



Home of the Week: Primitive, green and gorgeous

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By WENDI WINTERS, For The Capital

Finding Gary Stiewing's home in the Tracys Landing community in South County was half the fun of getting there. Rattling over a quarter-mile of a gravel driveway on hilly, woodland terrain added to the anticipation.

The road dipped down and the woods thinned out to present a beautiful view of Fairhaven Pond, a bucolic, natural body of water. Beyond a finger of land

circling the far side of the pond lies Her-ring Bay. Gary's house sits on a slope leading down to the pond. His combination workshop-garage is off to one side.

Nestled next to the house is an in-ground pool with an amoeba-like organic shape, rimmed with unpolished slabs of slate. It's a pool for relaxing, not doing laps. The pool is surrounded by a fence of steel cabling recycled from old sail-



boats and raw locust wood posts.

A multipurpose volleyball and badminton net is strung across a swath of greensward. Off to one side, several stools made of old stumps are stationed around a fire pit. It's where Gary and friends have evening drum circles, when not reclining in a red net hammock or bouncing on a trampoline. A few yards away, two goats bleat from atop their cedar-shingled goat house. They want attention — and someone to let them out of their fenced-in enclosure. Plus, they've chewed off most of the cedar roofing shingles and want some new cuisine.

A native of New Haven, Conn., Gary, a former wooden boat builder, is a graduate of the Chester Institute in Stratford, where he studied architecture. It is now the Porter and Chester Institute. His father and grandfather were also builders.

Gary owns Rising Sun Woodworks and is a contractor experienced in building

“primitive” and “green” residences, including geothermal heating and cooling, active and passive solar, timber frame and straw bale homes, living roofs and slab furniture, just for starters. “I have a niche market,” he said. “I’ve never been without work.”

His goal in building his own dream house was to make it environmentally friendly, close to nature and relaxed.

Gary purchased the property in 2002. After living in Davidsonville for many years, he wanted more space. He found it on the 30 acres of waterfront near Herrington Harbor. He desired a place to stretch out in with his six children from former marriages. They include: Eli, 12, at Bates Middle School; Benah, 15, at the Fairhaven School in Prince George’s County; Joey, 21, a GWU student studying in Barcelona this semester; Cassidy, 23, a student and new mom in Rehoboth Beach; Toby, 30, a Navy enlistee based in Germany; and Todd, 38, a third- and fourth-grade





teacher at Santa Fe School of the Arts & Sciences.

The location of Gary's residence and workshop was not serendipitous. He'd planned to site the house closer to the water, and acquired all the appropriate variances and permits to build on the yellow loamy land. He was talked into hiring a shaman, experienced in dowsing, to ensure the positioning and proposed design of the house was the best one.

Consultant Alex Stark, a Peruvian-born New Yorker, renowned as a dowser, experienced in feng shui, geomancy and shamanism, was hired to "dowse" the land. "He is in tune to the electromagnetic vibrations of the earth," Gary explained. "I was reluctant to spend \$1,000 on his services, but he was fabulous. He pushed the house away from the water and insisted I keep more of the trees I had been planning to cut. It took another six months to get a new variance for the changed location."

The house was designed by architect Bill Hutchins of Helicon Works, based in Tacoma Park, who is known for his ecologically sensitive architecture and building practices. "Bill gave me clay to mold. He pulls out of you the design you want to live in," said Gary.

Woodworker's nirvana

Driving on the gravel road, we passed stacks of sawed slabs of wood. A peek inside the building that houses Gary's garage, workshop and second floor workspace reveals a lot of sawdust and soft piles of wood shavings. It's an active space filled with heavy woodwork-

ing machinery, and stacks of sawed cherry, walnut, locust and poplar harvested from Gary's lands.

The garage, like the house, features a facade that, on its lower level, is faced with uneven granite slabs quarried in Pennsylvania, all carefully pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle. The upper level is clad with white cedar clapboard siding. The rooftop is sheathed in standing seam tin. "The roofs will last a hundred years," said Gary. "They have to be painted every 10 years, though."

Of the siding, he noted white cedar, a wood used in boat building, lasts much longer than the standard red cedar siding. Plus, he said, white cedar ages to a silvery gray, not black as red cedar products tend to do.

In building the house, most of it by himself, Gary pointed out that no VOC finishes were used on the wood floors, beams and trim, just nut oils. "The wood is re-used from other building sites or wood from my land. Part of the roof doesn't have tin on it; it is covered with rubber sheeting. I'm planning to put a green roof there later this year," said Gary. He also hopes to install a composting toilet system soon.

Gary sunk six geothermal wells on the property. Their waters course through the seven hot water zones in his house. The wells were sunk over 200 feet, through one aquifer and into one submergied below it. "They pull up a consistent 60-degree water. All I have to do is raise it to 70 degrees to heat or cool the house," he explained.

He also explained why, on one end of the house, the screened-in porch lacks screens. "The goats ate them," Gary said simply.

Round energy

Stepping into the house, the first impression comes from looking at the floor, composed of slate from India. At our feet is a large mosaic of a stone compass rose. "It's a rising sun. My logo," said Gary. "I set all the stone myself. The floors here and throughout the house have geothermal heating, too."

He wrapped his arms around a round column in the front foyer, a slender tree trunk stripped of its bark. "I've noticed that people avoid standing near square columns. The sharp edges bother them," he said. "I put round posts in houses I build because people are drawn to them. I also try to avoid angles, squares and rectangles by putting a little curve in most walls. It's better feng shui to get rid of corners. Round energy is forever."

