



INTO THE WOODS



Critters find themselves at home in the country

BY GLENDA WINDERS // PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGELA JACKSON

Gary and Michelle Critzer had their home built in the western part of the county eight years ago. The story of the land is almost as interesting as the house itself. Gary's grandfather was a dean and athletic director at Columbus High School who also managed Columbus Youth Camp. He bought 100 acres in the country, created a lake and built a house there in the 1960s. Later two sons (one of them Gary's dad) built there, too. For many years the family operated Genth Christmas Tree Farm on the property.



"I sort of grew up out here — running, hunting and riding motorcycles," Gary said. "My parents waited until I was 16 and could drive before they moved out here so they wouldn't have to run me back and forth."

Age 16 was also when he met the young woman who would eventually become his wife. Both students at Columbus North High School, Gary

played football, ran track and swam, and Michelle was a cheerleader. After one of her girlfriends told him Michelle thought he was cute, he came to a game where she was cheering and invited her out for pizza afterward. During the ride home she asked him what they would do on their next date. He teased her by answering, "Oh, are we going out again?"

"I was embarrassed, but we just clicked," she said.

They dated through the rest of high school and college, even though she went to Purdue and he went to Vincennes University.

Meant to be

"We dated other people," Michelle said, "but we always communicated, and he came to visit me. I fell in love with him because of his morals and ethics. He loves his family, he loves nature and we're alike in our Christian spirituality. Neither one of us ever found anyone who matched up as well."

They married after college in 1984 and raised two daughters, Brelyn, now 33, and Bianca, 30. The women, both educators, are now married with families of their own.

When the couple decided to build their forever dream house, the family acreage seemed like the obvious place. But before they came to that conclusion, they had a lot of conversations to weigh their options.

"I love the outdoors, but I had never lived out of town," Michelle said, "so he was a little bit leery about me coming out to the country. I was more leery about the drive."

But there were also pluses. They wanted to be closer to Gary's now-widowed mother while not crowding her independence. Besides that, Michelle had noticed that since Gary had retired from the Columbus Police Department he stayed inside their Lafayette Avenue house when she knew he longed to be outside doing the things he loved — walking, hiking, hunting and cutting wood.

Once they made the decision, they began looking through catalogs, magazines and websites to find the plan they wanted to build, but nothing incorporated all of the special features they wanted in their home — a French country house like those they had seen in Europe with lots of room to entertain that would allow them to age in place. They told close designer friends about their frustration, and the friends said they would take a crack at the project. Three months later the Critzers had the blueprint they had sought.

A strong connection

The next step was interviewing several builders, after which they decided on Banister Construction. "Tom Banister said yes to everything we wanted," Michelle said. "He is an out-of-the-box thinker in his homes, and he was into everything we wanted to do that was so different."

Banister felt like it was a good fit, too.

"We enjoy new and unique and creative things to do," he said, "so it's a good opportunity for us when people bring ideas to the table that we can take and run with. They



had good vision of what they wanted, and we gave them feedback as a sounding board about what we might recommend. They had great ideas and true excitement throughout the project, which makes our job fun."

The result was a home that checked every item on their list, starting with their organizing principle of simplicity. They had loved the "quaint" two-story, brick house they left in town, but it had been decorated with items that fit its architecture. Now they wanted sleek and modern, so they had a big garage sale before they left.

"We got rid of the stuff you move from one attic to the next," Gary said, "and we

said never again. Unless it has sentimental value, if we don't use it in a couple of years we're going to get rid of it."

Michelle added, "If you use simplicity as a value, it is so much easier to clean, and it clears your head and you feel more organized. As we have grown as a couple, simplicity has become more important to us."

Natural views

Another reason for not having lots of tchotchkes was that they didn't want anything to interrupt the stunning forest view that greets visitors the moment they enter. Eight sets of French doors — some of them stationary — face the woods.

"We want people to walk in and feel like they're still outside," Michelle said. "We want them to see the beauty that's all around us."

Most of the first floor of the 3,700-square-foot house is a great room, since one of the couple's priorities is entertaining. They've hosted family get-togethers, bridal and baby showers, and holiday parties here. Since both of their daughters live in Columbus, their four grandchildren are frequent visitors, too.

A dining table that seats 10 leads the eye directly from the front door to the view. On out through the French doors is a long patio where they can set up extra tables and chairs for gatherings or let the grand-

children play while the adults sit on the steps and visit.

The interior design plan here and throughout the entire house combines Michelle's passion for black, gray, taupe, metallics, animal prints and fur with Gary's love of the outdoors. The wooden dining table is textured, as are many of the finishes throughout the home, and the two chandeliers over it are made from faux antlers. The eight chairs along each side are covered with black velveteen, and the captain's chairs at the ends are silver.

