

A man with a beard and a woman are in a modern kitchen. The man is standing on the left, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. The woman is sitting on the right, wearing a dark sweater. They are both smiling. In front of them is a white marble countertop with a white base. On the countertop, there is a small wooden bowl, a small framed picture of two snow globes, and a smartphone. Above the countertop, there are two white pendant lights hanging from the ceiling. The background is a plain white wall with a light switch and a vent on the floor.

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IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS

SPRING 2026

Defining their space

Couple applies wealth of DIY experience to renovations on their new home

Making a meal of it

Rural Paxton's Cedar Oak Farms taking farm-to-table dinners to new heights

Pattern recognition

Urbana artist sharing her passion through Hooey Batiks

Pollinator's paradise

Champaign woman transforms backyard into haven for insects

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The Spring Edit

Discover a fresh perspective on home



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6

Teresa Sturm adjusts a centerpiece while preparing for a farm-to-table dinner at her Cedar Oak Farms in rural Paxton.

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Luke and Lizzie Stokowski pose on either side of the kitchen island they installed while completing renovations on the home they bought last summer.

Photo by
Robin Scholz

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Here's to the dreamers



Welcome to the new year! As you can see, we made the momentous decision — yay! — to return to a glossy format. We will be making a few changes to content in the coming months, so stay tuned. In the meantime, I hope this issue will be galvanizing to the do-it-yourselfers among us, as well as the aspiring DIYers.

We talked to multiple people who took the initiative to learn something new and then put it into action:

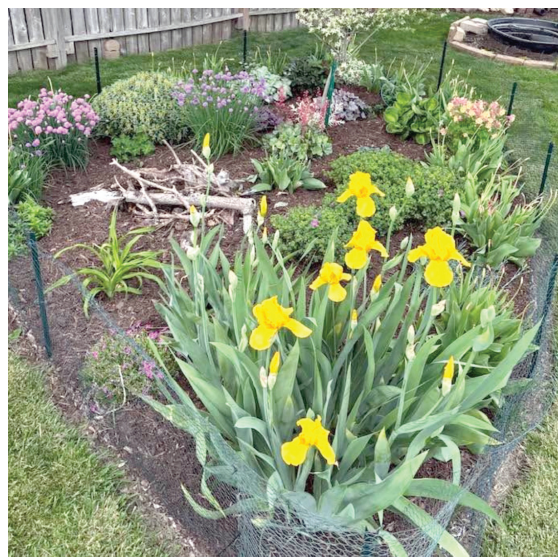
- Teresa Sturm, a chef, excitedly looks forward to learning new cooking techniques and recipes on her yearly culinary adventures.
- Jill Miller, an artist, honed her craft through experimentation.
- Lizzie and Luke Stokowski, young homeowners, watched, learned and then did it themselves thanks to help from knowledgeable family members and video tutorials.
- Kate Deedrich, a gardener, did her research online, getting guidance and advice from professional websites.

What they all have in common is curiosity and the drive to make their dreams a reality.

For me personally, reading about each of their journeys was fascinating and inspirational. Maybe this is the year that I, too, will go beyond dreaming about a bigger garden and finally learn the actual steps I need to take to make it happen. And if I do, I'll have all these amazing individuals to thank.

If you take inspiration from any of these stories, I'd love to hear about it and see the pictures. Email me at camaillepetersen@gmail.com. Keep dreaming!

Cheers!



Some of the plants in the pollinator garden that Kate Deedrich created in the backyard of her home off Duncan Road in Champaign.

— Carolyn

P.S. You can find us online at news-gazette.com/at_home — both current and back issues — as well as on Instagram (@athomecentralillinois) and Facebook (@athomeincentralillinoismagazine).

Teresa and Bo Sturm have created an idyllic farm-to-table experience at Cedar Oak Farms in rural Paxton. **INSET:** Teresa, known as Chef Ella, serves one of the courses she cooked to diners.



HOMEGROWN MEALS

Owners **Teresa and Bo Sturm** have turned their **Cedar Oak Farms** outside Paxton into destination dining



Story and photos



Carolyn Maille-Petersen

PAXTON

The word idyllic gets bandied about a lot, but Cedar Oak Farms in the Paxton countryside truly embodies the meaning of the term.

Shaded on the west end by massive cedar and oak trees, the farmstead encompasses a home, a former horse barn turned on-site kitchen and dining room, a tiny greenhouse, and flower, vegetable and herb gardens, all surrounded by corn and soybean fields. Owners Teresa and Bo Sturm have lived on the farm for more than two

decades, raising their children there while working in Champaign and Onarga.

Now, in retirement, their home has become a destination for people who want to experience a farm-to-table dinner made by Teresa, aka Chef Ella. That's a far cry from her previous career.

Teresa was a certified public accountant and the chief financial officer at Henneman Engineering for many years. A self-professed workaholic, "I thought I'd take early retirement," she says, "because you know, that's the dream. And I hated it!"

Teresa began to think about what she loved, and it turned out to be restaurants and food. She grew up in the restaurant business in Chicagoland.



“I put myself through school in the restaurant business,” she says, “and I thought ‘OK, let’s do that. Let’s start with that.’ And I love it. I love the people who come out here. I love the feel of it. It’s just wonderful!”

That was seven years ago. The Sturms went through multiple iterations of food-centric businesses before hitting on the farm dinners, Teresa says. It started with monthly farmers markets on their farm, alongside a home bakery and home-decor business they ran out of their converted barn.

