



*the transformation of a*  
**starter home**

they loved their location and neighborhood...so why move?

**D**espite its great location, a nice backyard, and five bedrooms, there was little doubt that when homeowners Nikki and Steve first bought their Lancaster County property in 1997 that it was a starter home. In fact, their realtor at the time was convinced that within five to seven years they would be upgrading to something bigger and better. The young, upwardly mobile couple, with their 18-month old daughter, had no reason to doubt the realtor's prediction.

Although they had no complaints about the home's second floor space, the first floor was a different story. The rooms were very small and partitioned, and together with the narrow hallways, the flow was severely compromised. As the family grew (two additional girls within the next few years), the lack of comfortable "family" space became more and more pronounced. Exactly what to do about it would preoccupy the couple for years to come.

In fact, it took Nikki and Steve 15

years to finally come to a decision. In between, they went back and forth as to whether they should sell their home and move to one with a more family-friendly living space or stay put and create their own by doing an addition. Much went into their deliberations but in the end, it boiled down to two key points—the economy and their comfort level they had with their location and neighborhood. They would stay put.

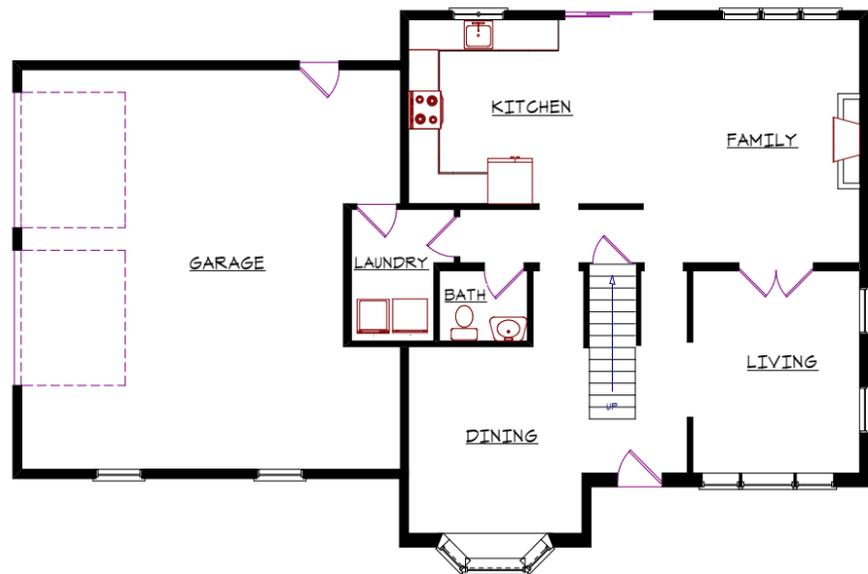
In selecting family-owned Duff Builders of Lancaster for their

project, Nikki and Steve brought in a team that they were convinced could produce a well designed space that blended with their original home. They did NOT want an addition that looked and felt like an addition. As you'll learn from our interview, they were not disappointed.

Joining Nikki for our interview is Joe Duff, owner and founder of Duff Builders along with his daughter, Laura Duff Schroeder. Laura is officially the Office Manager

