

at home™

IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS

JULY-SEPTEMBER
2025

Titans of tailgating

A look at three
of the most
recognizable
vehicles outside
Memorial Stadium

Home-team proud

Illini memorabilia
plays a big role
in decor for these
devoted fans

Celebrity chefs

New series kicks off
with WCIA anchor's
go-to dish for dinner
on a busy weeknight

Petal preserver

UI professor's
hobby business
turns garden favorites
into works of art



TOP LAWYERS

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA AREA

BASED UPON A SURVEY OF THEIR PEERS



These **LEADING LAWYERS** have been recommended by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois.

Delmar K. Banner	Banner Ford LLP	Champaign	217.353.4900	Agriculture; Close/Private Held Business; Real Estate: Commercial; Real Estate: Finance; Trust/Will/Estate
Barbra A. Webber	Barbra A Webber Attorney at Law	Champaign	217.531.1147	Family
James D. Cottrell	James D Cottrell Law Office PC	Champaign	217.693.4905	Agriculture; Close/Private Held Business; Land Use/Zoning/Condemn; RE: Commercial; Trust/Will/Estate
Todd A. Bresney	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1520	Personal Injury: General
William J. Harrington	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
Robert M. Javoronok Jr.	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Kathy A. Olivero	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
John J. Waldman	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Richard P. Klaus	Klaus LeFebvre & Wince LLP	Champaign	217.337.4700	Civil Appellate; Commercial Litigation; PI Defense: General; Professional Malpractice Defense; RE: Commercial
Thomas B. Borton	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Professional Malpractice Defense
Nicholas M. Schiro	Schiro & Themer	Danville	217.443.1721	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Rowan E. Themer	Schiro & Themer	Champaign	217.607.0750	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
William A. Peithmann	The Peithmann Law Office	Mahomet	217.586.6102	Agriculture; Real Estate: Commercial; Real Estate: Residential; Tax: Individual; Trust/Will/Estate
Denise Knipp Bates	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Elder; Real Estate: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Justin N. Brunner	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Rights/Constitutional; Gov't/Municipal/Lobby/Admin; Medical Malpractice Defense; PI Defense: General
Eric S. Chovanec	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Close/Private Held Business; Employment: Management; Labor: Management; Workers' Compensation Def
James D. Green	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Insurance/Coverage/Reins; Personal Injury Defense: General
Richard R. Harden	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Defense: General
Nathan T. Kolb	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Insurance/Coverage/Reinsurance; Medical Malpractice Defense; PI Defense: General
Kenneth D. Reifsteck	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Workers' Compensation Defense
Nathaniel M. Schmitz	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Close/Private Held Business; Real Estate: Commercial; Real Estate: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
John M. Sturmanis	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Workers' Compensation Defense
Lott H. Thomas	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Trust/Will/Estate
John T. Wozniak	Wozniak & Associates	Urbana	217.367.1647	Close/Private Held Business; Real Estate: Commercial; Real Estate: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate

These **EMERGING LAWYERS** have been identified by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois who are age 40 or younger OR who have been admitted to the practice of law for 10 or fewer years.

Gina Couri-Cyphers	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Civil Appellate; Personal Injury: General
Philip J. Pence	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Employment: Management

Leading LawyersSM
Find a better lawyer, fasterSM

emerging lawyersSM
on a fast track to the topSM

A lawyer CANNOT buy the distinction of Leading or Emerging Lawyer. The distinction was earned by being among those lawyers most often recommended by their peers. For a full description of our research process, a complete list of all Leading or Emerging Lawyers, and to view profiles of the lawyers listed on this page, go to www.LeadingLawyers.com

At Home in Central Illinois won first place for best niche publication and second place for special sections in the Illinois Press Association's 2020 Newspapers in Excellence Contest.

**2101 Fox Drive
Champaign, Illinois 61820
217-351-5252**

**EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
AND PUBLISHER**

Paul M. Barrett
pmbpub@aol.com

**VICE PRESIDENT
OF ADVERTISING**

Mark Lukas
(217) 393-8238

**VICE PRESIDENT
OF NEWS**

Jim Rossow
(217) 393-8261

CONTENT MANAGER

Carolyn Maille-Petersen
camaillepetersen@gmail.com
(217) 390-4816

ART DIRECTOR

Niko Dugan
(217) 393-8253

LETTERS

Your input is encouraged. Contact
jrossow@news-gazette.com
or mail letters to 2101 Fox Drive,
Champaign, IL 61820.

FOLLOW US ONLINE

FACEBOOK

@athomeincentralillinois

INSTAGRAM

@athomecentralillinois

At Home in Central Illinois™ is published four times a year by Central Illinois Multimedia Group LLC, 2101 Fox Drive, Champaign, IL 61820. ©2025 by Central Illinois Multimedia Group LLC, all rights reserved. Contents may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher.

Home is where the game is



Coming up with the contents of each issue of At Home is both fun and a challenge. I am always asking myself what “counts” as an appropriate topic for the magazine.

How much leeway do I have when thinking about home- and garden-related topics? Does “home” just mean the physical structure in which we live, or more broadly, does it mean the area where we live, work and play? I choose to think it’s the latter, and that definitely shines through in this edition.

Nearly all the stories took a completely different direction from what I originally envisioned. We went in search of one thing and found something completely different. We were trying to find people who had Illini “fan caves” in their basements where they would host game-watching parties. Turns out, those are hard to come by. What we hit upon instead is so creative and fun, I thought we definitely needed to push the boundaries.

We found three mobile venues where families and friends get together to enjoy each other’s company and celebrate a shared passion for the Illini. We also found three longtime and passionate Illini fans who collect and display Illini memorabilia throughout their homes instead of just confining it to a designated “fan cave.”

Similarly, our piece about Cris Hughes and her botanical artwork took on a larger scope than originally intended. I had planned to put it in the spring issue, then pushed it back so we could include photos of both her artwork and her gorgeous home garden. Then, Cris told me about the artwork she is creating in partnership with ClarkLindsey. That is a story unto itself, and you will read more about that later this fall. Stay tuned!

Tweaking stories isn’t new, of course. But, no matter the direction a story goes, it always takes on more interest and heart when it includes the people behind the “stuff.” I hope you agree.

Cheers!

— Carolyn

P.S. We got one of our best leads from Don Flynn (above), who is featured in the tailgating article, so be like Don and send me your suggestions.