People loved her bread and baked goods so much that she pivoted to just running a bakery and coffee shop. It was around that time that people began asking Teresa if she would cook dinner for them.

“So we had a couple private dinners,” she relates, “and I’m like, ‘Hmmm, this is my jam. I like this!’”

What came next was monthly farm-to-table dinners that did so well, they sold out every meal in the two seasons they’ve been hosting them. They even added a second night each month last

fall to accommodate the waiting list. Needless to say, Teresa is tickled pink that her dinners have become so popular.

Creating community

“What I love is, at the end of the night, people will be talking, and I’m like, ‘Did you guys come together?’” she says, and as often as not, they’ll tell her they met over dinner. Those connections thrill her.

“That’s what I love,” she says. “The community part is what’s pretty darn special about farm dinners.”

Keeping the numbers low — the dining space in the barn only accommodates 24-30 people — also makes it special.

“I think I’m going to keep it this size,” she says, reasoning that it makes the whole process manageable, but more importantly, “it also keeps it intimate. If you go too big, it just takes some of that away.”

Originally, they hosted meals outdoors, where space was nearly limitless.



“The problem with that” she says wryly, “is we live in Illinois. So either it gets too hot or you know, it rains.”

And the bugs. Anyone who has been outside on a humid Illinois summer evening understands.

Since Teresa is the only chef, that’s another reason to keep the numbers low. She employs part-time servers to help at dinners, but otherwise, it’s just her whipping up all the culinary delights that get served.

The room is set up to encourage new friendships. Three tables of eight run the length of the intimate space so people have the opportunity to meet someone new. The five-course meal comes out slowly, with time in between for diners to get to know one another.

Dinner with time between courses is so atypical in American society that Teresa makes sure to let everyone know how it works when she welcomes her guests.

“It’s important that people understand that,” she says. “I have to get 24 (dishes) out at the same time, and I don’t want to just throw it on the plate. I want it to look nice. More importantly, I’m giving you that opportunity to turn ... and talk to that person next to you. I’m asking you to slow down and savor it.”

Keeping it local

Cedar Oak Farms is Teresa’s passion project, and it comes through when she talks about the reasons behind the endeavor. Community is key: building new friendships with and among the guests at events as well as building partnerships where she lives.

“I really started this for the community,” she says. “Our goal has always been simple: Stay as local as possible and support farms that care deeply about how food is raised.”

She and Bo value sustainable practices, humane treatment and “exceptional quality,” she says, and are always on the lookout for new local partners.



Currently, they buy lamb from Crider Farms in Farmer City; chicken from DuChick Ranch in Cissna Park; beef from Cow Creek Organic Farm and pork from Living Light Farms, both in Paxton; flour from Janie’s Mill in Ashkum; and cheese from Prairie Fruits Farm and Creamery in Champaign and Ropp Jersey Cheese in Normal. Their bar features locally produced vodka, bourbon and rye whiskey from Paxton-based Silver Tree Beer & Spirits, and beer from Urbana’s Riggs Beer Company and Savoy’s Triptych Brewing.

The Sturms also grow 100 percent of the herbs and edible flowers and 90 percent of the vegetables served at their farm dinners, Teresa says, all while using chemical-free practices. If they don’t have enough from their own gardens, they buy from local farmers markets. In keeping with the farm-to-table philosophy, meals include whatever produce is in season at the moment.

Burnishing her skills

Teresa has been honing her craft since childhood. Her family nicknamed her Chef Ella — Ella is her middle name — since she did most of the cooking for herself, her mom and her three siblings.

“I’ve been cooking for my family since I was 9 years old,” she says, adding it was her way of helping out their single mother.

She began working in the restaurant business when she was 14 years old, first at fast-food joints, then moving up to steakhouses and other fine-dining establishments in the Chicago area.

“I was always in the kitchen cooking,” she says. “I wanted to be with chefs, real chefs, not just line cooks, so I applied and started getting my foot in the door.”

When a chef knows you’re interested, she says, they want to teach you all the tricks: “That was my education.”

Though she chose a career in accounting, she continued to cook as a hobby.

“Cooking allowed me to use the other side of my brain,” she says. “Cooking is like being an artist.”

When she retired, she began traveling to other parts of the country to explore the



regional cuisine and add to her skillset. Every February, she and Bo head out on an adventure, checking out a new local food scene and working with different chefs.

“Last year, we did the whole Louisiana backroads,” she says.

She worked with several chefs in New Orleans and beyond, starting with someone she knew and then getting introduced to others who let her go behind the scenes. This gave her the opportunity to learn new techniques she couldn’t acquire anywhere else.

She recounts learning a baguette recipe that only requires six ingredients from a chef who grew up in the Bayou. It was completely different from any of the complicated recipes Teresa found

in cookbooks, and it was one more reminder to her that learning where a food comes from and how it was first prepared is important.

“Let’s get down to the basics of making it well first before we start getting fancy with it,” she says.

While in Louisiana, she also made a point of seeking out and eating at restaurants favored by the locals.

“If it’s 2 o’clock and that restaurant is packed, that’s telling me it’s a good place,” she says.

Besides the joy of trying new foods, she likes to go as a diner because she notices details about the experience that she misses when she’s working in the kitchen “cranking out the orders.”





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This year, Teresa and her husband are headed to the Sarasota and Naples area in Florida to experience the agritourism industry during peak season. While there, they will be visiting organic farms, bakeries, creameries and artisan cheesemakers, as well as participating in some cooking classes. She will also spend time speaking with the chefs wherever she goes.

“You get better feedback from them when they see you’re interested,” she says.