**project description**

Type:	Major Addition and Interior Renovations
Contractor:	<b>Duff Builders</b> (see ad p. 35)
Trade Partners:	J.K. Mechanical, Inc. (see ad p. 39) Martin Appliance (see ad p. 41) "To The Trades" Wholesale Floor Coverings (see ad p. 36)
Scope:	<p>The homeowners had spent nearly 15 years thinking about the possibility of moving to a larger home. With the declining real estate market over the years, they knew they would not be able to get the value of their home if they sold. The more they thought about it, it became clear that they loved their neighborhood and their location and started discussing the idea of remodeling and adding on to their existing home. The family has three active daughters and space was becoming tight in their limited living space and breakfast areas. Their existing kitchen was basic and in great need of some creative solutions, additional storage and an overall fresh design.</p> <p>The homeowners had a very specific design idea in mind for their remodel and addition project. Their need for additional space in the kitchen was resolved by extending the area by 40 sq. ft. The custom kitchen was largely the homeowner's vision after years of clipping magazine photos and articles about storage solutions. The kitchen was able to fulfill all their storage and space concerns with the increased square footage. Preparing meals for the family became more efficient with newer appliances and plenty of increased counter space, and the open floor plan overlooking the great room and the newly remodeled dining area was essential for family communication and socialization with friends. The original breakfast area was transformed into the main dining area. The existing fireplace along the side wall was simply a basic fireplace and wood surround/mantel. The homeowners had a vision for custom-built bookcases on either side with small windows above. Duff Builders was able to sketch some ideas and the design was able to incorporate the existing fireplace into the beautiful built-in bookcases. The legs of the fireplace mantel were mimicked in the design of the columns that separated the kitchen &amp; dining areas from the lowered great room.</p> <p>The great room addition added 720 sq. ft. and featured lots of windows with transoms for a bright, open feeling. The window seats on either side of the fireplace were designed and constructed after the homeowners saw the benefit of utilizing the space for more seating and storage. A simple tweak to the fireplace design by bringing it into the room 2' gave the couple a solution to more seating and storage by adding custom built window seats on either side. The large closets in the great room have custom built cubbies for organizing each family member's coats, bags and shoes. The French doors open from the great room into the new screened porch. This addition provided the family with the ability to enjoy dining and entertaining outdoors in a protected area.</p> <p>As the design came together for the addition off the rear of the home, it became apparent that the roofline of the addition would interfere with an existing window in a second floor bedroom. The homeowners were agreeable to having the window location moved by a couple of feet.</p>



FRONT

and Director of Marketing but better known to the company's clients as the selection/research guru. In addition to handling the design end of the project, Joe provided oversight to the construction phase.

**You spent years going back and forth on whether to move or do the addition. What specifically swayed you?**

Nikki: It's true, we agonized over it for years. We talked about it daily and those conversations generally got very intense....it was consuming.

On the *moving* side of the debate was what we were seeing around the area—the additions we were seeing *looked* like additions. To me, this was appalling. We wanted an addition that blended so well that you couldn't tell that it wasn't part of the original design. Maybe we were looking in the wrong places, but we just weren't seeing that.

On the other hand, we had to be practical. Although the country was climbing out of the great recession, the climb was going slow. The housing market was significantly over inflated during our 5-year search with our realtor and the upgraded choices were lacking so many things given that our home has 5-bedrooms with a large lot. From a financial point of view it was more cost effective to add on and renovate so that we could spend our money on living life and family vacations, and not on grand mortgages and ridiculous annual real estate taxes.

Another thing that was disappointing, was that while many of the homes we looked at had a *great* room, the size of these rooms weren't all that great.

Joe: As both a builder of homes as well as a remodeler, one of the first questions I'll ask a homeowner contemplating such a decision is "Do you like your location? Do you like your neighbors?" If they answer 'yes' to both questions, I'd ask "why would you even consider moving?" You can move to a glitzy house in a glitzy neighborhood and end up with a neighbor that wants to battle with you over nearly everything. Why take that risk when you don't have to?

Nikki: Joe's right...and in our case, we didn't have to. We love our location and our neighbors are great. Also, we were lucky to have a large lot with space in the back to put on the addition without pushing up against any of the neighbors.

**Okay, so your decision was made. How did you get connected with Duff Builders?**

Nikki: Well actually, a fair amount of time went by from the time we first met Joe. I want to say nine months or so. We had gotten a few ballpark estimates from a few others, but for a variety of reasons we weren't quite ready to make the commitment. Although we liked Duff Builders the most, we just needed some time to let things evolve. They did eventually.

Joe: Considering the length of time that elapsed from when we initially met, I assumed they had decided to go in a different direction. Needless to say, I was thrilled to get Nikki's call.

