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Niskayuna family surprised with home makeover on Oprah program

Woman ailing with cancer wrote to show's Web site

By Justin Mason (Contact)
Gazette Reporter

Tuesday, November 25, 2008

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Photographer: Barry Sloan

Joan Parow and her family watch the Oprah show, on which they appeared, from their renovated basement on Monday.

NISKAYUNA — Joan and Ken Parow bought a split-level ranch on Godfrey Lane with the hope of transforming it into a dream home for their two sons.

But their renovation plans never got off the ground. In 2003, Joan was diagnosed with stage-4 breast cancer, and the young family quickly switched their focus.

“When Joan got sick, all the renovations took a back seat,” Ken recalled Monday. She is 37.

Joan’s condition worsened in January, when she developed congestive heart failure. Her cardiologist told her she could no longer continue her job at the Tri-City Joint Apprenticeship Committee and advised her to spend the time with her family.

She found herself watching the Oprah Winfrey Show and logging onto the program’s Web site. She noticed a post soliciting families in need of a home makeover and decided to write a letter asking for help with finishing a renovation of the basement Ken started before she fell ill.

“I thought to myself, ‘This is something I can do for my guys,’” she said. “They’re always there for me.”

Producers from the show contacted the Parows and said they couldn’t do much. However, they offered to fly them to Chicago so they could ask renowned designer Nate Berkus for tips during his appearance on the show in September.

They were seated in the back row of the studio when Berkus perused a picture of the dingy cellar, cluttered with exposed wires and leaky pipes. He took one look and offered his only tip.

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“I think the best thing for you guys is to take me back and I’ll do it for you,” he said during the show, which aired nationally Monday afternoon on the local NBC affiliate.

What followed was a whirlwind of events that transformed the Parows’ basement into a state-of-the-art entertainment center, a small exercise room and work space. Over the course of three weeks, Berkus teamed with local builder Dave Del Zotto to add nearly \$100,000 worth of improvements to the Parow’s basement.

“I was shocked,” Joan said after watching the sequence of events unfold on her family’s new home theater system. “We had no idea.”

Berkus used old timbers from a covered bridge in Vermont to cover the basement’s concrete walls and furnished the new room with rustic items he collected from Northeastern antique shops. The renovation also brought in a new mahogany pool table, leather couches and a wall-sized retractable home theater screen.

But the Parows’ surprises didn’t end there. After the three-week renovation was complete, they were flown back to Chicago earlier this month to film a followup segment with Winfrey.

During the segment, Berkus began discussing what he would do with Joan and Ken’s master bedroom. Each time he suggested a new furnishing for the room, one of Winfrey’s crew members would wheel the item onto the stage.

In just a few moments, Joan found herself in front of millions of viewers sitting on the plush bed of her newly decorated bedroom. Several hours later, the Parows were back in Niskayuna wondering if they had all imagined the almost surreal series of events.

“It was like ‘Did we really just do this?’” Ken said. “It was far beyond what we expected.”

And far beyond an appearance on national television or world-class home renovation, too. Appearing on Oprah provided Joan a respite from dwelling on her dire condition.

“It takes a huge weight off my mind,” she said. “Those things that I’d ordinarily think of.”

The Parows have also made a lot of new friends in the process. After the filming, Del Zotto Builders teamed with several other volunteer contractors and replaced the Parow’s deteriorating roof —it took them one day — and neighbors are now offering to cook the family meals when they are in need.

“Our little circle as a result of this has gotten a whole lot bigger,” Ken said. “This whole thing has been a silver lining in a very dark cloud.”

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