This, she hopes, will inform some decisions about what’s next for Cedar Oak Farms.

What’s next?

The dinners are so popular and Teresa enjoys it so much that she’s going to expand.

“We’re just going to switch it up,” she says.

She wants Cedar Oak Farms

to be a place people return to rather than making it a one-off experience at a dinner.

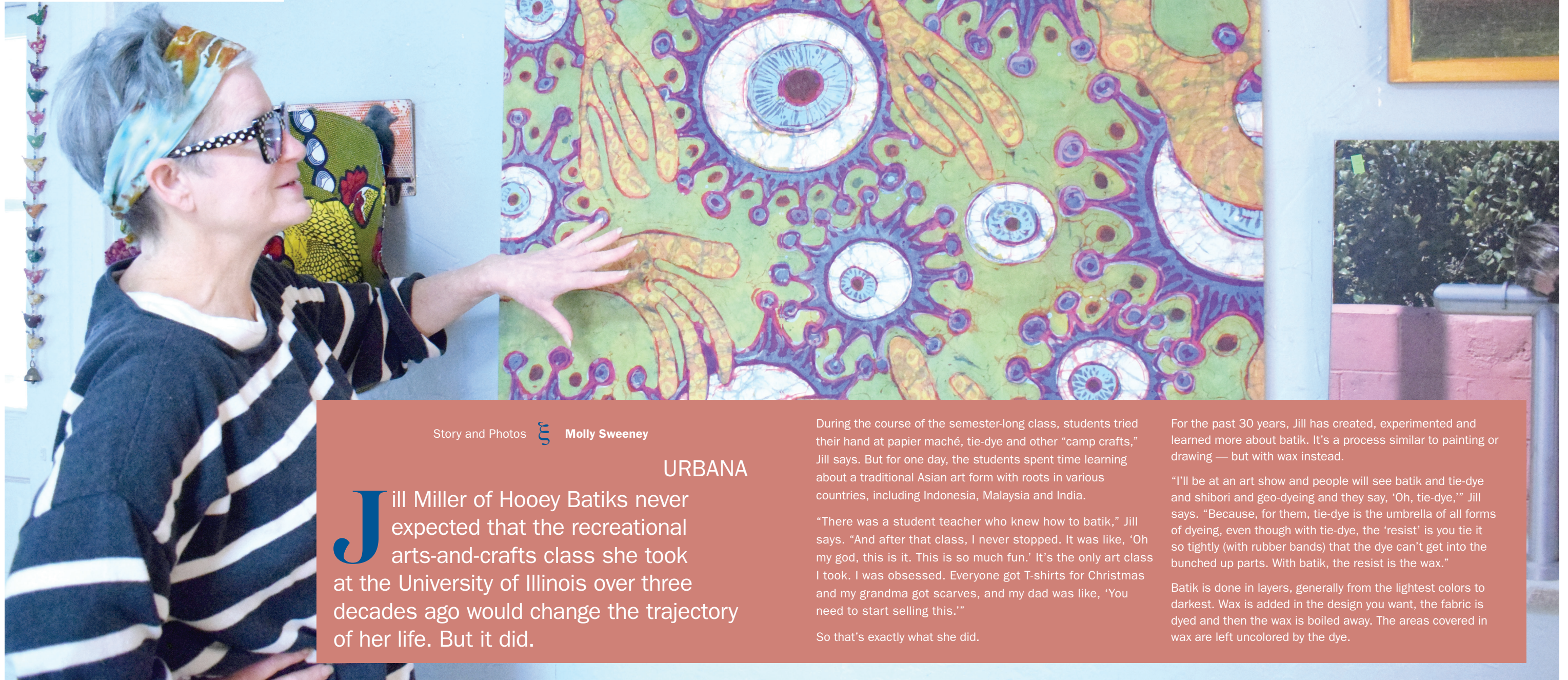
The 2026 season will include the monthly farm dinners from May through October. However, this year they are expanding to include other events: Mother’s Day Brunch, you-pick tulips in the spring and sunflowers in the summer, Burgers & Bourbon in the fall, a local farm tour and a yoga retreat. Other ideas are in the developmental stage, so Teresa urges interested people to check their website for details in the coming months.

Teresa is excited about the upcoming season and the opportunity to draw in more people. Come for the food, stay for the conversation, leave with an expanded outlook and full stomach. Chef Ella awaits.

For more information, visit cedar-oak-farms.com.

PATTERN recognition

*Urbana artist **Jill Miller** has been practicing the ancient Asian art of batik, a dyeing technique that uses wax as a resist, since she took a recreational class as a UI student more than 30 years ago*



Story and Photos  Molly Sweeney

URBANA

Jill Miller of Hooley Batiks never expected that the recreational arts-and-crafts class she took at the University of Illinois over three decades ago would change the trajectory of her life. But it did.

During the course of the semester-long class, students tried their hand at papier maché, tie-dye and other “camp crafts,” Jill says. But for one day, the students spent time learning about a traditional Asian art form with roots in various countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and India.

“There was a student teacher who knew how to batik,” Jill says. “And after that class, I never stopped. It was like, ‘Oh my god, this is it. This is so much fun.’ It’s the only art class I took. I was obsessed. Everyone got T-shirts for Christmas and my grandma got scarves, and my dad was like, ‘You need to start selling this.’”

So that’s exactly what she did.

For the past 30 years, Jill has created, experimented and learned more about batik. It’s a process similar to painting or drawing — but with wax instead.

