

O. Henry

M A G A Z I N E



Peace and Purpose

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A spirited little girl's art offers solace — and hope

By Ross Howell Jr.

Photographs by Amy Freeman

The home that Austin and Shelby Tew built sits outside Stokesdale at the end of a long gravel drive surrounded by 10 acres of hardwoods. It's unique and its story is bittersweet — even heart-breaking. And I didn't arrive at the house in the way you'd expect. I began the journey at the MM Interior Design Group offices on State Street in Greensboro, where I was greeted by Mark Mitchell, business administration manager. Mark walks me into the design area. Marta Mitchell, founder, president and partner of the firm, is looking at fabric samples and stops to greet me. Marta's firm recently reached out to the magazine about the Tew house, a project she's been working on for some three years. She's a stylish woman with a wonderfully calm voice and an accent I don't recognize. When I ask her about it, Marta tells me her family was from the Mato Grosso region of Brazil. She grew up in the outskirts of São Paulo. "I still have an accent, but I've been in Greensboro for about 40 years," Marta says, smiling. She moved here with her husband, Peter, who's now the marketing manager of the firm.

“My husband came for graduate school and was later offered a job, so Greensboro became home,” she adds. “Our two sons were born here.” It was the younger of the two, Mark, who met me at the door. Marta explains that she had been trained as an interior designer — “we still called it ‘interior decorator’ back when I was in school,” she adds — and started the business in 1989, working alone. “Now, we work in teams of three designers on every project,” Marta says. Her most senior staff are design directors — there are three of them, including her. They manage the work of lead interior designers, who serve as the main client contacts and bear overall responsibility for individual projects. The lead interior designers work in tandem with assigned interior designers on individual projects day-to-day. “There are 14 of us now,” Marta says. “There aren’t many interior design firms this size.”

Typically, her firm is hired by a client before construction even begins. Marta guides me over to the design pod where Angela Austin — one of the company’s lead interior designers — has the computer-assisted design model of a client’s waterfront house up on her computer screen. She shows me the floor plan for an attached guest house. “Right now, I’m working on some selections for cabinetry,” Angela says. With a keystroke here and mouse click there, she shows me a variety of cabinet styles in place, some stained, some painted, along with variations on ceramic tile and its placement — as well as a floor plan with chairs and sofas. “All of this was done before the contractor even broke ground,” Marta says. In addition to using 3D models, renderings and video walkthroughs, Marta’s design group takes visualization to the next level — producing virtual reality tours. Marta guides me to a large conference room. Awaiting us are Shannon Harvey, the lead interior designer for the Tew house, and Chloe Fields, interior designer for the project. Shannon is an experienced interior designer born in Mississippi, who lived for a time in Germany. Chloe is a recent UNCG graduate with a degree in interior architecture. Marta is the team’s design director. I sit down in a swivel chair. “Here, this goes over your head,” Shannon says, handing me the VR headset.

And boom.