"Do I think out of the box? I live outside of it, too," he declared.

Parts of the nearly 3,500-square-foot residence are still unfinished — there are no railings on the walnut and locust slab staircase that spirals its ascent to the second floor. "It's a work in progress," Gary smiled. "I've been at it for six years and it should be done in two more years." He added: "I'm pretty sure-footed, but the stair rails should be completed soon."

Throughout the four-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bath house, Gary has placed pieces of furniture he's created by hand



from slabs of wood. He made the handsome dining room table, his bed with built-in nightstands in the master bedroom, plus the bunk beds in two of the kids' rooms. He also collects Victorian chairs and rusted Industrial Era machinery and mixes them with delicate, crystal chandeliers and scones, bleached roots of ancient trees, antlers, Indian dream catchers, carved totem masks and stunning works of art.

Light pours into the house. All the glass-panel doors are eight feet tall. The home's windows — most of which face the water — are double paned, sandwiching argon gas between the panes for energy efficiency. The window frames in the main rooms and the master suite are raw strips of wood. On the outer edge of the frames, the natural line of the strips — bark, knots and all — are left intact. One window, in the master dressing room upstairs, resembles a peaked chapel window. An image of the window decorates his business card. Frames elsewhere in the house are more contemporary.

In addition to the window frames, natural, untreated wood is used throughout as support beams, posts, edging and trim. The smell of freshly cut wood, a terrific scent, permeates the house.

Gary noted the house is insulated with a combination of soy foam and recycled shredded newspaper.

Stumps for stools

The kitchen is situated so the cook can turn from cooking duties and gaze out through a bank of windows across the room and drink in the scenery. The bar counter is a C-shaped slab of walnut. Green India slate, similar to that paving the stone floors, is utilized for the kitchen countertops. Two of the bar stools tucked beneath the counter are a pair of locust tree stumps with part of their root structure still attached.

The brushed metal propane gas stove was recycled from a house project he worked on. "The owners ordered it and

didn't like it," he said. An antique maple cutting block in the center of the kitchen serves as an informal table when it's not a food prep station. Gary built all the cabinets and is pleased with the various coordinated handles and knobs. Some have the look of antiqued, hammered metal leaves. All were display samples; he bought them at bargain basement prices when the styles were discontinued.

A few steps from the kitchen is the dining area. Its table was made from a four-inch slab of darkened walnut and is surrounded by high-back, rush-bottom chairs. On the table rests an old, wooden African feeding trough. Gary has filled its five sections with dried peas, lentils and grains and placed a votive candle in each pocket.

On the opposite side of the house in the living room, there are nearly a dozen windows of varying widths. Wide, natural wood planks cover the floor. The furnishings are minimalist, but comfortable. Guests can use a couple of cozy couches to cuddle up on, and two slab benches to sit upon or use as footrests, while listening to Gary and the gang pound on a trio of native drums in one corner. In another corner, six oars of varying lengths are propped up, forming a pyramid. Native woven tapestries are also on display, as is a painting by Santa Fe artist Amina Ray, formerly of Annapolis.

Up the staircase

Bannister or not, Gary leads the way up the spiraling staircase to the second floor, to show his bedroom and three others.

Gary's room is to the right of the top of the stairs. Like the rest of the house, there is no carpeting in this room, just the smooth natural plank flooring. The wall behind Gary's hand-crafted sled bed undulates in a subtle series of waves. Gary can lie in bed and, through a bank of tall windows, view the rising sun and moon. Above the bed hangs a print of a dancing Native American war-



rior.

The dressing room and master bath are in a room behind the bedroom, accessible through the bedroom or hallway. Another door in the center of the hallway leads to a tidy laundry room.

Further down the hallway, past a wall covered with children's artworks thumbtacked to it, are three more bedrooms. To the left, facing the water, are rooms used by Benah and Eli.

Benah's room is at the far end. She has a bunk bed framed with a curling wood slab, and a tree trunk seems to sprout from the floor and grow through the ceiling. Benah's room is painted a bubbly Barbie pink and accented with a pair of pink velvety bean bag seats. Her plush, wooden and ceramic equine figurines are displayed around the room, including on the shelves of a bookcase set into her closet.

Next door is Eli's room. His room is painted in turquoise and gold. Dinosaurs battle on a framed poster above the top bunk; Angry Birds growl from a wall poster. Robots and model planes elbow for space on a bookshelf ledge alongside the lower bed.

The final bedroom is a guest room. Tucked in a corner, a set of narrow stairs leads to a loft on the third floor. It, too, has a grand view. The space is still unfinished, but looks like a terrific place for kids to read, paint or play.

Last stop

We scamper, carefully, back down the staircase to a stairwell into the basement. It, too, is filled with light. The rec room, like the rooms stacked above it, has a spectacular view. Guests can walk right out a sliding door to the swimming pool. Here, Gary has a classic set of drums placed a few yards away from his work station where he hand-draws architectural plans for his clients. A pair of cozy, overstuffed chairs faces an entertainment center.

Looking around his sturdy house, Gary said: "I don't like the way most houses are built today. They're made of glue-based composites — plywood, sawdust and glue. The glue will eventually harden and break apart," Gary said. "Old homes were built with wood timbers; they had no off-gassing. Glue-based buildings will only last 40 years. Homes built with wood last 200 years or more."

He added, "I build with timbers, stone, straw bales and tin. They're the real deal."

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