“I’ll be at an art show and people will see batik and tie-dye and shibori and geo-dyeing and they say, ‘Oh, tie-dye,’” Jill says. “Because, for them, tie-dye is the umbrella of all forms of dyeing, even though with tie-dye, the ‘resist’ is you tie it so tightly (with rubber bands) that the dye can’t get into the bunched up parts. With batik, the resist is the wax.”

Batik is done in layers, generally from the lightest colors to darkest. Wax is added in the design you want, the fabric is dyed and then the wax is boiled away. The areas covered in wax are left uncolored by the dye.



The length of the project depends on the kind of design you're creating, and Jill adds that it's something that could constantly be revisited or added to.

Adding small changes to the batik, like polka dots, can change how the art appears. That takes a lot of time — everything would need to be waxed except for small dots on the fabric — but Jill says the ability to constantly rework her art is part of what she loves about it.

And at its core, that's why Jill fell in love with batik — it's fun, unpredictable and flexible. It's also a large part of why she named her business Hooey Batiks.

"When I was trying to think of a business name, my cat named Hooey got really sick and I had to put him down," she says. "And he was just a silly, goofy cat. And a lot of my designs, in the beginning, are just playful and stupid, like my cat. It made sense to call it Hooey Batiks."

Although Jill never had a formal art education — she graduated with a degree in sociology — she doesn't have a lack of inspiration.

Her cat, Vivian, and foster cat, Mrs. Katniss Fluffington, make frequent appearances in her art. She also takes inspiration from mundane things seen in everyday life.

"If I think I can interpret it onto a fabric, then I'll do it," she says.

Even after 30 years, Jill says she is still learning new techniques.

"I'm combining different colors and finding new favorite combinations of colors and discovering," she says. "If I had taken more classes, I probably would have known that if you add yellow to purple you get an amazing ugly green that's beautiful. It's just fun."

But what stood out to her about batik all those years ago also went deeper. Creating something new can be "meditative" she says, and allows her mind to wander. It also helped her find a community of friends and fellow artists.

Miller started organizing home shows in 2003. She's also the vice president of the Craft League of Champaign-Urbana and involved with Artists of the Corn, an art collective. Between all of those

commitments, she's had a hand in too many art shows to count.

"The reason I started doing art shows was because I know so many fabulous artists," Jill says. "In 30 years of experience, you make great friends. I'm always on the lookout for fun new artists. I want to show them off, I want everyone to see this cool new artist I've found."

She laughs while adding, "It's more selfish than anything, because I'm like 'Oh my god, you would be a great fit for my show and help make it more of a success.' I'm happy to get them going on the art show track."

Besides organizing art shows, Jill, along with several others in her circle, help guide young artists in other ways. This includes helping them figure out where — and how — to apply for art shows, showing them off on social media and answering any other questions they might have.

But she says if there's one thing she would tell a young artist who is still working to find their groove, it would be to "keep playing around."



"Keep messing around, keep doing it. Get a part-time job or a full-time job if you have to. Talk to everyone, talk to older artists. We're happy to tell you what you should do," she says with a laugh. "Keep trying new things and doing art shows."

If you're interested in checking out Hooey Batiks or other local artists, Jill suggests visiting the Craft League Collab during the Boneyard Arts Festival. It takes place April 11 and 12 at the Orpheum Theater in downtown Champaign.

"The Orpheum is where everyone is going to want to be," Jill says.

More information about the event is available on the festival's Facebook page (@boneyardarts) or the Craft League's website at craftleaguecu.com. Jill's artistry is on display on Facebook (@hooey.batiks.art) and Instagram (@hooeybatiks). 





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The Stokowskis' dining room and kitchen before the remodeling.

Story **Carolyn Maille-Petersen** Photos **Robin Scholz**

Remodeling and decorating a home is often a time-consuming and expensive, not to mention daunting, undertaking. However, it is possible to reduce costs if you are willing to put in the effort to do the work yourself. Enter Lizzie and Luke Stokowski.

The twentysomething couple are no strangers to home remodeling, having undertaken multiple home-improvement projects in the last three years. They are proof that it is possible to do your own work if you are patient and willing to learn.

The couple, who are expecting their first child later this spring, bought their current home last summer. They knew they wanted to undertake some big renovations, but that didn't intimidate them. Lizzie comes from a family of DIYers and Luke is a quick study.

Growing up, 25-year-old Lizzie had a front row seat to her very own home-improvement show. She likened her mom and dad, Lynn and Byron Yonce, to Joanna and Chip Gaines, the popular hosts of the long-running home-improvement show "Fixer Upper." She credits her parents for her love of home improvement on a budget.