Don Flynn gives a tour of the GameDay USA mobile concessions trailer that he transformed into an Illini-themed tailgating palace.

Photo by Carolyn Maille-Petersen



12

Photo by Molly Sweeney

A collection of commemorative glasses, mugs, pitchers and newspaper front pages from the Illini's past successes at superfan Marty Long's home in Savoy.

Contents

5 Celebrity Chefs

Our new occasional series kicks off with longtime WCIA Channel 3 anchor Jennifer Roscoe's go-to quick meal: Her mother-in-law's mostaccioli.

7 From the garden to the wall

UI anthropology Professor Cris Hughes has turned a budding interest in flower preservation into a hobby business, Secret Gardens CU.

12 Illini at home ...

The memorabilia these three superfans have collected over a lifetime of hailing to the orange has a sacred place in their houses.

18 ... and on the road

When it comes to tailgating, these three Illini-themed mobiles are among the most involved — and recognizable.

22 Real estate 101

A new series consulting area real-estate experts about things you may not know continues with Coldwell Banker's Jayne Ahlden.

27 Ask the Expert

Interior designer Kim Peckert shares tips on the many ways you can incorporate wallcoverings in your decor.

On our cover

Don Flynn, second from left, and his family show their spirit in front of the 'shadow box' that holds in the TV in the mobile concession trailer that he transformed in 2020 into an Illini tailgating palace, festooned with memorabilia.

Photo provided

Find more photos and feature content at [news-gazette.com](https://www.news-gazette.com)

July-September 2025



MY FAVORITE MEAL

The go-to dish for: WCIA-TV anchor **Jennifer Roscoe**

Story Carolyn Maille-Petersen  Photos Provided

In a new occasional series, we're going to spotlight well-known community members who like to cook. We'll delve into their methods (or their madness) and ask them to share a favorite recipe. First up: Jennifer Roscoe.

Jennifer, the longtime anchor at WCIA-TV, has always made room in her schedule to make homemade meals for her family. A self-taught cook, she enjoys the process and the satisfaction of knowing they are gathered around the table eating a well-rounded meal.

However, being an evening news anchor makes cooking a tricky business. It was even trickier when she was just starting out and juggling a young family. Her work schedule meant rushing home after the 6 p.m. news to eat dinner with her husband, Toney, and daughters Sophia and Tessa before hustling back to anchor the 10 p.m. news. This left no time to cook in the evening.

"Because my schedule was so goofy, I knew I had to come up with a system," says Jennifer.

With two working parents on different schedules, life can be crazy, as anyone with children knows. Jennifer got the girls out the door in the morning, while Toney took the evening shift, handling after-school duties.

"I knew that T (Toney), having

worked all day and having to pick up the kids, he is not going to try to put together a multi-step recipe, right," she says.

So Jennifer used her mornings at home to prepare meals that were easy to warm up at dinner time. But it's not enough to cook in the morning. You also need to know what you're going to make and have all the ingredients on hand. Thus, a system was born.

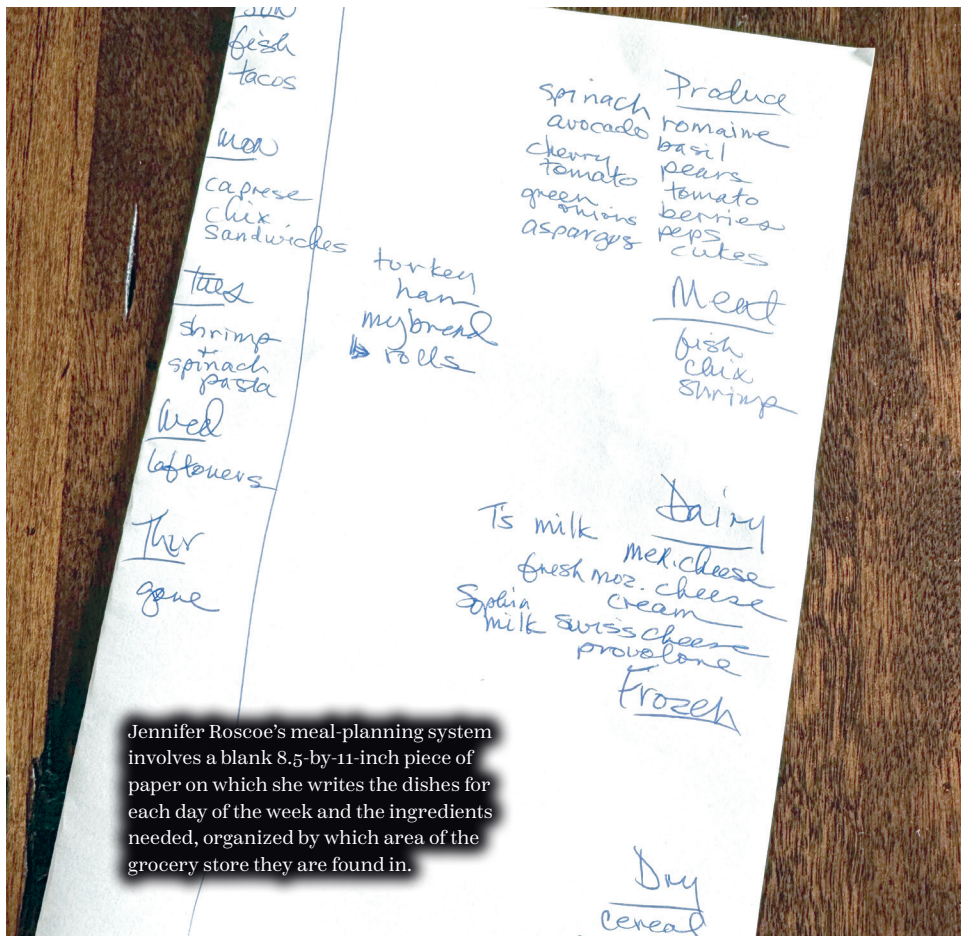
That system — a blank sheet of 8.5-by-11-inch paper — has worked well for decades.

"I have made this piece of paper for 25 years," she says.

She eschews electronic lists because "I don't want to be talking into my phone (at the store)." And she can customize it.

She lists the days of the week, the meal of the day, and then creates a list of the items needed for each meal. To make shopping more efficient, the list is broken down by category and placed in the order she encounters it in the store so she isn't backtracking. All this is done on Sundays. Then the week begins.





