

Knoxville News Sentinel

Saturday, Aug. 1

Sherri Gardner Howell: Trading tradition for happier outcomes

I have two new rooms in my house.

Before you feel sorry for me for living through a major construction project, I better hasten to say that these two new additions to my home required no building permits, drywall or roofing. These two rooms came into my home through "repurposing."

I have a pretty traditional two-story house. When we had it built in the mid-1980s, I followed the only blueprint I had ever known for what a home had to have: my mom. Her traditional vision of what made a great house was 1950s classic.

Once you got past the givens of bedrooms and baths, mother believed a house had to have an eat-in kitchen or kitchen/breakfast room, a den and a living room and dining room.

Looking back, you would think I would have learned from the house my mother designed and I grew up in and been smarter. Our home in Lexington, Tenn., had a front door that no one ever entered, a formal dining room and living room. These two rooms took up three-fourths of the front, with the den and kitchen (enter through the door off the carport) backing up to them.

I have eaten in the dining room two or three times a year. I can remember a couple of times when a date and I would sit in the living room with my mother before we made our escape. The rooms were "off limits" to the shenanigans of my brother and me and were filled with breakables — glass decanters, porcelain statues, china and crystal.

On occasion, when home alone — meaning I was babysitting by four-years-younger brother — we would add a trek through the living room/dining room to our adventures in hide-and-seek or Roy-Rogers-to-the-rescue. But mostly, we stayed out of the two "company" rooms that never saw any company.

The same was pretty much true in my Knoxville house. The two rooms just sat at the front of the house unused except for piling coats on the couch and setting up the dining room table for either desserts or drinks if we had a big party.

When my husband retired and began looking at all the things we had neglected to fix, declutter and transform in our house, those two rooms began to get careful scrutiny.

First, I was going to turn the dining room into an office and move my home office from the family room. I thought briefly about making the living room a dining room — because it was bigger than the tiny dining room — but I just didn't see a bigger dining room getting any more use.

What I really wanted was a downstairs bedroom — having seen the wisdom during my knee surgery — and an awesome playroom.

Would my mother tell me I have lost my mind? Probably. But the playroom — as my grandson, Cohen, and my Memphis great-nephews will attest — is awesome. It has an Xbox, television, beanbag chairs, a rug that is also a race



Grandson Cohen, age 9, with my sweet great-nephew Phillips boys, sons of Libby and Chris. Below is grandson King, chilling in the playroom.



track and boxes full of Legos, coloring books, balls and balloons.

The bedroom turned out nicely, too. I got a vintage bedroom set and had it "chalk painted" in a nod to my mother's love of "antiquing" every piece of furniture that would hold a coat of paint.

Then I glammed it up with an expensive comforter and more pillows than a bed should ever have. If she were still with us, I think mom just might like sleeping in the living room.

Sometimes you just have to work through the process of letting go of what you "should have" and embracing what makes you happy.

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