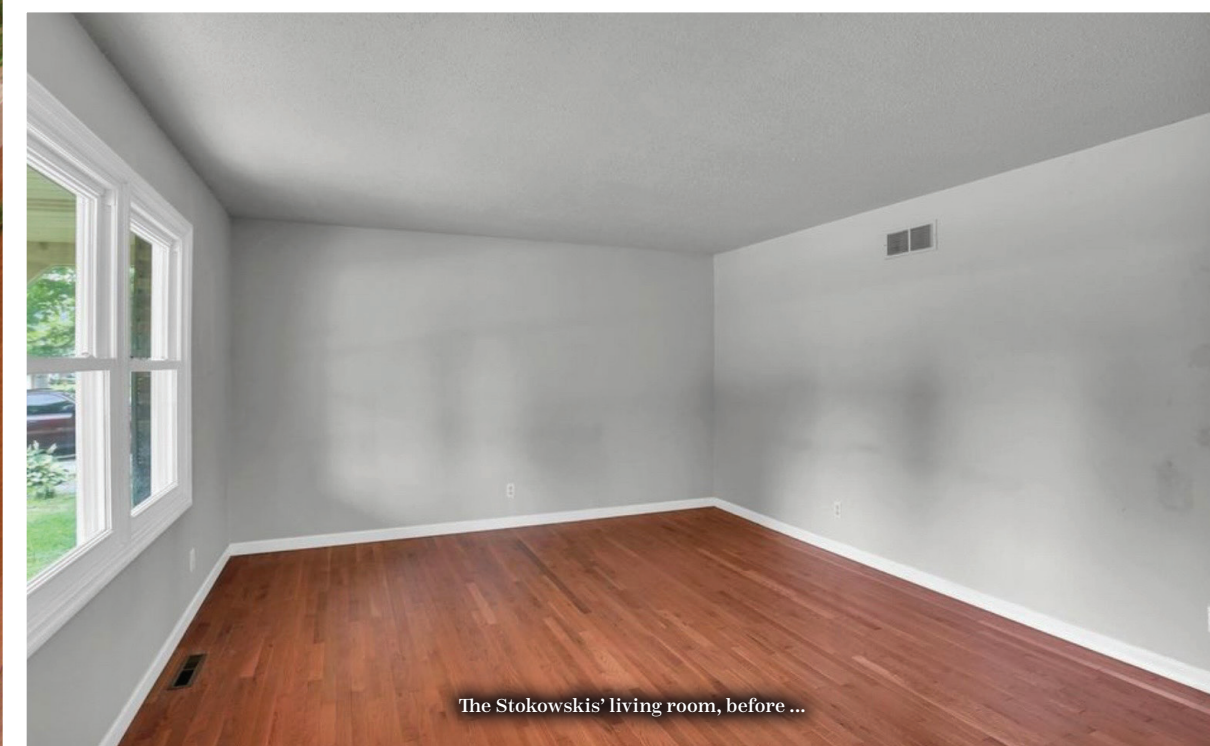
The renovated dining room includes a corner cabinet that came from Luke's grandparents.



Luke and Lizzie Stokowski in their remodeled kitchen.

A HOME of their OWN

When **Luke** and **Lizzie Stokowski** bought their house last summer, they put their wealth of DIY experience to use in remodeling it to fit the needs of their growing family



The Stokowskis' living room, before ...

... and after.



The Stokowskis' powder room before renovations.



The kitchen faucet was a 'recycled' find from the Habitat for Humanity ReStore.



The powder room and kitchen after renovations.

The Yonces overhauled their own home room by room, doing much of the work themselves. As Lizzie got older, she helped as well, from painting the outside of the house alongside her parents and brother to helping her dad renovate her bedroom. It was this do-it-yourself spirit that profoundly influenced Lizzie, who with her husband is now doing the same thing in their own home.

“I think I’m a mix of both” parents, says Lizzie, “where I love the vision, but I also like to figure out how to do it.”

While some kids would be put off by having to help their parents, it only fanned the flames of Lizzie’s interest.

“In high school, my mom and I would go to open houses every Sunday,” Lizzie recalls. “That was our fun thing to do.”

She also liked buying items at garage sales and resale stores and fixing them up, including some of the furniture she took to her college apartment.

When the pandemic hit and she had to move home from college, she used the time to learn something new.

“I was going a little stir crazy because we couldn’t do anything,” she says. “So my dad and I got into woodwork. That’s when we built my headboard and just, like, college dorm furniture.”

Lizzie’s dad taught her how to use various power tools, giving her the practical

skills she needed to take on repair and renovation projects when she and Luke bought their first home together.

It’s like a game for Lizzie. She sees something she likes but can’t afford, and it becomes a challenge to see if she and Luke can recreate it for less money.

“I like to see a project and see how to get there,” she says.

Sometimes, she can figure it out on her own, while other times, she and Luke turn to video tutorials to see how it’s done.

Now, those years of visiting open houses, rehabbing thrifted furniture and learning home-improvement skills have paid off. When Lizzie and Luke sold their first house last year, they made a tidy profit thanks to the improvements they made, most notably built-in shelves in the garage and a closet they turned into an office.

Moving up

That profit is now being plowed into their new home. The 2,300-square-foot two-story abode, built in 1973, needed some upgrades, particularly in the kitchen and main-floor powder room. Over the course of two months, they completely renovated the two rooms, with Lizzie’s dad, Byron, and Luke doing the lion’s share of the work.

Under normal circumstances, Lizzie would be right in the thick of it, getting her hands dirty, but because she was pregnant, her input was more conceptual than hands-on.

The Stokowskis hadn’t planned to completely gut the kitchen, but a layout issue with the original cabinetry changed their minds.

“It was a can of worms,” Lizzie says.

The upper and lower cabinets didn’t align in the space where the refrigerator needed to go. In addition to the visual dissonance it created, the offset cabinets caused the refrigerator to jut out past the wall, partially blocking the hallway off the kitchen.

“The cabinets completely threw everything off,” Lizzie says.

At that point, Luke pushed to redo the entire kitchen so they wouldn’t have to deal with the mess once they started having children.

As luck would have it, their new house had the same layout as the home of a couple for whom Lizzie used to babysit. She liked how they renovated their kitchen and used that layout as a template.

The kitchen

They ripped the kitchen out down to the studs and removed part of a wall. While some young couples would be intimidated by the extent of the work that needed to be done, it didn’t faze the Stokowskis. Lizzie loves a challenge, and Luke is always game to learn something new. It also helped knowing Lizzie’s dad would be there to guide and help when necessary.



