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Second Time
Around

WRITTEN BY ANN TAYLOR
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LEAH MULLER'S DESIGN TEAM BRINGS
THE LIGHT IN TO A DECADES-OLD HOME

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The house Susan and Mike Neilson purchased a year ago on the barrier island was dark and dated. Thanks to a blue and white palette, the family room now sparkles with light. Hand beaded John Robshaw accent pillows and a bronze hourglass table base with creamy Cristallo quartzite round top add punch.



The inviting living room features a textured coral stone fireplace facade, custom-designed cabinetry and floating shelves that showcase Susan's treasured collection of blue and white Chinese ginger jars.

For Susan and Mike Neilson, timing has been everything. Three years ago they decided that Vero Beach was where they wanted to spend the winter months, so Susan started searching online for residential listings. It didn't take long before she spied a house in the perfect location. With three bedrooms, three baths, living room, a large kitchen, family room and a pool, it was tailor-made for their lifestyle. The only problem was that by the time she and Mike could come down from their home in South Carolina, the house had sold.

As luck would have it, it came back on the market 18 months later, and the couple just happened to be renting a condominium on Royal Palm Pointe. The Neilsons wasted no time in checking out what they hoped would be their

future home. It was better than advertised.

After the Neilsons made an offer they joined friends and headed out to the golf course for a friendly round of 18. Mike had no sooner made the perfect putt than his cell phone rang. It was the real estate agent saying their offer had been accepted. The house was theirs.

That's the short version of a story that begins when Susan fell in love with our small seaside town. "The first time I knew about Vero was when my parents, who wintered in Stuart, would take me up to the Ocean Grill for dinner and we would drive around. I remembered how beautiful everything was, how friendly people were," Susan recalls.

"Mike and I had lived in New Canaan, Connecticut, in the same house for 40 years, and when it came time to



Benjamin Moore Super White paint and aged European white oak floors transformed the foyer from dark to light. The high-gloss black lacquer console and free-form organic barnacle mirror add a dash of youth and glamour.



The guest bathroom was given a fresh look with a Carrera marble countertop, polished chrome mirror and "Great Wave" wallpaper. At right, double beds upholstered in China Seas fabric and abstract oil paintings by Florida artist Sally Cahill are an invitation to come and stay awhile. Family members already have and love the new look.

downsize we moved into a condo there and built a retirement home in Spring Island, South Carolina. Every once in a while we would drive down to Vero and spend a weekend or two with friends."

It didn't take long before the Neilsons realized an occasional weekend wasn't enough, so they rented a condo for a month and began a serious search for the right property.

"Actually, our first choice was a condo; however we really didn't see anything we wanted. The more we looked around, the more we realized we really wanted a house, a place where we could walk out the front door and be in a neighborhood. Even though it took awhile, we found it," says Susan.





They didn't want a "beachy" look, preferring what Leah Muller calls "traditional meets coastal modern."

While they could have purchased some of the furnishings from the previous owners, they chose instead to bring pieces from their Spring Island home after it was sold and purchase what was needed. The question was: How could they pull everything together?

The answer was quick to come. "One of the condos we looked at had been recently updated by designer Leah Muller and we loved the look," Susan enthuses.

"Leah's very good, not only with fabrics and furnishings — she's very good architecturally. In the condo we saw she had transformed the hallway from ordinary cookie cutter to one that was beautiful."

Leah could see why Susan and Mike fell in love with the house. Not only did it have "good bones," the floor plan flowed and the kitchen and bathrooms had been updated. Recently installed impact windows were a big bonus. What was needed was a fresh new look by mid-December. The problem was, because of projects already on her drawing board, Leah couldn't get started until August.

"We were very clear that we needed to be in the house by Christmas because we were closing on our South Carolina house, and Leah said she could make it happen," says Susan. "When we came back in December and saw the whole new look it was like getting a cake with lots of icing on it."

The cozy master sitting room features custom upholstery designed by Leah Muller, as well as a floating cabinet and shelves, which California Closets built to her specifications.



The existing character-grade honey alder wood cabinets, baseboard and crown molding exude warmth. Upholstered stools nestle up to the granite-top island where many a meal and snack are savored.

From initial conversations Susan and Mike had with Leah and project manager Shannon Colkitt, it was clear they didn't want a "beachy look," preferring what Leah refers to as "traditional meets coastal modern," with a color palette of whites, soft blues and greens and happy pops of coral.

"I wanted to have something from our South Carolina house in every room, so we showed her photographs of things we planned to bring with us, a few paintings, my blue and white ginger jar collections, and an antique mahogany chest. We also showed her pictures of things from magazines we liked and I remember her saying, 'Susan, I get you' — and she did."

Susan says the proposal Leah put together was fantastic.

"Mike and I spent about two, three hours in her office going through everything, page by page, room by room, and if we didn't like something, Shannon would research alternatives. We'd be sitting at the table and I'd say 'oh, I love that,' and Mike would say 'I hate that.' Leah had a lot of patience with us, and in the end everything worked out beautifully."