Nikki: During this lengthy period of indecision, we kept coming back to Duff Builders. Joe was definitely our favorite. As I mentioned earlier, the critical point for me was that the addition could NOT look like an addition. From our initial meeting, we were impressed by Joe's creativity and flexibility. His ideas such as keeping the ceiling the same height and creating an angled entrance from the kitchen to the new great room provided a unique solution to our primary concern—our addition does not look or feel like an addition. The openness of it also helps make it feel as though it was part of the original floor plan. Rather than build an addition accessible by an existing doorway, we had the entire back wall taken off.

Once we finally made the decision to do it, we jumped in with both feet. As I'm sure Joe and Laura can attest to, it was really hard for me to be patient. I wanted it done the very next day.

**There were some challenges in the design phase. Please elaborate.**

Joe: One of my biggest challenges was



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Joe: The solution was burying the beam within the ceiling. In doing so, it required the re-routing of existing duct work.

Nikki: I love how the ceiling goes straight across the new addition without opening up into a vaulted ceiling that you typically see on additions. Again, I definitely didn't want that look.

Joe: Another challenge was finalizing the size and features of the addition. I remember that we had done 4 or 5 different versions, some included an expansion on the second floor and another set of steps from a bedroom.

Nikki: Yes, our original ideas were much too grandiose and far too complicated. The more we thought about it, the more it made sense to simplify things. We kept coming back to what we really wanted,

how to conceal a beam that was to run through the kitchen... Nikki was dead set against it showing.

Nikki: Yes I was...absolutely against it. I didn't want a beam cutting through my kitchen.

what we really needed. Once we refocused, our vision started to become very clear and things started rolling.

Laura: Many of our clients have looked to us for design ideas—which we are happy to provide. In Nikki's case, she



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had a strong vision of what she was looking for and that vision got increasingly clearer as the plans developed. She also had a big binder filled with magazine photos that were helpful for me in getting the visual image she was looking for. I knew what she wanted and was definitely on board.

Nikki: That collection of ideas, all the clipping and cutting, was a labor of love. Like I said, this project was in the making for many, many years. I think my notebook with my ideas were important to the success of the project and, hopefully, helpful to Laura.

And speaking of Laura...her role as a design manager, or whatever you want to call her, was another thing I loved about Duff Builders and something I found out only after we had already committed to them. Having Laura to help with the design details and all the online research that was required was so huge. I'm not sure other builders provide that kind of service.

**Which brings us to the construction phase. You lived onsite during the entire 4-month period—how did that work out?**

Nikki: It wasn't bad at all. Joe and his staff set very realis-

tic expectations...there were no false promises. We were pretty much prepared. The weather, which included some periods of very heavy rain, played havoc with the schedule but Joe was completely upfront with things. We appreciated his candidness.

Joe: Unlike new construction where the homeowners are living offsite, remodeling projects are almost always disruptive. Very few homeowners have the luxury of living elsewhere, even temporarily. Our objective is to minimize the negative impact on the family's day-to-day activities. On this particular project, in addition to partitioning areas off to separate our work area from the rest of the house, we knew that the loss of the kitchen would be a significant disturbance. To ease the pain, we went as long as possible before we were forced to close down the kitchen. And when we did, we relocated the refrigerator to a temporary location and hooked up a stove in the garage. It doesn't always work out this nicely, but whenever possible, we try to set up our clients with some semblance of a working kitchen to hold them over.

Nikki: Overall, it went very smoothly. The partition that they set up worked really well. It allowed them to get their work done and it gave us some degree of separation. The dirt and dust was pretty much confined to the work areas.



**Were there any surprises during construction?**

Joe: There was one that actually solved an ongoing mystery for Nikki and Steve. During the course of our demolition, we discovered in one section of the wall a defect in the original ductwork which was not allowing heat to be directed into the master bedroom.

Nikki: As you can imagine, this was a HUGE discovery. We suffered unnecessarily for years!

Joe: In addition to this discovery, we brought in J.K. Mechanical of Willow Street to design and install a new zoned heating and cooling system to handle the entire home...not just the new space. In addition to dramatically improving the comfort level throughout the home, I would think that the new energy-efficient system is resulting in some significant savings.