Jennifer Roscoe's meal-planning system involves a blank 8.5-by-11-inch piece of paper on which she writes the dishes for each day of the week and the ingredients needed, organized by which area of the grocery store they are found in.

Over the years, Jennifer leaned into meals that were easy to warm up: casseroles, soups and chili. On Sundays, when she isn't working, she often makes fish or other dishes that don't lend themselves to being reheated.

But even though she's been cooking for years, she still feels like she can learn more. For that reason, she recently launched a new cooking show she calls "Let's Dish." The first episode was released earlier this month on WCIA's new digital streaming app, "WCIA 3+."

Today, however, is about her favorite recipe: her Italian mother-in-law's baked mostaccioli.

"I'm not a chef," she says modestly, "but this is the recipe that I can make without looking, because I've made it so many times."

This is the dish delivered to the new mom, the sick friend or the neighbor who has suffered a death. It has been a mainstay at every family gathering — including the holidays, she says, served alongside the Thanksgiving turkey and the Easter ham.

But never mess with the recipe, Jennifer warns. That's asking for trouble: "They would revolt!"

Here, then, is the unadulterated recipe. Buon appetito!

Jennifer Roscoe's Baked Mostaccioli

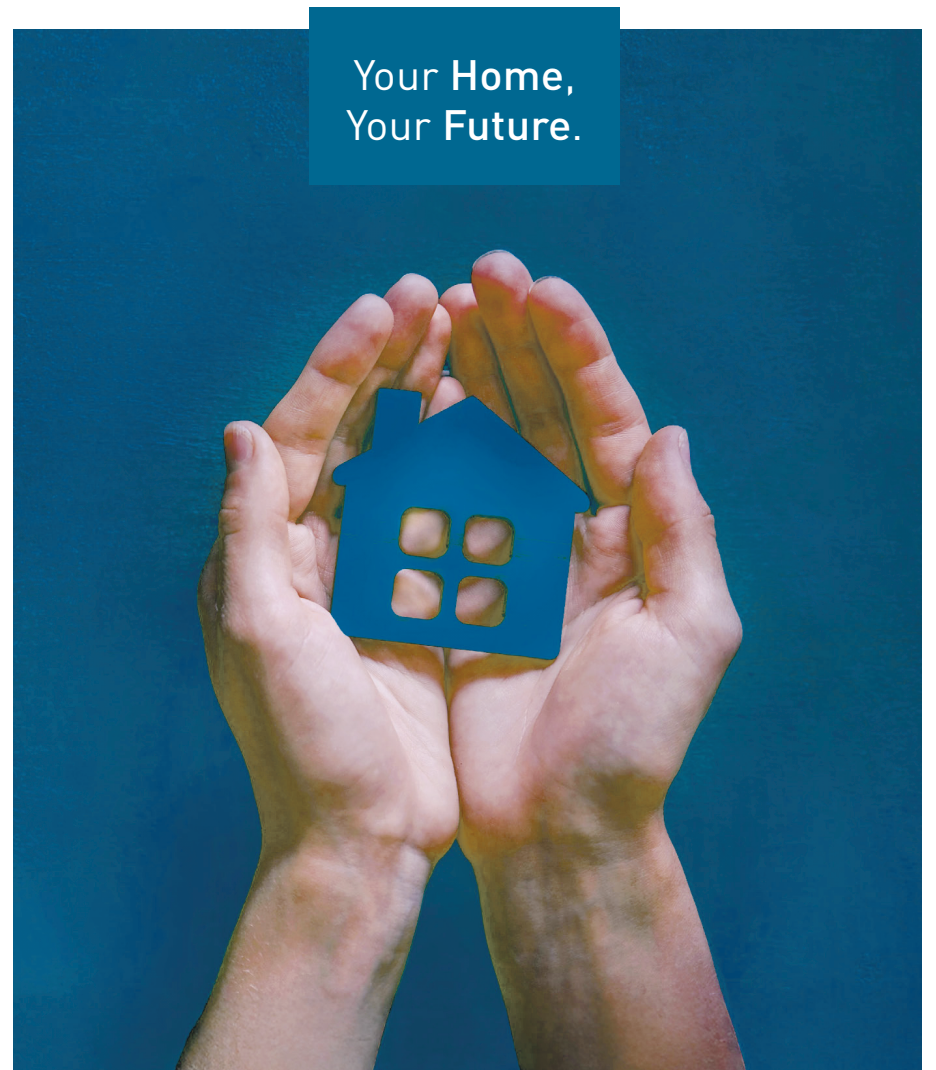
- 1 pound mostaccioli pasta
- 2 pounds ricotta cheese
- 8 ounces grated mozzarella cheese
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 3 eggs
- 3 tablespoons dried parsley
- 24-ounce jar of Ragù "Mama's Special Garden Sauce"
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Boil and drain pasta. Mix pasta with cheeses, eggs, parsley and ⅓ jar of sauce. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Pour into 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Pour rest of sauce over top.

Cover and bake for 30 minutes or until fork inserted in middle comes out hot.



Your Home,
Your Future.

LOCAL. EXPERIENCED. INVESTED.

You live here,
we lend here.

We are here to guide you every step of the way with competitive rates, personalized service, and quick decisions made right here in our community.

HICKORY
POINT BANK

Invested.

EQUAL HOUSING LENDER MEMBER FDIC

HICKORYPOINTBANK.COM

CHAMPAIGN DECATUR SPRINGFIELD

NATURAL inspiration

UI Professor **Cris Hughes** has turned her passion for gardening and interest in preserving flowers into a thriving hobby business that transforms blooms into works of art



Story Carolyn Maille-Petersen  Photos Robin Scholz

Every gardener knows the thrill of a flower bed in full blossom and the desolation that accompanies the end of the growing season. Wouldn't it be great if they lasted forever? If you're Cris Hughes, you've figured out how to make that a reality.

Cris is the creative, energetic owner of Secret Gardens CU, a hobby business she began in 2019 after she became interested in preserving flowers. The impetus to make her own three-dimensional botanical compositions came from seeing a beautiful piece of floral artwork by Anne ten Donkelaar.

"That drove me to learn how to dry them,

and then I fell in love with collecting," she says. "I fell in love with paying attention to my surroundings."

It didn't hurt that she had just given birth to her daughter, Cricket, and was spending a lot of time taking her for strolls. These walks gave Cris ample time to notice the world around her.





