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NINE REAL MOMS DOING THEIR BEST

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in good company

Kitchen remodel creates room for hospitality

by Kathleen McKinney

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family photograph by Kathleen McKinney
before photographs provided by The Candlers

It's been seven years since Pete and Meredith Candler moved to Waco, and it's been seven years since they moved into their beloved home on Columbus Avenue. It's a long time to wait, but the Candlers are finally able to enjoy a newly renovated, modern kitchen, which was designed with good food and good company in mind.

When Meredith and Pete, a North Carolina native and a Georgia native, came to Waco, they were charmed to find what Texas is known for — space. Pete had accepted a teaching position at Baylor, so he and Meredith made the move and upgraded from a 1,000-square-foot home to a 3,000-square-foot home.

Built in 1947, the Candlers' home is unique. It was originally a mother-in-law duplex. A family with children lived in one part of the house while the mother-in-law lived in a separate but attached part of the home. Each side of the duplex had its own living area, kitchen and bedrooms.

However, by the time that Meredith and Pete moved in, the duplex was no more. Instead, another owner had turned it into a single four-bedroom home with multiple living areas and two kitchens. The Candlers used the kitchen that the original family had used, and the second kitchen was used as a laundry room. And in the beginning, that worked.

"We didn't have kids, and it was just us," Meredith said. "It was four years of us being here without kids. We were just trying to figure out how to live in such a big house."

In North Carolina, they had a small galley kitchen that was cramped by a washer and dryer but no dishwasher. So initially, their new kitchen felt like a

the candler home

much bigger space. But after four years, their first son, Henry, arrived, and then two years later, their second son, Charlie, came. Henry is now 4, and Charlie is 2.

"At first, the kitchen wasn't that big of a deal, but at some point, stuff just started piling up, and the kitchen was just so stressful," Meredith said. "We lived in it for so long because there was charm to it. People would come over and say, 'We love your kitchen. It's so charming.' There were all these neat built-ins, and you kind of wanted to keep the old feel of the house, and you're nervous about getting rid of that."

But finally, the quaint kitchen started to loose its appeal as its flaws revealed themselves. The 1940s countertops were neat, but they were shallow, and the crevices were unforgiving when it came to dirt. Pete was constantly hitting his head on low-hung cabinets. A little breakfast room wasn't actually big enough for a table for four. A lot of space was lost to a water heater closet and an inefficient pantry. A wall with an arched doorway separated the small breakfast room from the narrow kitchen.

"The kitchen we had before was great and just really aesthetically interesting, but it just wasn't very functional for the stuff we like to do sometimes — even for ordinary meals," Pete said.

When they would come home, the Candlers primarily used the garage entrance, so the breakfast room and kitchen were the first things they would see. The small space would immediately make Pete and Meredith feel claustrophobic.

"My husband would come home and just be miserable right away," Meredith said. "And we added to it. It didn't have to be as cluttered as it was, but the design of it was so bizarre that it didn't work for someone who liked to cook."

And the Candlers, especially Pete, love to cook. They also love to have company over and regularly host dinner parties throughout the year.

"We always have a big New Year's Day party," Meredith said. "Also, I'm the president of the board of the Family Abuse Center, so we have the Christmas party over here. We like to have big parties."

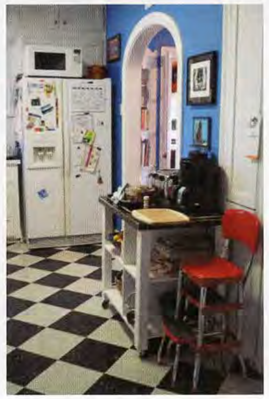
Meredith and Pete are also involved in the Crane Scholars Program at Baylor, a program

Opening page: Henry, 4, and Charlie, 2, love to sit at the kitchen's new breakfast bar and play "restaurant" as their mother, Meredith, serves up healthy snacks. Left: After the kitchen remodel, Pete finally found a perfect spot to showcase his beloved Johnny Cash painting. Below: The under-cabinet lighting beautifully accents the kitchen tiles and counters, but while Pete and Meredith are hard at work preparing food for their family or guests, the lighting also brings unobstructed light to their work space.

that encourages and supports students who are interested in academic careers. The Candlers have students from the program over to their house three or four times a year.

"If you had more than two or three people, it was just claustrophobic, even for my husband and our two boys. We either had to move or do something about our kitchen," Meredith said.