The renovated living room and entryway as seen from the front door.



The Stokowskis' renovated kitchen.

“Byron was a good teacher,” Luke says.

With the exception of the electrical work and the plumbing for the kitchen sink and dishwasher, Luke and Byron did all the work themselves, with Lizzie as project manager.

“We didn’t hire anybody that wasn’t our friend,” Lizzie says.

Lucky for them, they have friends and family members with expertise in these areas.

Trial and error

Even with help from friends and family, doing the work themselves was not easy. There was a lot of trial and error, says Luke, with some things having to be redone. Luke and his father-in-law spent a lot of time watching how-to videos on YouTube before undertaking various projects.

In the kitchen, they installed new vinyl plank tile flooring, as well as cabinets, an island and countertops that they bought at Lowe’s and Home Depot. Always on the lookout for a bargain, they bought their appliances during the Fourth of July sale at Lowe’s, and thrifted their kitchen faucet from ReStore, Habitat for Humanity’s used household goods store.

They installed pendant lights bought from West Elm over their kitchen island, and a statement chandelier from Lowe’s over their dining room table. Luke and Byron also rerouted the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system that runs under the house.

“That probably was one of the hardest parts,” Luke says.

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The kitchen before work began.



The new island was installed with a specially built endcap to hide ductwork underneath.

Another “struggle,” he says, was the pendant lighting over the island. In order to install the lightswitch, he had to cut a 4-inch strip out of the drywall from the island countertop all the way up to and across the ceiling. Then he had to repair and repaint the drywall and the textured “popcorn” ceiling, all of which is difficult to do properly. He is proud of the work he did on the drywall -- as well he should be, since it is impossible to see any patchwork through the paint.

The powder room

Their second big project was renovating the powder room. In addition to being dated, the vanity was too short, particularly for the Stokowskis, who are both tall. They pulled up the floor and removed the vanity, mirror and lights, but retained the toilet.

They laid down the same vinyl plank tile flooring as in the kitchen and installed a gently used vanity and countertop that Lizzie purchased for \$100 on Facebook Marketplace.

“A new vanity was like \$1,000, which was not in the budget,” Lizzie says.

She and her dad spruced it up by painting the cabinets and installing a new faucet from Lowe's. They also put in overhead lights from Home Depot and a mirror from HomeGoods.

In addition to the vanity in the powder room and the kitchen faucet, a lot of their furniture was acquired secondhand.

"I like real wood," Lizzie says, "but it's hard to afford."

All of the furniture in their dining room was purchased on Facebook Marketplace, with the exception of a corner cabinet and a black wooden bench. The cabinet came from Luke's grandparents, and it matches the dining room table perfectly, Luke says. The bench they found on the side of the road.

"It was in rough shape," Lizzie says. "We had to glue some of the arms back on, then I scraped, sanded and repainted it."

Now no one would suspect it was once destined for the trash.

Lizzie loves the thrill of the hunt and has purchased many gently used items for a fraction of the cost of new.

"I really like hearty furniture," she says. "I don't really like new stuff. I like more lived-in."

Patience is a virtue when looking for used furniture and home goods that are both inexpensive and of good quality.

"If you want nice things and you can't afford it," Lizzie says, "you just gotta keep looking."

The Stokowskis are living proof that it doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg to have nice things. You don't even have to be the next Joanna and Chip Gaines; you just need patience and a willingness to learn and put in the work.

"Don't be afraid of the unknown or messing up," Luke counsels. "Just try your best." 



The renovated vanity in the Stokowskis' powder room, which Lizzie purchased on Facebook Marketplace and repainted with her father's help.



The black wooden bench in the dining room was found on the side of the road and rehabbed with glue, scraping, sanding and new paint.



A view from the living room into the entryway and dining room.

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CREATURE COMFORTS

Bit by bit, Kate Deedrich has turned a bland backyard into a home for pollinators



Story **Carolyn Maille-Peteresen**



Photos **Provided**

CHAMPAIGN

Looking for a relatively low-maintenance yet colorful flower garden that not only looks pretty and attracts birds, butterflies and bees, but also helps the environment? Consider planting a pollinator garden like the one in Kate Deedrich's backyard.

Her pollinator garden lies just outside her fence along Duncan Road in Champaign.

Driving by, you can't miss the bright yellow wooden pallet with the name of her garden, "Buzz and Blooms," on it, along with a certification sign from University of Illinois Extension.





Kate has always been interested in gardening. Growing up outside Pesotum, her mom had a garden and their neighbor was a landscaper, and both influenced her. Now, as an adult, she has multiple garden spaces in her own yard in addition to managing the landscaping at a horse-boarding facility and a friend’s country gardens.

All this in addition to her day job as a crop-insurance underwriter. Suffice it to say, she is fervent about gardening.

“I’d much rather be outside than at a desk,” she says.

Filling in the blank(s)

When she moved into her house in 2016, the yard was a blank slate, she says. Now, she estimates there are more than 200 types of plants growing there.

Inside her fence are more formal garden spaces, along with a small pond she installed to attract wildlife. Outside her fence is her pollinator garden, where the flowers are more unruly.

The motivation for the pollinator garden came after she went on the Champaign County Master Gardener Garden Walk one year. She was inspired by one of her mom’s former co-workers whose pollinator garden was featured on the walk.

Planted in 2018, Kate’s pollinator garden has grown and changed over the years. But getting that wild look didn’t come by chance. The process began months before she dug up the grass.