In their last house the Critzers had taken out a wall between the living room and kitchen so guests could congregate where the cook was. This time they planned for that in advance. The oversized island that divides the kitchen and dining area provides seating for six as well as plenty of room for the cook to work and space for buffet service. Hidden beneath the island is lots of storage space that opens with a touch, and on one side is a drawer that is actually a microwave.

Aging in place

"As we get older we won't be taking something out and maybe spilling it on ourselves," Michelle said.

"We'll be lifting it up, which is easier." Ditto the induction range, where the pots get hot instead of the burners.

"I can turn the burner on and put my hand on it, and it won't burn because my hand's not magnetic," Michelle said. "It's great for older people and children. Even if I've been cooking something, it doesn't stay hot."



the last minute changed their minds in favor of pale gray, easy-care engineered wood.

"We were going to live in the middle of the woods," Gary said, "and I knew we were going to get mud and rocks and friends and family and chairs and dogs." In fact a new goldendoodle puppy, Filson, recently joined the household.

The utility room is just off the kitchen on this main floor, another lesson they learned from their previous home, where the washer and dryer were in the basement. Also here are a sink, large pantry,

cupboard for storing linens and closet for Gary's outdoor gear.

There is a basement that currently serves as a playroom for the grandchildren. Banister's team finished the walls in a brick pattern that was easy to paint and provided a more polished look for whatever they eventually decide to do with the space. Also down there are a guest bedroom and a full bathroom.



At the other end of the great room on the main floor is a comfortable living area with sofas arranged around the focal point — a huge concrete, Old World-style fireplace. Gary insisted on a fireplace insert that uses the wood he cuts, and in the winter the couple enjoy a fire every morning and evening.

Upstairs, downstairs

They decided to have two master bedrooms — one for now and one for a future time when they might not be able to negotiate the stairs to the second floor. The downstairs bedroom is currently a luxury guest room, where the shower in the full bath has river rock as its floor, and three sparkling chandeliers light the areas over the sinks and tucked-away toilet. The shelves in its walk-in closet house toys and games at the moment since the grandchildren are all still small and often play here instead of downstairs.

Outside the bedroom is a private covered patio, complete with comfortable seating, TV and fireplace — the other side of the one indoors. The beamed ceiling from the great room continues out here, and the flooring is stone pavers.

A smaller bedroom on this floor currently functions as a game room. It was formerly Gary's office, but he has downsized his operation into the closet, where he can close the door when it is not in use. One of the French doors is in this room, and when Michelle was working on her master's degree a few years back, she said it was a great place to study. It is also a sunny spot where her potted plants can safely winter. A black-and-white bathroom completes the

downstairs floor plan.

The second floor is completely devoted to a master suite. The French doors in the bedroom open onto a balcony where the couple like to have their morning coffee. In case they can't be outside, a pair of cozy chairs still allows them to enjoy the view. A mirrored chest of drawers is the only piece of furniture for storage in the entire house. In their effort to streamline, a massive walk-in closet with built-in shelves and drawers performs that function.

In this room as in others, wall space is limited because of the many windows, and they use what there is for family photos. The decor here, too, combines Michelle's love of lighting and shine with Gary's more rustic aesthetic. When the drum chandelier over the bed is on at night, the light that filters through its shade resembles sunlight coming through the leaves on a tree.

The master bath on this floor is the culmination of wishes they had when they lived in the smaller home, such as a long vanity with generous sinks and multiple mirrors. Accent tiles in the walk-in shower are metallic, and here, as in the other bathrooms, the shower has a bench in case they need it later. A soaking tub nestles in an alcove beneath a chandelier.

"We can stay up here all day if we want to," Michelle said. "I would recommend a retreat like this to anyone who is building a house."

Next steps

This year she is wrapping up her career as an elementary teacher with her kindergarten class at Parkside Elementary School. She has taught most



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elementary grades here and at Schmitt Elementary School, but after earning her master's in reading she wanted to give younger children a strong foundation in that area.

She was eligible for retirement a year ago, but she said she felt like there was something still left for her to do. When COVID-19 struck, she knew what that was. She stayed on to help colleagues, students and their parents through the difficult time, but she says this year is definitely her last.

She is looking forward to being at home with Gary and doing the things they like to do. Her interests are hiking, exercising and flower gardening, while he said one of his free time loves is playing golf. They both said their favor-

ite pastime at the moment is spending time with their grandchildren.

But these two aren't likely to take it easy for long. Gary already does some work in the public safety sector, and Michelle is toying with the idea of parlaying her love of fashion and design into a second career.

She said she has never regretted moving to the country and the place where Gary has so much history.

"I feel like when I'm driving out of town and coming toward the sunset, I'm decompressing," she said. "The farther I come toward my home and the farther into the woods I get, the more serene and calm and peaceful I feel. This house is us. It's our mark on this property." ☀