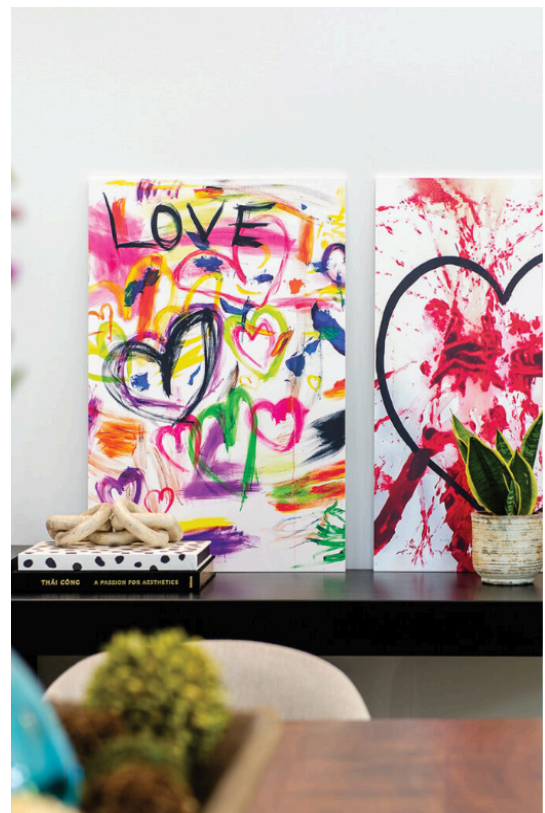
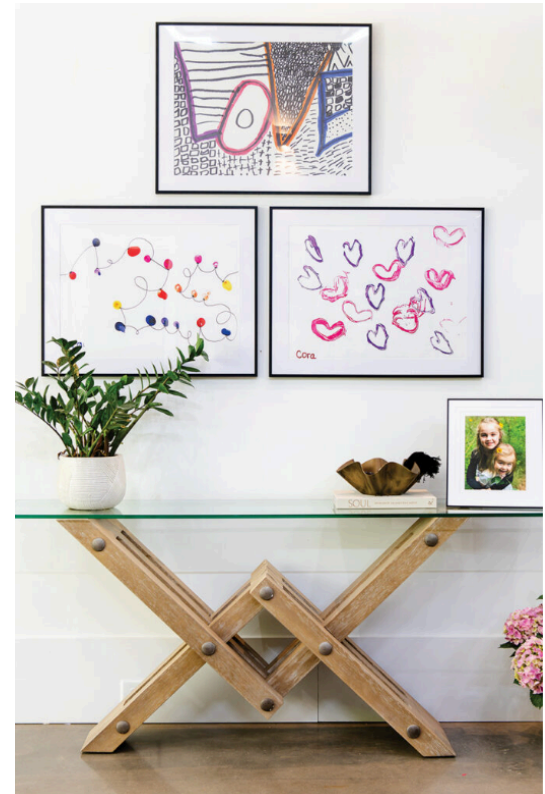
There I am, inside the Tew house. “You can look up and you can look down and you can turn around in your chair to see more,” Marta says. She explains how the VR program brings daylight in, so what I’m seeing is more realistic than the 3D computer models. I look up at wooden rafters and industrial-sized heating and cooling ducts hanging from the ceiling. I look straight ahead toward an enormous kitchen island in a long great room. Beyond the island is a bank of windows and doors looking out into woods. “You can turn around in your chair to see more,” Marta says. Now I’m looking at the entry wall of the house. There’s a spiral metal staircase leading up to a loft. “The Tew project was really interesting,” Marta says, as I continue looking around, “because the house was already built when Austin came to us.” Since he had work experience in construction, Austin personally completed or oversaw the building of the house, from pouring concrete to framing. “It was empty, just walls,” Marta adds. “Then Shannon started working on it.” Guests were always the first consideration, Shannon tells me, not the

comfort of the Tews themselves. They also stressed that they were on a limited budget, so Shannon provided images of her furniture recommendations to Shelby, who searched for similar, less expensive pieces, while Austin implemented Shannon's painting or finishing ideas himself. "He's so handy," Chloe says. "He's built dressers, beds . . . that concrete countertop you see." And there was another essential consideration — their young daughters, Braylen and Cora. Shannon tells me to swivel clockwise in the chair.

"There," she says. "The big piece of art on the wall. That's Cora's." It's a whimsical, colorful painting of hearts set among strokes of pure, bright colors with a single word: LOVE.

As we continue my tour, Marta explains some of the design elements that Shannon introduced — painting sections of the enormous wall with contrasting colors to break up the space and placing big pieces of furniture strategically for the same purpose.

When I'm set to remove the VR headset, Shannon gives me a hand. "The Tews started building this home when Cora's cancer was in remission," she says. "But the cancer came back." Now, fast-forward with me from virtual to real — the heart-breaking part of the story — as my car tires crunch along the gravel driveway in Stokesdale. Austin Tew greets me at the door and invites me in. He's accompanied by a romping, blue-and-white pit bull rescue named Dolly. She brings me a couple toys to inspect, decides I'm not as interesting as I first seemed and returns to her bed. I stand there, looking around the great room. It's big, feeling even larger than the space I saw in the VR headset. If it weren't furnished, you could drive a semi-truck and trailer inside and park. The concrete floor is polished. The windows are metal-framed. The house exterior is clad with white aluminum siding. Turns out, Austin is the owner of Key Automotive Group in Stokesdale, so it makes sense. "You see,



I'm pretty industrial," he says, smiling. "So we really had to find a designer who could think outside the box." "Marta was the only one who got it," Austin adds. And got it, Marta's team did. The house feels like a home. Shelby emerges from her office at the back of the house. She's a CPA with her own practice. Since it's tax season during my visit, she's in need of a well-deserved break and joins us.



The first room we step into is Braylen's bedroom. She's the Tews' older daughter. The couple heard me through the bedroom quickly, since it looks just as you'd expect from a 10-year-old in a hurry to get to basketball practice on time. We pass by a Jack-and-Jill bathroom to another bedroom.

"This is Cora's room," Austin says quietly. Feeling awkward, I turn my eyes to a corner, where a rainbow is painted on the wall. "Cora had picked out a rainbow and I promised her she would have one," Shelby says. "Marta found a pretty design online," Shelby continues. "We got in touch with a mural artist named Lacey Crime, who painted this for us." The artist also painted a lovely frame of flowers around the mirror in Cora's end of the

Jack-and-Jill “She never saw the rainbow or the flowers,” Shelby says quietly. She directs my attention to the ceiling of Cora’s bedroom. It’s covered in clouds. “Marta picked out that wallpaper,” she says. Austin clears his throat and we continue our tour. As we walk, they tell me their story.