The flowers she encountered in central Illinois were quite different from her native Florida. She discovered a love for some of the flowering bulbs that don't grow in the Sunshine State, as well as an appreciation for the variety of plant life that comes with four distinct seasons.

"I really love having seasons," she says. "I feel it's super special."

She began to research the process for preserving flowers, settling on a method that involves covering them in silica to wick the moisture from the plants while preserving their color and shape.

"It's not easy to do" the drying process, she says. Understanding how you preserve the structure of the flower and then encasing it in silica such that it dries in the desired form takes a lot of time and patience. Wedding bouquets, for example, take one to two hours just to pose the flowers before the drying process is undertaken, and that's just the first step.

The drying process only takes a couple weeks. However, creating one of these delicate and intricate pieces of three-dimensional artwork takes anywhere from five to seven hours, depending on the size of the piece.

Cris has a full-time job as a professor and forensic anthropologist at the University of Illinois, not to mention a family, so she works on her art in her spare time. For this reason, customers can expect to wait six months or more to receive their completed piece.

From wild to styled

While Cris has been doing wedding bouquets almost exclusively the past few years, she also creates art pieces using what she finds on nature walks and in her home garden. She describes her personal style as a "flowery, prairie-woodland vibe."

The process of creating a piece of art from a wedding bouquet differs somewhat from the process of making something from her own cache of preserved items, in part because her choice of natural items is a bit broader.

"I usually start with inspiration from a particular foraged item, like an interesting mushroom or chunk of moss and use that to build out the vibe of the piece," she explains, adding this helps her decide on materials and "levels of vibrancy." "I pull out, usually, all of my 15-plus containers with (dried) flowers as I choose what I intuitively feel like the piece needs next, and keep building, guided by the color and flow of the objects."



Once she has arranged a draft of the piece — without pinning anything down — she eyeballs it to see if she wants to make any adjustments. Once she is satisfied, she trims up any overhanging stems and begins securing the items using specimen pins.

“I’ve developed all sorts of tricks to get the flowers just how I want them with glue, pins and a little bit of foam board to match the background of the piece,” she explains.

Once everything is pinned, “I take tiny specs of glue to dab in various locations to stabilize the petals.” Then it is left to dry a bit more before placing it in a shadowbox frame.

Garden Inspiration

While the flowers used in artwork created from wedding bouquets are mostly provided by the couple, Cris’ own art pieces come from a wider variety of sources. Cris grows more than 85 species of plants that she uses in her art. Additionally, she incorporates other items, from moss and mushrooms to bark and butterflies (any insect she uses must already be dead when it’s foraged).

She also receives foraged items from friends, family and even her hairdresser. When she visits Florida, she picks up items from her parents’ and in-laws’ yards.

Her main concern when foraging is ensuring that she has permission if she sees mushrooms or other items on someone’s property. She is also conscientious about not decimating a flower patch when cutting flowers.

“I’m not going to take things in batches,” she says. “I want to respect that.”

Cris’ own yard is a riot of color. She has cultivated her garden for the 14 years she and her partner, Taylor, have owned their home. “Garden,” however, is something of a misnomer, since she has multiple flower and vegetable beds scattered throughout her front and back yards, all of which she cares for herself.

Bells of Ireland are her “absolute favorite flower,” she says, along with anything “spire-shaped” such as foxglove, monkshood, snapdragons and delphiniums, all of which she grows at home.

A to Z

Painting & Decorating, Inc.



A complete painting & decorative service:

- Interior & Exterior
- Residential & Commercial

*Serving the greater
Champaign Urbana Area*

atozpaintinganddecorating.com • 217-643-2600



She has also planted poppies, bachelor's button, cottage garden mix, smaller zinnias, Canterbury bells and Chinese-lantern plant, to name just a few, all from seed.

"I love the process — watering it, seeing it grow," she says. "I by no means have my process figured out."

She recently expanded her garden into her east side yard to make room for more annuals.

"I am mostly trying to find what will be happiest," she says.

She's always experimenting, moving plants around, even transplanting a random vine she found growing in one of her flower beds. Unbeknownst to her, that vine turned out to be a beautiful Chinese clematis that now drapes luxuriously over a wooden frame on the corner of her deck.

In the community


While Cris' business may be called Secret Gardens CU, her artwork is no secret. Locally, she has sold more than 250 original pieces of art, as well as more than 1,000 art prints and cards. Maybe you've seen her work at the Boneyard Arts Festival or Allerton Park. These are two of the many places she's exhibited her creations.

Or maybe you participated in her community art project funded by an Urbana Arts Grant in the summer of 2020. Cris preserved flowers donated by community members — either from their own gardens or local foraging adventures, or by choosing from the fresh-cut flowers at her stall at Urbana's Market at the Square — over a period of months, then created a wall-sized botanical art piece that hung at Anita Purves Nature Center. That piece took approximately 40 hours to arrange due to its large size. It was later raffled off for free and now hangs at H2O hair salon in Urbana.

Currently, Cris is working with the folks at ClarkLindsey retirement community in Urbana to create a 3-by-4-foot piece of art. When complete, it will hang in the passageway where the skilled-nursing facility intersects with the independent living apartments currently under construction.

The project, undertaken with the help of Randy Hauser, ClarkLindsey's landscape designer and horticulturist, has been a labor of love. For more than a year, residents and staff, with guidance from Cris and Randy, have been foraging for items on ClarkLindsey's grounds. The hope is to have it completed by the time the new apartment complex opens this fall.

For Cris, her artwork is about more than just collecting and preserving beautiful flowers. It's an homage to the "intersection of seasonality and ecosystems" and its ability to remind us to literally "stop and smell the roses" and appreciate the tiny details in an often busy world.

But perhaps more broadly, it's about creating connections and bringing joy to the people she meets, and what's more joyful than flowers? 

If you'd like to see the preservation process in action, Cris has posted short videos on her website at secretgardenscu.com/frequently-asked-questions that show how she dries the flora and fauna she uses in her art. You can also follow her on Instagram (@secretgardenscu).



Illini superfans Pat Porter, left, and Barb Barker sit on the Illini Rebounders bench — one of only two made — outside Barb's house.

They've got SPIRIT



Marty Long and daughter Teresa Wilson sit surrounded by some of her Illini memorabilia in her home in Savoy.

Pat Porter, Barb Barker and Marty Long's decades of devotion to all things Illini is evident in the memorabilia that make their houses into homes

Marty Long has been an Illini fan for nearly seven decades. Over those years, she's collected a treasure trove of items — enough to fill an entire room to the brim.