“I did a design the winter before I planted, trying to find different heights and different blooming seasons so I always had something that was blooming,” she says.

In the summer months, it is a riot of flowers, including native bee balm, black-eyed Susans, blue false indigo and white wild indigo, false sunflower, compass plant, foxglove beardtongue, smooth blue aster, yellow and pale purple coneflowers, common

and swamp milkweed, orange butterfly weed, and wild bergamot.

She added a few non-native plants, including lavender, daylilies, dill and mums for added bloom times and additional host plants for specific types of pollinators. To encourage compost, she adds locally sourced logs and wood that naturally break down over time.

Now, eight years later, the soil is “way better” than anywhere else in her yard, and the insect population is quite diverse, she says. Those insects include bumblebees, honeybees, carpenter bees, monarch butterflies, swallowtail butterflies, various moths and beetles, as well as isopods (colloquially known as roly-poly bugs) and earthworms that break down the soil.

What Kate finds interesting is that the prevalence of different insects varies over time. It also attracts a variety of birds, including finches and hummingbirds.

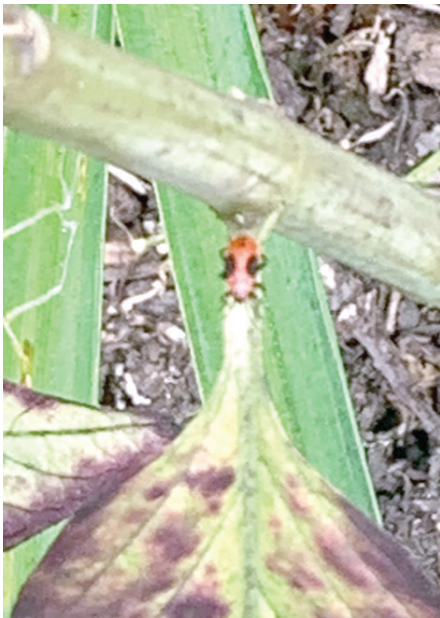
No chemicals allowed

Chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides are discouraged in pollinator gardens. They defeat the purpose by killing off the very insects that a pollinator garden is trying to attract. Thus, gardeners need to be tolerant of some plant damage from insects, Kate says. But she assures aspiring gardeners that it all balances out.

Even if a garden has a large number of insects that could be considered pests, in a healthy pollinator garden, this is counterbalanced by other insects that keep the destructive insect population in check. The same can be said of birds, who love a good insect smorgasbord.

Weeds aren’t much of a problem either, Kate says. Over time, native plants fill in, creating a canopy that prevents most weed seeds from dropping to the ground. That’s not to say it’s a weed-free environment, though.

“I do pull everything by hand back there; I try to at least keep things from seeding,” she says.



Resources

- pollinators.illinois.edu
- grandprairiefriends.org
- go.illinois.edu/pollinatorpocket
- pollinator.org

For the aspiring gardener

Pollinator gardens are an easy way to get into gardening, Kate says. There is a lot of information and support available, and you can start small, with a pollinator pocket garden. Kate relied heavily upon Illinois Extension when researching and laying out her own garden. They have a lot of information about native plants — how tall, how much sun they require, when they bloom — that helps when planning a pollinator garden.

“They make it pretty easy,” she says.

Additionally, she says, “I’ve found websites where it will give you the layout already and the list of plants to do it, based on whether you have part sun or full sun, stuff like that.”

Pollinator gardens rely heavily on plants that are native to the area because they are best adapted to the local environment and can tolerate the weather conditions. They tend to be drought-resistant, with deep roots, therefore requiring little water, she says. They are often tolerant of overwatering as well. As an added perk, native plants are typically low-maintenance and don’t require a lot of trimming or shaping, she adds.

Of course, like most gardeners, Kate’s not done. She is always moving plants around and adding new ones to the mix. When she wants new plants, she buys them from Grand Prairie Friends, attends plant swaps she finds on Facebook or gets inexpensive starts from Facebook Marketplace.

And while it isn’t necessary to certify a pollinator garden, Kate chose to do so. Certifying one is a simple process, she says, and it signifies that the owner has agreed not to use chemicals on it.

“I wanted to do that ... to encourage people to get involved and add native plants to the landscape,” she says.

While gardening may be its own reward, in Kate’s case, it’s also rewarding to the local pollinator population, the planet, and anyone who has the pleasure of driving by her garden in full bloom. She is making the world a better place, one plant at a time. 

KEEPING IT REAL (ESTATE)

What to know about buying a home with ... Coldwell Banker Real Estate Group's **Deana Gauze**

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: Deana Gauze.

Q: A recent report from Cotality, a data-analytics company that focuses on real estate, indicates the Champaign area is ranked first on a list of the top 10 U.S. markets where home prices have cooled down. Can you explain what that means?

A: Well, their method looks at repeat sales data, whereas our data is based on median home prices. Ours is the most common method for reporting home sales and pricing. So they just used a completely different data set, and that does not seem to be accurate with what's really going on in our market.

Q: So Champaign may not necessarily be in the top 10 markets with cooling home prices. But do you have any advice for homeowners who are facing a cooling market? What can people do to lessen the impact on their home? How can people maintain a home that is attractive to potential buyers?

A: Well, there's strong buyer demand for well-priced, well-prepared homes. According to the National Association of Realtors, the average age of a homebuyer today is 59. So sellers are wise to invest in deferred maintenance and improving energy efficiency of their homes and mechanicals and appliances. Buyers are willing to pay a premium for move-in-ready homes.