The Tews were living in Madison, just over the Virginia state line. They had gone out for dinner and Cora had fallen at the restaurant, hurting her leg. The Tews felt a small lump and thought it was from the fall, but the toddler cried through the night. Shelby decided the next morning to take Cora to see her pediatrician. Later, she called Austin



from Brenner’s Children’s Hospital in Winston-Salem and said an oncologist was going to run some tests. The results showed Cora had cancer. Wanting a second opinion, Shelby dove into research and found that one of the leading treatment facilities in the country specializing in pediatric cancer was the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. There, on Feb. 14, Valentine’s Day, 2019, Cora was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a highly aggressive form of pediatric cancer. She was 2 years old. Between February and June, the Tews made frequent trips to Cincinnati. In mid-June, the doctors scheduled surgery for Cora. “So we packed our stuff and hauled it up there,” Austin says. It would be

an extended stay. Surgery was followed by 23 days of radiation and chemotherapy. Cora's lab tests looked good. Doctors removed her intravenous port. She was clear of cancer. The family returned to North Carolina and broke ground for construction of a new home on the Stokesdale land they had purchased before Cora's diagnosis. Then, on Cora's second, 3-month checkup back in Cincinnati, scans revealed her cancer had returned.

"We couldn't believe this was happening," Austin says.

Shelby tells me that, during the grueling, 12-hour days of treatment at the hospital, she and Austin noticed how much Cora enjoyed coloring or drawing pictures to take her mind off the beeping machines and busy nurses — how working on the art seemed to give her strength. And they found that big sister Braylen — just two years older than Cora — would use painting to let her emotions out. Despite their situation, the Tews understood they were among the fortunate, because they were self-employed. "You'd see some kid all alone in the hospital during the day because their parents couldn't be there," Austin says. "They had to work to keep their jobs." And, as happened with the Tews, families would find insurance companies denying payment for life-saving treatments. "You see these situations, and it's

devastating," Austin says. "You want to find a way to help." They decided they would use their individual skills to create a business — Faith and Healing Arts — that helps other families struggling financially with childhood cancer. Building on their love for their own children's art, they've found suppliers who reproduce their own and other children's art



in large sizes on high-quality art paper or canvas. Austin builds the frames and mounts the art. Already, Faith and Healing Arts has retailers selling the work of children from some 25 families. The art can also be purchased on the Faith and Healing Arts website. All proceeds from sales go to participating families. For two years, Cora received chemotherapy at Brenner's Children's Hospital in Winston-Salem, with 3-month scans at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. All the while, she played with her sister as her father poured concrete and framed the walls of her new house. "But it was like she knew she wasn't going to be around," Austin says. "She never really staked a claim."

Cora passed away in 2021. She was 5 years old.

We pause by a group of photographs on a wall so I can have a look.

"There's my little mini-me," Shelby whispers. "My little Cora Grace."

They take me to the back corner of the house and I have a peek at Shelby's office looking out on the woods. When she sees the client messages queued up in her inbox, she realizes she'd better get back to work. I thank her for her time and we say goodbye. In the great room, Austin shows me a grouping of Cora and Braylen's art. Then we go through a door into the beautiful private suite they've built and furnished, where families going through cancer treatment can stay when needed. Austin leads me back to the kitchen area, where along the wall there's a commercial-sized refrigerator, lots of cabinets and a hidden, walk-in pantry. A stove and sink are located in the expansive, concrete-slab kitchen island.

He pats the slab.

"There's a ton of concrete here," Austin says. "And a steel bar to hold it up."

He tells me about the concrete safe room in the house, built strong enough to withstand a tornado, where Braylen and Cora used to play just after the concrete had been poured and the framing was going up. Austin tells me about the radiant heat system in the concrete floors, proudly showing me the utility room he designed and built — each duct, fan and pipe gleamingly clean, easily accessible for maintenance. "All the fan motors are in here," he says. "You turn on a bathroom fan when you're in the guest suite, you don't hear a thing." It's a great house, a one-of-a-kind house. It's a house blessed with peace and purpose. Recently Austin celebrated his 40th birthday. "We had our daughter's basketball team's kids and parents here, we threw corn hole in the living room, we did it all," he says, reflecting for a moment. "You know, an empty house sucks," Austin says. "What matters now is to live life." OH

For more information on the Tews' art program to help the families of children who have cancer, visit www.faithandhealingarts.com.

Ross Howell Jr. is a contributing writer.