But how, you might ask? Or even, why?

"They all know how nuts I am about it," Marty says with a laugh. "I have people give me stuff all the time, you know, because they know I've got a room for it."

It all started when Marty was 18. She was working at a collections agency when her boss took her to a University of Illinois football game.

"I mean, high school football, I was at every game. But I never thought I'd get to go to a university game," Marty says. "But I liked football really well, and my boss took me to a football game and that did it. From then on, I wanted football. I like basketball too, but football is my favorite."

Now 87, Marty has lived a life full of experiences -- with plenty of Illini stories to show for it. She's been to a bowl game, met players, coaches and other fans, and found herself in a special community. One coach in the Illini community even gave Marty the shirt off her back — literally.

"Theresa Grentz was the women's basketball coach. I worked for the bookstore, and we were selling stuff. And she came in, and she had an Illini shirt on," Marty said. "And I said, 'Oh, I really like your shirt.' And then she went on around to the booths and stuff, and, I know the girls there told her what a nut I was about Illinois. When she came to go out, I was at the door. She took it off and handed it to me."

Grentz wasn't the only well-known Illini Marty met while working at the Illini bookstore.

"Bruce Weber came in once to buy his daughter's books, and all the girls said, 'Go to Marty's cash register,'" she says of the coach who took the 2004-05 men's basketball team to the national championship game. "He came up and I said, 'I need to see your identification.'"

And we just laughed."

Marty isn't able to go to basketball or football games in person anymore, but she's no less of a devoted fan. Now, she streams the games on TV, and her family knows not to bother her when the Illini are playing.

"I put a do-not-disturb sign up," she says with a laugh.

She added that the family's legacy of Illini fandom continues on, even though she can't attend games in person anymore. Marty's mom chose the family's seats about 90 years ago, and her granddaughter has them now.

"Under the opening at the 40 yard line; best seats in the house," Marty says.

In the Illini community, however, the connections that fans have with each other endure, regardless if someone is at the games in person.

"I was in the hospital," Marty says, "and a lady crocheted these two butterflies for me. A lady in this complex that I hardly know, she brought them to me after" she was back at home.

Interactions like that are a large part of how Marty came to acquire many of her items. People give Illini memorabilia to her for Christmas, birthdays or just because they know she would truly appreciate it. Among Marty's items are an Illinois symbol made from turf from the old field, a painting of linebacker legend Dick Butkus (of which only 50 exist), and a helmet autographed by former football coach Lovie Smith. Some of her most special and important items, however, are rows of Illini buttons.

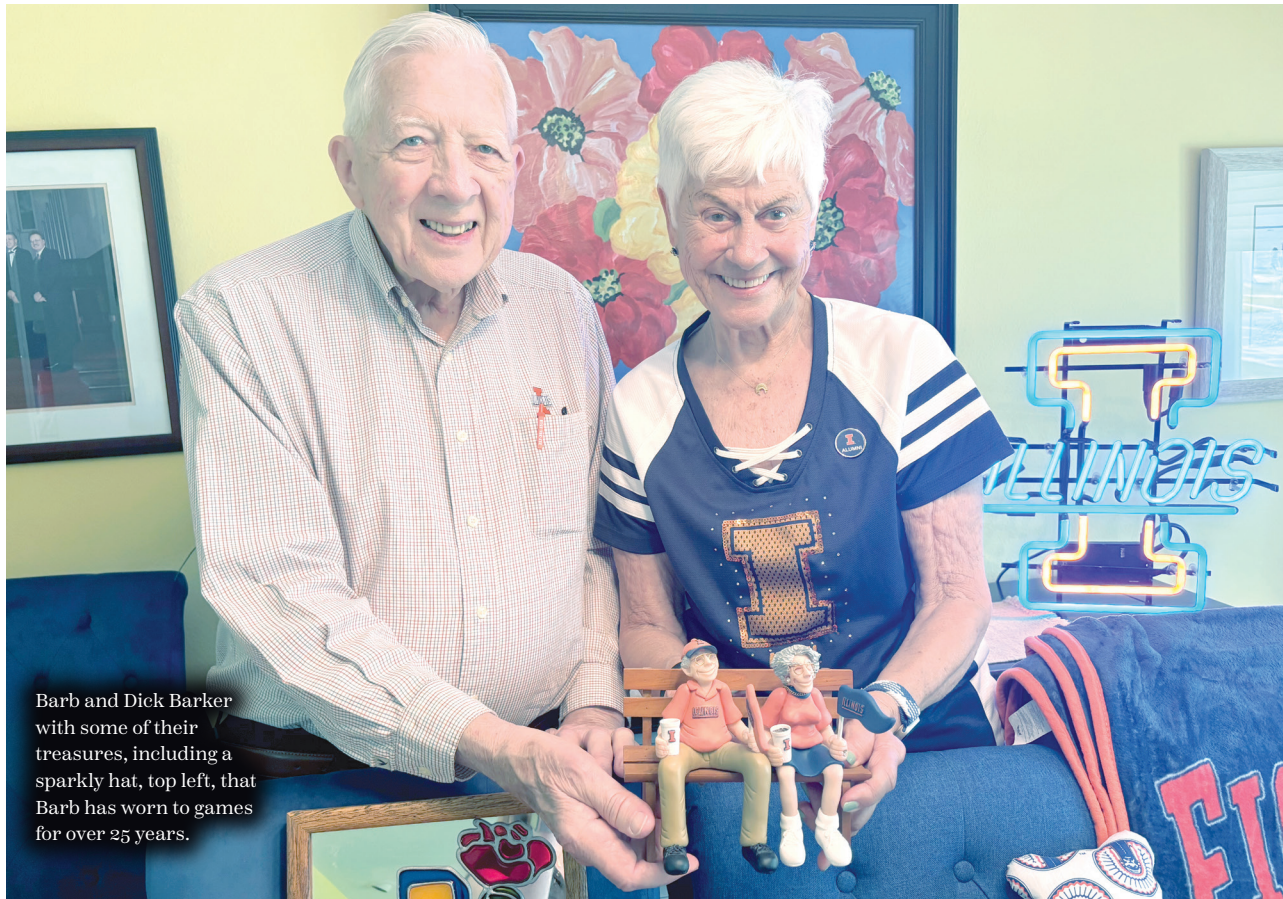
"My dad made those," she says. "He had a store that made buttons and did trophies and stuff, and most of (the buttons hanging up) he made."





