

HOMETIMES



The newly renovated exterior shows off the updated design of the home, complete with a three-car garage and fresh siding, a far cry from its previous rundown appearance. Left: Jay and Amy Gross.

Jay and Amy Gross are reviving a house and creating a home

BY MEGAN MOLSEED

A tip about a fixer-upper on an auction block led Jay and Amy Gross of Newell into a project that turned out to be far more involved than they expected. What started as a simple renovation quickly became a months-long process that required more than just their experience — it demanded patience, creativity, and a lot of hard work. In the end, they didn't just fix a house — they turned it into their dream home.

A HIDDEN GEM IN PLAIN SIGHT

Jay and Amy Gross have built their livelihood around real estate—renovating, managing, and transforming more than sixty long-term rental properties, along with several Airbnbs. So when a friend from Amy's hometown of Newell tipped them off about



Before the renovation began, the house's exterior was in poor condition, with chipped siding and neglect evident in every corner.

an extreme fixer-upper hitting the auction block, their curiosity was piqued. "We put in a sealed bid for \$1,500 and won the bid," Amy recalls. Their bid was accepted and the couple was ready to work. However, they had no

idea yet how big of a job they had just taken on with their new purchase. This house was a total mess, the couple says, neglected and stuffed to the brim with belongings. As soon as Amy and Jay stepped onto the property, they knew right away it wasn't going to be a quick fix...the project they were facing was a full-on overhaul. "The house was a complete remodel and was completely filled to the brim with stuff," Amy recalls. "We hauled out almost 30 dump trailers full, mostly to the landfill, before we could even begin work on it." Initially, the purchase was meant to be another rental property, Amy notes. However, as they dug deeper into the project, they noticed that under all the neglect was some real potential. And somewhere along the way, the



The kitchen features sleek black appliances, a functional island, and light wood floors.

house they snagged as just another property at auction stopped being just another project...and instead it became home. "We decided to make it our own and do some upgrades we wouldn't have normally done," Amy said.

THE TRANSFORMATION

"We spent over a month cleaning it out," Amy said of the first steps of their overhaul process. "We wanted it completely empty to begin work on it." Then, the real work began, starting with what the couple says was probably the most labor-intensive part of the entire process—fixing the crumbling foundation. Something that needed to be completely redone so the house was structurally sound, Amy explains. Once the foundation was taken care of, Amy and Jay moved on to the other pieces of the project, replacing the roof, windows, siding, electrical, plumbing, sheetrock, fixtures, kitchen and bathrooms. The couple also restored much of the home's original hardwood and added a three-car garage. "We did not anticipate putting as much time, work or money into the house as we did," Amy admits. "We simply wanted to make it less of an eyesore for the town and provide a nice home from a family to live in but when we realized literally everything needed redone, and the amount of money we would need to make this into a great home, we decided to switch gears and make it our own."

The Gross home, which now boasts 2,100 square feet of living space, is nearly unrecognizable from its original state. The three-story house includes four bedrooms and three bathrooms. The main level features a spacious kitchen, dining room, and pantry. The second level holds three bedrooms and a bathroom. The finishing touch was the addition of the third-level master suite, a once-dark attic now transformed into the couple's master suite.

UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

Like any major renovation, this project was filled with unexpected challenges and unanticipated questions along the way. And with each step, their plans kept growing. And, ever the dreamer, Amy says, her husband Jay was adding more to the plans as the project went on. "In true Jay fashion, more and more got added along the way," she laughs. "We moved some walls, put in a sliding glass door, a deck, and plenty of other things that weren't originally on the list." DIY was central to the project, but the local couple didn't tackle it all by themselves. They enlisted the help of retired Friesen Construction builders David and Carlos Ortiz, who worked alongside them for eight months to turn their vision into reality. "We also hired an electrician and HVAC guy out of coon rapids that we use a lot for our rental properties,"

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The remodeled bathroom now feels fresh and modern, a complete transformation from its previous, dated state, offering a spacious and inviting retreat.

HomeTimes...

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Amy says. For materials, the couple turned to Menards for appliances, cabinets, lumber, hardware and garage doors. Flooring was a mix of what was left in the house — brand new in boxes — and new purchases. Furniture and decor were a thrifter's dream, with Amy finding pieces on Facebook Marketplace, in thrift stores, and pieced together from those perfect department store finds. Jay's favorite feature is the garage, though he'll admit his "fancy" bidet toilet in the master bathroom is a close second. Amy, meanwhile, is most excited about the hidden pantry, the flood of natural light, the wood beams, and the charm of the original woodwork.

HOME SWEET HOME

"This was a much bigger undertaking than we had ever imagined," Amy says of the project. However, she adds, now that the space is complete, the family is ready to settle in and start building memories. Fifteen-year-old Austin still lives at home and is a freshman at Newell-Fonda High School, balancing cross country, basketball and track. The rest of the children — McKenna, 25, a teacher in Omaha, Neb., married to Blake, who works in finance; Jaelyn, 22, set to graduate in



The master suite, once a dark and cluttered attic, is now a master suite full of natural light with a built-in fireplace.



The cluttered, hoarded condition of the house before the renovation required Jay and Amy to clear out over 30 dump trailers before they could even start their work.

May with a journalism degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Alexis, 20, a junior at Iowa State University studying business management — all have a place to return to that feels like home. Jay and Amy are eager to make new memories. "We are extremely proud of how it turned out and hope to make many memories with friends and family in our newly renovated home," Amy said with a smile.



Dale Wordekemper, left, is gradually hanging up his hammer after an arrangement to sell Benchmark Woodworks to Hunter O'Bannon.

O'Bannon succeeds Wordekemper at Benchmark Woodworks

BY DOLORES CULLEN After 39 years Dale Wordekemper is retiring from Benchmark Woodworks in Storm Lake and passing on his business to Hunter O'Bannon. O'Bannon grew up in Storm Lake and graduated from Storm Lake High School. He picked up his carpentry and construction skills working with M&M Construction — Mike and Misty Sanderson — before moving to Des Moines for a job with Broadway Builders in Des Moines. Broadway Builders specializes in custom carpentry and woodworking, and O'Bannon was able to further hone his abilities. The pull of his hometown

came into play after three years. "There was a lot I missed about it," he said. "If you grow up near the lake, you feel like there's something missing without it." He and his wife Abbie and their two children Sophia and Beckett moved back to Storm Lake last year. Abbie works at Storm Lake Early Elementary. "We're keeping the main essence of Benchmark with cabinetry and custom woodworking," said O'Bannon. He will continue to offer Crystal cabinets and Corian countertops. General contracting services have been added, including kitchen and bathroom remodels and jobs like porch repair. "I'm busy for the next several months," said O'Bannon. He still welcomes additional work. Wordekemper continues to help his successor. "I pass on jobs to him that require more time and finesse," remarked O'Bannon. Wordekemper is easing into retirement. He's moving some of his equipment to his acreage near Peterson where woodworking will evolve into more of a hobby. "The community has sup-

ported me well for 39 years and I hope they still do," he said of Benchmark's new owner. Wordekemper built his reputation with fine woodworking, especially in banks and churches. He started out under Walt Becker in Alta, then established Benchmark in 1986. "I had a good partner," he said of Dean Lind. Lind passed away in the fall of 2023. "For me it will always be about the quality of the work," said Wordekemper, a priority O'Bannon is eager to carry on.

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