

From Silver Screen to Shining Counter Tops

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A digression: Last February, Paramount Pictures released the critically landed movie, "Wonder Boys," starring Michael Douglas and filmed in Pittsburgh - at Carnegie Mellon University and in local neighborhoods including Friendship, downtown Pittsburgh, the Hill District and the North Side.

What does this have to do with *Mt. Lebanon* magazine's Build Your Own Landmark series? Well ... the interior of the movie's Hi-Hat Club is actually the North Side's Modern Cafe, owned by Woodland Drive resident Irene Zotis. She and her husband, Dean, a salesman at Wire Rope Industries, used the money they received for renting Paramount the cafe for three weeks to remodel their kitchen - the "Wonder Kitchen," as they call it.

Now let's backtrack. When the Zotises married in 1973, they bought a house on Rockwood Avenue. As their family grew to include three daughters - Constance, now a Mellon Middle School 8th-grader; Sophia, a junior at Dickinson College, and Vasso, who lives on Rae Avenue with her husband, Costa Paliouras, they began searching for a larger abode.

In January 1997, Irene and Dean dropped in on a real estate open house at 76 Woodland Drive. Irene was instantly smitten with the 48-year-old stone ranch house. Dean wasn't so sure. He thought it was too pricey for the condition it was in. "I'm not touching it," he told Irene. "It's a money pit."

But Irene could see the potential and was adamant. Both of their parents live out of town, and the four-bedroom, three-full-bath house would be wonderful for visitors. Sure, the kitchen needed major work, but it was spacious enough for cooking and entertaining - something both Irene and Dean love.

"I've been married 26 years," Dean says. "It was cheaper to buy the house than divorce my wife." They moved in January 1998.

Dean was right about the work aspect. The house had been neglected. Before the family even moved in, they ripped out old, stained carpeting and refinished the hardwood floors, stripped off the icky gold-flocked wallpaper, removed the dingy, light-obstructing "funeral drapes" and fixed the interior plaster, which was so badly cracked it resembled varicose veins.

After moving in, the Zotises had the exterior cleaned, revealing beautiful beige stone flecked with rusty browns that complement the red tile roof. To showcase the clean stone, they added new soffit, fascia, gutters and garage door in a putty color. Large bushes that were encroaching on the front door were removed, and the front yard was landscaped with roses, azaleas, yews, rhododendrons, pink and white impatiens, and yellow pansies. At the rear, Dean removed five pine trees to let more light into the yard.

Things were looking, well, wonderful ... except in the kitchen, where the ancient linoleum floors never looked clean, the Formica counter tops were stained and peeling, and the dark wood cabinets didn't close right. "The door to the Lazy Susan would fall off if you touched it," Dean says.

The job seemed so huge and costly that the Zotis' kept putting it off. But then the deal with Paramount arose - suddenly the Zotis family was hob-nobbing with Michael Douglas and picking out floor tile.

Choosing a contractor was a no-brainer. "Clark Construction had done the windows in our old house," Irene says, "and they were great." With the kitchen project now done, Irene is still singing their praises; "They said they'd be done in three weeks - and they were."

It was a dirty, dusty, inconvenient three weeks, however. The kitchen was gutted; a superfluous door to the back porch (there was a door in the dining room) was walled in - providing a few extra feet for the new beige Corian counters. Placing the new double sink in the corner helped create an unbroken counterline - unlike the counters in the old kitchen, which were divided into three small sections - giving the illusion of more space.

The walls were painted dark hunter green; still the room stays light and airy, thanks to recessed lighting, pale pink-and-beige ceramic flooring and backsplashes, and light oak cabinets. Irene added as many cabinets as possible, allowing her to stow appliances and keep counters clutter-free.

Special touches, such as two glass-fronted cabinets, beige and brass cabinet knobs, chair rails and a row of fleur-de-lis patterned backsplash tiles and panache.

"It's basically the same kitchen," Irene says. "We didn't add on or anything." Hard to believe from the before and after pictures.

Throughout the project, the Zotises followed one rule: Do is right the first time. "If you're going to do something like this, don't do it cheap," is Dean's advice. "Go for the good things because they'll last."

Still on the to-do list is replacing casement windows throughout the house - many of which have been painted shut for years - and repaving the driveway. But the finish line is, at last, in sight.

"At one point Dean was saying, "What did we do?"" Irene says, with a laugh. "The project just seemed so mammoth. But slowly it has come together, and we feel more bonded to the house ... more like it's ours."

FYI: Paramount is re-releasing Wonder Boys in October. Check it out.

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