Among Marty Long's Illini memorabilia: Rows of buttons, left, made by her father, who owned a store that produced them; and a variety of dolls in orange and blue, including her favorite piece of all, the doll above that once belonged to her granddaughter and is dressed in clothes her granddaughter used to wear.





Barb and Dick Barker with some of their treasures, including a sparkly hat, top left, that Barb has worn to games for over 25 years.

Her favorite item in the entire room, though, is one she says has a special connection to her granddaughter.

“This doll was my granddaughter’s doll, and that outfit on it is the one she wore,” she says with a smile. “I’m very close to her.”

Just a few miles away, Barb Barker’s house tells a similar story to Marty’s — one of devotion and pride in the orange and blue.

Barb and husband Dick are longtime Illini fans, and Barb said she’s been going to games since at least 1956, when her brother was in the Marching Illini. It wasn’t until 1975, however, when she, Dick and several others started traveling to away games.

“So basketball took over our life, because basketball took over Champaign,” she says. “I just can’t imagine not being” an Illini fan.

One of their most cherished memories is a panoramic photo from a game against Michigan where Dick was an honorary coach, and his name appeared on the

screen just as the photo was being taken.

A friend later called Barb and suggested that she visit the photographer to check the picture out.

“So I walked in, and the guy says, ‘Can I help you with something?’” Barb says, and she told him she was looking for the picture. “And he says, ‘Are you the Barker lady?’ And he showed me the picture and I said, ‘I want that for my husband.’” Now, the photo hangs proudly in the Barkers’ home.

After Barb retired from teaching, she joined the Illini Rebounders. Like Marty, people gifted her items, and her collection ranges from a sparkly hat worn to games for over 25 years to limited-edition memorabilia like an Illini Rebounders bench. Only two exist; the other belongs to longtime staff member Rod Cardinal.

Barb’s collection even includes cardboard cutouts of her and Dick that were used to fill empty seats during the pandemic.

But what truly stands out is the sense of community — friendships built through fandom.

Geothermal
Urbana-Champaign

A public education and bulk purchasing program that makes going geothermal easier and more affordable.

GeothermalUC.org

Scan to learn more



Pat Porter with the neon 'Block I' sign given to her by her husband.

Barb and fellow fan Pat Porter taught in the same school district. They would talk daily about Illini sports at lunch, during breaks and after school.

And like Marty and Barb, Pat's love for the Illini isn't just a hobby.

"So we've been probably two of the most loyal fans in our school district, for sure," says Pat, who's been an Illini fan for over 60 years.

"We stay in the winters here in Central Illinois because of the University of Illinois and how we want to always be here and go to everything. We follow everything," she adds.


Pat and husband Tom, a former wrestling coach and assistant football coach for the Illini, are die-hard fans like the Barkers. The proof of their love for all things Illini is evident in the gifts they've given each other over the years.

"This was a Christmas gift to me," Pat says about a neon sign in the shape of the "Block I" logo. "I asked for diamond stud earrings. (Tom) came home for Christmas and he goes, 'I have your Christmas gift. I want to give it to you now, but you need to shut your eyes.'"

"So I shut my eyes, and he's messing around. And I thought, 'What is going on?' And he said, 'OK, open your

eyes.' Well. He turned off every light, and just all around the room was this orange-and-blue glow."

If you're looking to get into collecting or to find those special items that others might not have, Pat has some advice: "Be a loud, vocal Illinois fan. Go to everything. Get involved in everything that you possibly can. Pick up little things that will someday be a keeper."

From dolls to benches, the collections in these women's homes show more than just fandom. They're also reminders of the friendships that have been made, family bonds that have been strengthened and a lifetime of loyalty. 

Tailgating TITANS

How three of the most recognizable vehicles outside Memorial Stadium on game days came to be



Photo by Jim Rossow

The Flynn family — Don and DeeDee, center, and their children, from right, Jared and Zack Flynn and daughter Nicki (Flynn) Polhamus with husband Chad and children Dexter and Lennon — are shown with the GameDay USA mobile concession trailer that Don transformed into a tailgating palace.

Story Carolyn Maille-Petersen

Tailgating with friends and family before, during and after football games is a long-standing tradition at the University of Illinois.

You know it's a football weekend when the cars, campers and mobile homes begin streaming into town Friday evenings in the fall. It is unquestionably a dedicated fan base.

But there are fans, and then there are FANS.

FANS are the ones who line up at 4 a.m. Saturday to get a prime spot in Lot 31

near Memorial Stadium. They are also the ones who have dedicated, Illini-themed tailgate mobiles of all shapes and sizes. From repurposed ambulances and buses to fire trucks, campers and concession trailers, you see it all in Lot 31, including the three featured here.

Don and DeeDee Flynn, Robert Rosenthal, Laura Dawson Salmon and Greg Kyburz are what you might call

super fans. They don't just set up a few camp chairs, a card table and a cooler full of cold beverages and call it good. No, these five stand out from the tailgating crowd thanks to their custom Illini-themed tailgating vehicles.

Don and DeeDee have a repurposed mobile concession stand, Robert has a converted fire truck and Laura and Greg have a renovated recreational vehicle.



Making no concessions

Don and DeeDee Flynn have been season-ticket holders for 39 years. When their three children, Jared, Nicki and Zack, were young, they “tailgated” at home out of necessity, DeeDee says.

It wasn’t until the early 1990s, when their kids were older, that they began tailgating by Memorial Stadium, first in the former Gold Lot, now known as Grange Grove, and then across the street in Lot 31.

For years, they used the GameDay USA mobile concession trailer that Don had as part of his job selling concessions and T-shirts at high school baseball tournaments.

In 2020, Don had the opportunity to buy the trailer, at which point he decided to go all in and convert it to show his Illini pride.

That summer, Don commissioned a friend of Zack’s to come up with a design to wrap the outside of the trailer.

“Of course, that was the year of COVID,” Don says. “We did not get to tailgate.”

Nonetheless, they forged ahead. The custom design includes Illini colors, the “Block I” and Illini catchphrases, as well as some photos that Don took of Memorial Stadium and the statues of Dick Butkus and Red Grange.

Once the design was complete, the same friend wrapped the trailer. While it normally takes two to three days to wrap a vehicle, Don says, this project took a bit longer since it was being done as a side job.