Energy-efficiency improvements can include upgrading the HVAC, furnace and central air, or at least maintaining them, keeping them clean and having them checked. Buyers can tell when homes have been well maintained, and that's part of it.

Obviously, if the roof is 25 years old, that would be a deterrent to a buyer, because that's a huge cost. So investing more in things that are going to be very cost effective for a buyer are smart things to do.

People can do some more cost-effective things too, like a really good cleaning of the home, cleaning their carpets, especially if they have pets. There's a lot of things people can do just to make their home a little more appealing; it's not just all about spending a lot of money, necessarily.

Q: On the flip side of things, for people looking to buy a home in this area, what would a cooling market mean?

A: Well, if it were truly cooling, it could be good for them. But we don't really feel that it's cooling. We are still experiencing an inventory shortage overall in our area. Champaign County is better positioned than a lot of areas because our prices are still more affordable.

At the end of 2025, we were up 0.73 percent in total unit sales year-over-year from 2024 due to acceleration in the final quarter of the year. So I'm pretty

confident many places are cooling more than we are.

Q: What's the difference between their metric and yours?

A: My understanding is the repeat-sales method they use is looking at a home that was sold before, compared to what it's selling for now. And you know, some houses maybe aren't reselling so quickly, so it's just not as reliable as looking at the median sales price, which is what we use.

Q: Overall, what would you tell someone who has been thinking about buying a home in this area? Is now a good time to consider that?

A: As of Jan. 22, the average mortgage interest rate was 6.09 percent, versus 6.96 percent at the same time last year. We're down close to a percentage point in interest rate. In 2024, our median sales price was \$220,000. But in 2025, our median sales price was \$239,000. That's over a 9 percent increase. So when people are considering if they should wait for the interest rates to drop any further, they should consider that in the meantime, the sales price continues to rise. It's probably not serving them well to hold out for another quarter of a point, if that comes or not. The prices just continue to rise.

And more houses will continue to come on the market, which will bring more buyers, and more of a chance you'll be in competition. So again, I think that the time to make a move, or to think about making your move, is now. As the weather gets better and more people are out and about in it, more people are going to be buying, and you're going to — more than likely — be competing.

Deana Gauze has been a licensed Realtor for 25 years with Coldwell Banker Real Estate Group and is the current president of the Champaign County Association of Realtors. She grew up in Urbana and now lives with her husband in Mahomet.



Ask the expert

Q: What is wellness design?

A: Wellness isn't just a seasonal goal. It's a way of living, shaping our routines and spaces and the way we move through each day. A home can support how we truly want to live.

Wellness design is no longer limited to high-end spas or luxury retreats. Infrared saunas, steam showers, cold plunges and home gyms are becoming everyday essentials, integrated into homes with the same intention as a kitchen or living room. These features work because they fit into actual routines, not because they photograph well.

Historic homes have the edge

Here's what surprises many homeowners: Older houses often offer great canvases for wellness upgrades. In Champaign-Urbana's historic neighborhoods — West Urbana, Greencroft, Yankee Ridge, Lake Park — we work with elements built anywhere from 60 years to over a century ago that now support modern wellness beautifully, like high ceilings that naturally vent steam showers and thick plaster walls that offer sound insulation for gyms.

One recent bathroom renovation in a Prairie-style home in Champaign had good bones (tall ceilings, generous windows) but felt cramped by an outdated shower and built-in tub. We opened it up with a steam shower and a sculptural freestanding tub that sat in a pocket of natural morning light. The space felt renewed and blended seamlessly with the original architecture.

In another project, a 1920s bungalow had an unfinished second floor. With proper insulation and skylights placed between rafters, it became a naturally lit, primary retreat with a spa-like bath and recessed cabinetry that left the bedroom area open and uncluttered.



Creating spaces that restore

Bathrooms today are more than functional; they're restorative. Natural materials like quartzite, terra cotta tile and warm wood offer texture and calmness. Steam showers with chromatherapy and sound create a ritual that eases transitions between busy moments. Hydrotherapy tubs help tired muscles unwind after workouts or long days.

Kitchens benefit from the same thinking. While historic homes often offer generous footprints and beautiful natural light, their layouts rarely support the way we cook and move today. Taking time to develop a space plan tailored to the people who actually use the kitchen is essential. What works for one household may not work for another.

Organizing the layout for better flow and accessibility and integrating smart appliances that quietly support meal planning and nutrition tracking can transform how a kitchen functions. Cooking nutritious food becomes easier, more intuitive, part of the rhythm of the day rather than another task to manage.

Letting light in

Light, especially natural light, plays a bigger role than most people expect. It regulates mood, energy and sleep. Older homes were designed to maximize it with

tall windows, deep sills and clever details like transoms. Restoring or opening up these features brings light back where it belongs, turning corners and nooks into places to read, reflect and recharge.

Start with the people

In the end, the most meaningful spaces begin with understanding not only how the house works, but also how the people inside it live.

We ask a lot of questions before we design anything. How do you use your kitchen? When do you work out? Do you really want a soaking tub or would a shower you use daily matter more? The best designs come from honest answers, not aspirational ones. That's when a house stops being just a place to live and starts supporting the rhythm of everyday life.

Small changes can help, but if you're ready to make your home work harder for your wellness goals in 2026, start by understanding what your home can handle — and what it can't. That's where experienced design makes the difference.

Dawn Bane is an interior designer and color strategist with Spectrum Design Group in Champaign. 

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