From the beginning, renovating seemed like the right option. At the same time that the Candlers began contemplating a kitchen renovation, Meredith's best friend, Leslie Huntley, was finishing her undergraduate degree in interior design, and kitchens were her specialty. Even though Huntley was all the way in North Carolina, she was starting up her own interior design company and was excited to design her friend's kitchen.



before shots

"My friend was graduating that May [of 2009], and she said, 'Look, I'll put this design together for you.' It was a win-win situation," Meredith said. "My husband teaches at Baylor, and I had just quit my job at Family Abuse Center, so we were on a budget. Leslie said, 'I'll do this design for you.' It was going to help her business, but [her design] wasn't going to cost us."

In the summer of 2009, Huntley met with the Candlers at Meredith's parents' house in North Carolina and presented them with possible plans for their new kitchen. It seemed like the plans had a green light, but when Meredith got back to Waco, she started to have second thoughts.

"I started freaking out about how much it was going to cost," she said. "I had to tell my best friend, 'We're not going to do this.'"

On their salary, Meredith didn't think a renovation was feasible, and a new home seemed like a better option. The Candlers contacted their realtor and started looking at houses inside and outside of Waco. Meredith, an avid biker, loves Cameron Park, so they looked at homes in the park but didn't find what they were looking for.

"We couldn't find a house [we liked] that had four bedrooms. We really enjoy people staying at our house," Meredith said. "Our house was so awesome, except the kitchen. Just the way our house was structured — we love it. It's well built; it's just solid."

When the Candlers still couldn't find a house in Waco, they started revisiting the idea of remodeling the kitchen. Around that time, Pete's great-aunt Bo passed away. According to Pete, she was a remarkable woman who devoted her life to her career as a hematologist. She married her beloved husband late in life, so the couple never had any children. When she passed away, she left her money to her great-nieces and nephews, including Pete. With this change in their financial situation, Meredith and Pete were back to plan A and decided to put the money toward their kitchen.

"This was something we weren't able to do out of our own means," Pete said. "We kind of dedicated our kitchen to her. We wouldn't have been able to do it without her and her generosity. She's the patroness of our kitchen. Aunt Bo was an interesting woman, quite a character, and I hope her spirit lives on in our kitchen."

After looking at the home's blueprints, they saw that they could knock down several walls and create one large, open space, which would be perfect for cooking and entertaining. They took Huntley's design, solicited bids from several local builders and ultimately went with JoCo Builders. By June 2010, the renovation was underway and the Candlers got *out* of the way.

"We went to live with my family for the summer," Meredith said. "We tend to get out of Waco for the summer. It's so hot, and none of our family lives here."

For the next six weeks, the Candlers let themselves forget about their kitchen and all the commotion that was going on back home. When they came back, JoCo still had another two months to go.

When a renovation is as extensive as the Candlers' was, a lot of families have to find temporary housing — a rental, a hotel, a family member's house — but because of the Candlers' unique two-kitchen home, they were able to stay in the house.

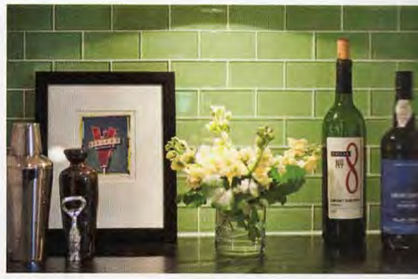
"The house is conducive to us living here and doing a kitchen renovation," Meredith said. "We just got used to it, and everyone who came in was just great."

The Candlers didn't have to uproot their kids for an extended period and, fortunately, they had a good experience living in the home during the renovation process. But while there are advantages to staying in your own space, Josh Wadsworth of JoCo Builders is the first to admit that there are some drawbacks that homeowners need to be aware of.

"It's noisy and dusty, and there are certain times when the water is going to be shut off," Wadsworth said. "It's an enormous inconvenience, to say the least. It's going to be one of the most stressful things you do in your home when you take out a kitchen. It's hard to understand that until you go through it. But once you have the final product, and you settle back in, you can forget about it."

The renovation was a new experience for the Candlers, but also for the JoCo team. The design for the kitchen included all new cabinets from IKEA, the Swedish home products company known for its inexpensive and ready-to-assemble furniture. JoCo had never worked with IKEA products before. The assembly of IKEA cabinets is very different from standard custom cabinets.

"You just have to take a different approach to



Left: Before photos reveal a narrow kitchen with shallow countertop space that was too confined for the Candlers' growing family. Top left: Because the abundance of counter-spac allows the Candlers to keep many appliances within easy reach, making fruit smoothies is a daily event for Meredith and her children. Top center: Above: The Candlers' kitchen was completely remodeled from top to bottom. A wall was removed to open up the space and many new features were added, including white and wood-colored cabinets from IKEA, stainless steel countertops and appliances, hardwood floors and vibrant, green subway tiles. Page 81: The Candler Family from left to right: Meredith, Henry, Pete and Charlie.

the job," Wadsworth said. "We had to learn and train ourselves, but if we do it again, we'll now know exactly what to do."