Topping the remodel to-do list was bringing a dated and dark house into the light. Leah's first step was to remove grass cloth wall covering in the living room, hallways, kitchen and family room. As she explains, "Grass cloth swallows up the light, so in its place we chose Benjamin Moore Super White, which is the perfect color to reflect the light, and that's what you see when you walk in the foyer."

And the welcoming foyer is the perfect place to start.



For the master bedroom Leah selected a palette of soothing grey-blue and white linens and window treatments from the British company Holland and Sherry. An antique gun box coordinates with the Neilson's antique chair from their former Spring Island home.

Here, engineered wood floors with custom stain set the stage. A free-form mirror framed with coral is centered over a black lacquer console, and just beyond, above a buffet with star-studded mirrored panels, is a large painting titled "The Silent Sentinel." It was a gift from Susan's mother when she and Mike moved into their Spring Island home, and thanks to Leah's choice of a new frame, it found a place of honor in their Vero Beach one.

To the left of the foyer is the living room, which underwent a complete transformation that made Susan and Mike's eyes pop when they saw it.

"Leah had all the floor-to-ceiling mirrored walls removed, and for the fireplace wall she selected a beautiful piece of coral stone. It's very dramatic and the first thing

you see when you come into the room. She also designed the shelving and all of the cabinetry," says Susan, who was delighted to see her treasured ginger jar collection displayed on shelves flanking the fireplace and two custom consoles.

"Mike and I lived in London for five years, which is where a friend got me started collecting ginger jars. Mike had responsibilities in Asia and I would go with him to Hong Kong and Bangkok. Every time I went there I bought pieces, along with a little garden stool, which is my very, very favorite. It's also in the living room," Susan says with obvious delight.

Here, as throughout the house, Leah worked with Ryan Jones of Ryan A. Jones and Associates on structural work



Contemporary nautical wall sconces flank Cuban artist Carlos Ramirez's abstract oil painting "Sitting on the Ocean Floor."



An intimate garden setting is the perfect gathering place for alfresco dining and conversation.

“When we came back in December and saw the whole new look, it was like getting a cake with lots of icing on it.”

In the bedroom, which lacked enough closet space for two, Leah designed a custom wall unit that accommodates Mike's clothing, while Susan owns the closet and she couldn't be happier with the arrangement. Another thing Leah did in the bedroom made Susan smile. “When Leah wanted a chair, we had one from our Spring Island home that was perfect.”

The open kitchen was another story. Recently updated with honey alder wood cabinets and all new appliances, it was a cook's delight. “Leah wanted to make some changes, but it was the one room Mike loved just as it was, and he was firm. I remember Leah gasped, then smiled and said ‘fine,’” Susan muses.

Changes were more than welcome in the family room, starting with the removal of a window seat, effectively expanding the space. Off-white walls, custom upholstered sofa in a soft shade of blue, side chair, coffee table, round table with four chairs, and a console with a large-screen TV and a striking coral ridge bowl complete the picture.

“We wanted the family room to be cozy and comfortable,” says Leah. “We introduced some modern [elements], but overall it's kind of traditional, a nice blend of the two.”

The two guest bedrooms on either side of the already updated bathroom mirror the same blend, with colors and patterns consistent with those in the more public areas.

The Neilsons' family has already visited and given their second retirement house a stamp of approval. It's easy to see why, as Susan points out.

“The house is very special to us and thanks to Leah we were lucky to create something new and fresh. Our son has an old farmhouse up in New Canaan, so he took 60 percent of the things we had in our South Carolina house. In a throw-away society like we live in today, it's really nice that he wanted our things. I know some of it will stay in the family and we have all we need right here in Vero.”

that, among the more than two-dozen items on the list, included transforming the living room walls, installing new interior hardware, removing a window seat in the family room, replacing old baseboards with new ones, and installing recessed lighting and decorative sconces.

Ryan, whose construction firm also manages properties, had gotten to know Mike and Susan when they were renting a condo from one of his clients. After the couple purchased the house, Mike sent him an email asking if he would be involved in the renovation, and Leah couldn't have been happier as the two have worked together previously.

One of the biggest challenges they faced in the living room was how to visually lift the 8-foot ceiling. Together they came up with the solution. As Ryan explains, “There was heavy crown molding around the room that made the ceiling feel even lower than it was. We felt it all needed to be removed and the beams altered in order to give the impression of a higher ceiling.” It worked.

Also leading off the foyer is a guest bathroom and just beyond is the master suite, where Leah's design and architectural expertise transformed a 1970s floor plan into one that accommodates today's lifestyle. She converted an empty space between the guest bathroom and master bedroom into a comfortable sitting room with twin upholstered chairs and a custom wall unit housing a large-screen TV and electronics.



J Ryan A.
JONES
& ASSOCIATES

Renovations

Construction

Estate Management