Another friend who works for Pacesetter Truck and Auto Accessories built a “shadow box” to place in the opening where concessions and T-shirts were once sold. That shadow box now holds a flat-screen television and vertical shelves for displaying commemorative football helmets.

Power is provided by a Honda gas generator that has its own locking storage cubby on the back side of the trailer. The generator sits on a sliding shelf that pulls out while they tailgate and then slides back in when they leave.

“The fun part about the trailer to me,” Don says, “there’s a lot of people that are just walking around, and they walk up to the trailer and we can see them stop and look. They’re looking at it; they’re looking at the setup.”

And Don, with his gregarious personality, loves to chat with anyone who shows an interest.

“We’ve given many guided tours,” he says with pride. “I think that what makes it unique is that the inside is finished.”

The two-room trailer — designed by Don — has checkerboard flooring, a custom Flynn family Illini doormat and multiple countertops and cabinets. It’s also covered

in Illini memorabilia, from posters signed by quarterbacks Juice Williams and Tommy DeVito to a framed photograph of Chief Illiniwek alongside family photos. When the game is over and it’s time to pack up, there is plenty of room to store their custom tents, tables, chairs, portable orange Coleman grill and cornhole game.

“We’ve had many diapers changed in there; we’ve had friends nurse their babies in there,” Don says. “It’s very functional that way. We’re very family-friendly.”

They’re also very welcoming. Like many tailgaters, they love to party with fellow fans, most notably DeVito’s family in 2022.

“They were a riot!” Don says.

Now, with three generations of the Flynn family tailgating alongside co-hosts Murray and Sue Outlaw and their friends, the converted concession trailer gets a workout.

“We just eat all day and party,” DeeDee says.

They even celebrated their 35th wedding anniversary with a tailgate party that included live music from Mank and Sass.

“People know the Flynn family tailgate,” their daughter Nicki says. “They know that they can come and stop by, and friends of friends are welcome. Everyone is welcome.”

Engine 77

Robert Rosenthal and his buddies also made clever use of a vehicle originally built for another purpose: a ladder truck.

The group has tailgated for years, and while in Tampa, Fla., to see the Illini in the 2023 ReliaQuest Bowl, they decided to pool their resources and buy a tailgating vehicle. After bandying about ideas such as a UPS truck or an ambulance, they settled on a firetruck.

Thus, in late July 2022, Robert and his friends bought a decommissioned ladder truck and set about reinventing it. They dubbed it “Engine 77” in honor of football legend Grange’s jersey number.

“We had basically a month to get it ready for the season,” he says.

And with a little luck and a lot of coordinating on Robert’s part, it got done. He immediately sent it off to Crispin Auto in Rantoul to be repainted in Illini orange.

“I knew I didn’t just want us to come up with stickers to put on the outside,” Robert says. “I wanted to do this right.”

He used Dean’s Graphics to come up with a design for the rest of the truck, with all decisions made as a group.

“We did it very democratically,” Robert says.

When considering options, they came up with some ingenious means of repurposing the truck, including turning the ladder rack on the side into a stand for the television and speakers. They also turned the upper tray where more ladders were stacked into a bench so people could sit on top.

The process made for some interesting conversations, Robert says with a laugh.

“All of our wives say this is our midlife crisis,” he says. “You have six guys in their late 40s/early 50s who all put money into the pot and then buy a fire truck, pay for the painting, pay for the wrap and this and that, and then you see you still have money left in the pot and you do things like, ‘Well, what if we got fire helmets?’”

This led him to Dale Corbin of Smoke Eater Customs, who painted six fire helmets with



Provided

the owners’ nicknames.

Those helmets are displayed inside one of the truck’s large doors that flips open and was originally used to store firefighting tools and radios. The helmet-display backdrop is one of the graphics used by the football team for recruiting purposes.

“We actually worked with a guy who worked for the football team,” to get the graphic, Robert says.

The final touch was a custom-made neon “Block I” that sits atop the truck and lights up when the Illini win.

“When we lose, we don’t light the I. It sits up there uncomfortably,” he says with a rueful laugh.

Luckily, there have been a lot of opportunities to light it in the last few years.

As with the Flynn’s trailer, the truck gets a lot of attention from fans, Robert says, and he, too, is happy to give people the tour.

“This exists for fandom,” he says. “This exists to promote the team.”



Quality calls for precision

**Siding • Windows • Walls • Garage Doors
Cabinets • Drywall Texturing • Epoxy Floors & More!**

Ask how to get a FREE estimate!

Precision Painting

701 West Park Avenue, Champaign, IL

217-384-7590 whyprecision.com



Photo by Robin Scholz
Greg Kyburz, left, and Laura Dawson Salmon with the 2001 RV they renovated (inset).

Retro Illini RV

Rounding out the trio is the recreational vehicle that Laura Dawson Salmon and her partner, Greg Kyburz, bought in Wisconsin in 2021.

The 2001 RV had seen better days: The tires had so much undetected dry rot that two blew out on the drive back to Illinois. But the couple had nothing if not a lot of energy and patience to put into overhauling it.

From replacing the tires and awning to painting the interior and exterior and sewing curtains, Laura and Greg did nearly all the work themselves, pouring a lot of sweat equity into the RV.

“We didn’t spend a ton on this,” Laura says. “We just wanted to have fun with it, you know?”

The 32-foot-long, 256-square-foot RV has a fully functioning kitchen and bathroom,

two double beds and one single, as well as a fold-out couch and a kitchen table with bench seating that can be converted into a bed, not to mention air conditioning and heat so tailgaters can escape the typically unpredictable game-day weather.

It also has plenty of cabinets, which Laura and Greg restored by removing the doors and then repainting and rehanging them, adding new pulls. Laura, an interior designer, decorated the inside with a nod to the Illini: orange and blue wall hangings, bedspreads, pillows and lower cabinetry.

“I wanted to try and do an Illini theme without it being, like, obnoxious orange in your face,” she says with a grin.

She found many of her decorations through discount home-goods stores, improvising when necessary. She took orange shower curtains and sewed them into charming custom curtains for all of the windows and repainted a gold wall hanging in orange and

blue. Peel-and-stick black-and-white floral wallpaper rounds out the interior.

While Laura worked on the inside, Greg worked on the outside. He repainted the exterior in white with blue and orange accents and mounted Illini-themed signs to both ends. He also replaced the awning, teaching himself how to do it by watching YouTube videos.