Nikki: It has, which is great! From a comfort standpoint, I can't tell you how nice it is not having those cold spots in the house any more. The temperature in every room, including our expanded space, is so easily regulated. We're loving it!



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**And speaking of loving it, you've got to be loving your beautiful new kitchen.**

Nikki: Well, once again, this is where my collection of photos came in. I had a good photo of what I had in mind and turned it over to Joe. He took it from there.

Joe: Nikki wanted little cabinets above the regular wall cabinets and, given that the kitchen had 8-foot ceilings and not the 9-footers you typically see in new construction, it was clear to

me that this was going to be a custom job—the cabinets would have to be built specifically for the space we were dealing with. And knowing how intricate and detailed the cabinets needed to be, I had the guy in mind to do it.

I've been using a local cabinet maker, Dick Mylin, over the years who does beautiful custom work and I knew he'd be perfect for the job.

[Editor's Note: Well beyond retirement eligible, Dick Mylin is in the process of gearing down his business and is no

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*"Thank you Nikki & Steve and congratulations to Duff Builders for another great looking project!"*

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longer marketing his services. Like many in his field, his fine craftsmanship will be appreciated and enjoyed for generations to come. We wish him well.]

Nikki: And, as it turned out, he was perfect for the job. I absolutely love the way it turned out. Spatially, it was a huge success as well—not just aesthetically. The additional space that we allowed between the island and the cabinets is just fantastic. There’s plenty of room for us to work without bumping into each other.

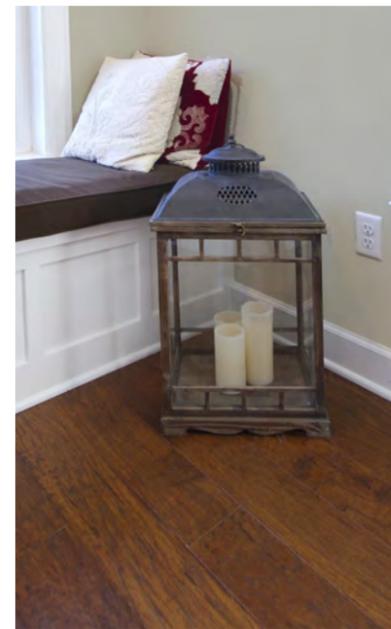
Joe: That’s a good point, in trying to gain additional storage space, many homeowners skip on the aisle space and end up regretting it. No matter how nice a kitchen looks, if you’re constantly bumping into one another, you’re not going to be happy.

Nikki: Going back to the decision to go the custom route versus something out of a showroom, I was surprised to find out that it wasn’t all that more expensive—and I’ve done my research. Although I didn’t know the cabinet guy, I put my trust in Joe in making the right decision and he certainly didn’t let me down.

Laura: Dick Mylin has been a great asset to us for years. He’s all about putting out a top quality product and he takes great pride in his work.

**In retrospect, is there anything you would do differently?**

Nikki: No, I honestly can’t think of anything that we’re not happy with.



Laura: That’s probably because you were so well prepared. You had a very good idea of what you wanted and made some very good choices along the way.

Nikki: Well, you guys did an incredible job all the way around. For us, it was quite a leap of faith. We didn’t know how it was going to turn out but the quality





of your work and your willingness to work with us just doesn't get any better. I can't say enough good things about the entire experience and the Duff Builders team.

**What advice would you give homeowners who are struggling with the same decision...to move or add on?**

Nikki: For someone on the fence, I'd suggest they try to pinpoint what's really important to them. Assuming that cost IS a consideration, do you want to pay for a fancy foyer with the big entrance when all you really want

is more family space? In our case, by not moving we avoided some considerable expenses, not to mention the real estate and closing costs that we would have incurred. On top of that, you have moving expenses as well as the hassle factor of relocating. Then there are increased annual property taxes to consider—which in our case, would have been substantial. Doing what we did got us what we really wanted—more family space—and, by not moving, it saved us a ton of money.

But it's not all about money. This home is the only home our girls have ever known. We have years of happy memories here—and many more to come.

R&A

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