For the Candlers, using IKEA had its pros and cons. They got a great deal on the cabinets, and Meredith loves that IKEA cabinet doors close on their own, as opposed to slamming shut like heavy, real wood cabinets. But again, IKEA cabinets aren't made from real wood, so the laminate can be a little sensitive. Also, ordering online, instead of in the store, turned out to be a nightmare. Still, Meredith is happy with the look of her installed cabinets as well as her made-for-IKEA Whirlpool appliances.

"I think people would be nervous about using IKEA, but look what you can do with it," Meredith said.

Besides IKEA cabinets, the renovation included new hardwood floors and stainless steel counters and appliances. According to Meredith, Pete is the designated cook and, therefore, the inspiration for the entire design. Pete is a fan of the Food Network's chef Tyler Florence, whose rustic kitchen features green subway tiles. So when Pete was giving his input on the design, he knew right away what he wanted: green tiles. Florence's tiles are closer to an olive green, but the allusion is evident in the Candlers' brighter, pale green tile backsplash.

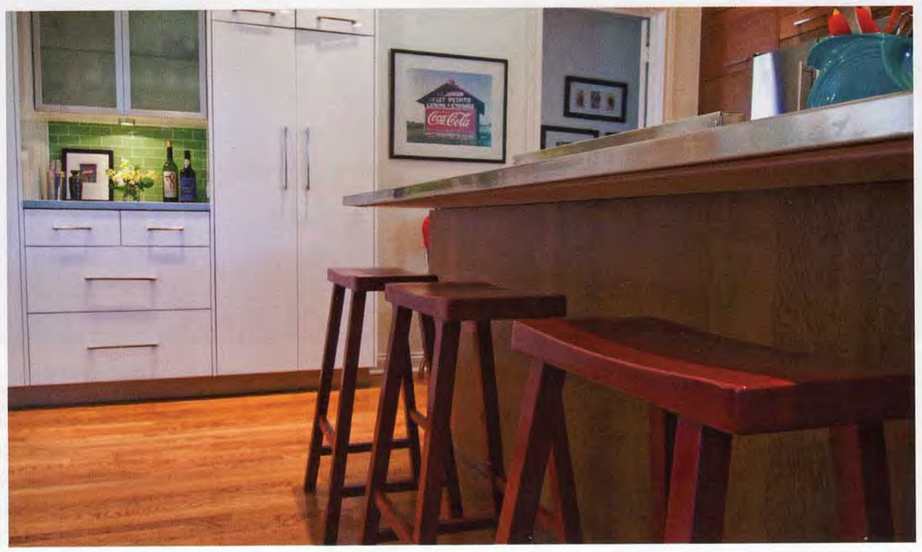
"We like the clean look of it, and it's the only color we have in the whole kitchen. Everything else is natural wood color, white or stainless steel," Pete said. "Also, the thing we liked about the glass tile, it had more depth and character than enamel tile. It reflects light differently and just sort of brightens it up."

After about three straight months of renovation, the Candlers were able to start using their new kitchen. The finishing touches were completed just before Thanksgiving. In the few months since, the Candlers' lives have completely changed.

"Pete is so different. He's just so happy. Anything we went through to get it done, it was so worth it because he is so happy," Meredith said.

Everyone else is happy in the new kitchen, too. Charlie loves scribbling on the wall-size chalkboard. Henry loves to pretend he's ordering food at the breakfast bar as if he were at a restaurant. Meredith feels like the new kitchen has given her more time.

"It's just more efficient," she said. "Cooking used to be such a chore for me. Everything — you couldn't reach it, or you couldn't get to it. Now, I feel like every night I cook dinner, and I'm really enjoying it. We're eating healthier. Every morning I'm making smoothies for our kids because I don't have to pull the blender out — it's just right here."

As they had hoped, the Candlers have been able to entertain and welcome large parties into their home. Just in time for the holidays, the Candlers welcomed guests in the new kitchen for Thanksgiving dinner, the Family Abuse Center Christmas party and their annual New Year's Day party.

"It wasn't about just us," Meredith said. "We like to have people over, and we like hospitality. It's such a huge part of who we are as a couple. 'Do we spend the money to do this?' And in the end, yes, because we wanted to give people the gift of good food."