Laura and Greg recount working on the RV for hours in the heat and humidity. But despite the miserable conditions, they both have fond memories of the renovation process.

“It’s a kind of labor of love,” Laura says. “It’s something to be proud of. We feel good about it, and we enjoyed working together.”


For the last two seasons they’ve been able to enjoy the fruits of their labor, hosting tailgate parties for friends and family and

even hiring the Voodoo Exiles band to play for the homecoming game against Michigan.

“It’s just been a nice gathering spot” when their children and grandchildren, who are scattered throughout the Midwest, come to visit, Laura says.

Game day is always one big party, but for Don and DeeDee, Robert, and Laura and Greg, the party is just a little bit more fun thanks to their unique tailgate setups. They’re all landing spaces for friends and family and tangible expressions of the Illini’s “FamILLy” tagline.

As Robert so aptly put it: “If Coach (Bret) Bielema is going to rebuild the team on the inside of the stadium, we’re going to do our part on the outside of the stadium.”

They seem to be doing a pretty good job, too. I-L-L! 

KEEPING IT REAL (ESTATE)

What to know about buying a home with ... Coldwell Banker's **Jayme Ahlden**

Story **Molly Sweeney**

Photo **Provided**

Our question-and-answer feature about homeownership sees us chat with a real-estate agent to get their take on some of the things people need to consider if they are thinking about jumping into the housing market. This issue: Jayme Ahlden.

Q: What is the current state of the real-estate market in the Rantoul area?

A: As of January, the median sales price in Rantoul is around \$125,125. The median price represents the point where half of the homes sold for more and half for less, making it a more accurate reflection of market conditions than the average price, which can be skewed by higher-end transactions.

Inventory remains extremely low, with only a one-month supply of homes on the market. Generally, a seller's market is defined as having six months or less of inventory, while a buyer's market has six months or more.

Additionally, homes in Rantoul are selling for an average of 98.1 percent of their original list price, meaning that most sellers are receiving close to their asking price.

Q: How do I determine the right neighborhood for my needs?


A: Getting pre-approved for a certain amount doesn't necessarily mean you should purchase at the top of your budget. Since you live in your monthly payment, it's important to consider what feels financially comfortable for you. This is why early conversations with your

Realtor and lender are crucial. Once you determine your comfortable price range, narrowing down your search becomes much easier.

It's also important to ask yourself what features you want in a neighborhood, like proximity to schools, parks, or work; to figure out what type of home suits your lifestyle -- a standalone house with a yard or a low-maintenance condo or townhome -- and to know if there are any deal-breakers. Exploring different neighborhoods with your Realtor can help you find the best fit based on your needs, lifestyle and budget.

Q: Are there any first-time homebuyer incentives or tax breaks available in the area?

A: If you're a homebuyer, I highly recommend working with a local loan officer. Unlike many online lenders, local lenders are familiar with our county-wide sales contract, easily accessible for questions and assistance, motivated to uphold a strong reputation in the community, and most importantly, have the most up-to-date knowledge of any financing incentives or tax breaks available in our area.

Consulting a local expert can help ensure you're taking advantage of every possible benefit. 

Jayme Ahlden is an agent with Coldwell Banker Real Estate Group in Champaign and president of the Champaign County Association of Realtors.



Ask the expert

Is wallcovering out of style? Absolutely not! In fact, there has been a resurgence in popularity for the last couple of years, with extreme growth in 2025. Say goodbye to plain walls and get ready for texture with bold shifts in wallpapered ceilings, accent walls and entire rooms.

Wallcoverings have been regenerated and reimagined for modern living. There are as many choices as paint colors, and the options are endless. A wide range of styles, patterns and textures allow homeowners to showcase their personal style.

The variety of ways that wallcovering can be used is astounding. Stripes can form unique visual patterns. Murals and landscapes are increasingly popular as they have become beautiful masterpieces on materials such as grass cloth, linen, paper weaves and vinyl. They are especially popular in dining rooms, powder rooms and foyers. If you are looking for timeless and traditional with modern simplicity, block prints are the perfect balance, some of which are printed by hand with artisanal qualities.

High risk, high reward

For a mood boost, a bold and confident wallcovering could be a risky choice but make an absolute statement for the entire room.

Another great choice: nature-inspired prints! These wallcoverings can have a calming and grounding effect. Botanicals, florals and tropicals are all great choices to add a modern and organic feel to any room.

Another interesting technique is using two wallcoverings within a space. This creates an intriguing design detail using contrasting patterns with a common color scheme. Adding this element to your room can elevate your design to a whole new level.



Wallcoverings can be used in unconventional ways as well, such as “the fifth wall” — commonly known as the ceiling. It can also be used in cabinet interiors, bookcases, bar areas and back splashes, and in all types and shapes of alcoves to add a little whimsical design.

Wallcoverings can also take the place of tiled areas in your home with the availability of easily cleanable vinyl paper. Some are also eco-friendly, made from recycled and renewable materials, and will maintain their appearance for years.

In essence, wallcoverings are a super versatile

and stylish way to elevate your space and home. They can turn your walls into works of art. Finding the correct wallcovering can sometimes be challenging and overwhelming, but a designer can help narrow the choices and elevate your design project. Now let's get going! *JP*

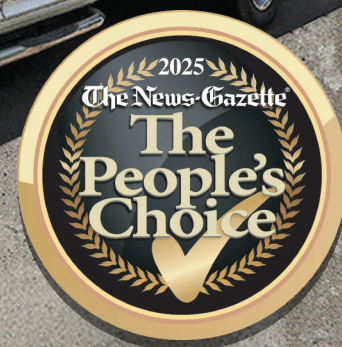
Kim Peckert is a designer and the owner of Kim Peckert Designs, a full-service interior-decorating firm specializing in curated custom interior designs and room/space planning for primary, secondary and vacation homes. If you have a question for this column, submit it to athome@news-gazette.com.

JACK-A-SLAB

CONSTRUCTION, INC

WE LEVEL WITH YOU

**Professional Egress Window
Installation in Central Illinois**



**Count your
basement as a
livable space!**

**Add a point
of egress for
SAFETY!**



**FREE Quotes!
Call Us Today!**

217-358-4141

10+ Years of Experience and You Won't Beat Our Price!

CHAMPAIGN • SPRINGFIELD • DECATUR • FREE ESTIMATES • FULLY INSURED
JACKASLAB.COM • 217-358-4141 • Also Serving Bloomington/Normal 309-694-6777