

A Hoosier country kitchen: www.heraldtimesonline.com

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Home decor can be a touchy issue when two professionals – a cabinetmaker and a builder – live beneath a single roof. After Nancy Hiller of NR Hiller Design began dating Mark Longacre of Longacre Construction, her professional instincts protested against his kitchen.

Mark built his house himself with his former wife, Patti Torp, modeling it on the graceful old farmhouses he had admired during his boyhood in Elkhart, Indiana. The overall look of the house was right, but the kitchen irritated Nancy's detail-oriented eye.

"The cabinets, which were custom made by a local company using red elm, were beautiful," Nancy said, "but the layout and the cabinet design made very inefficient use of the available space. Also, as someone who knows about period cabinets and built-ins of different styles, I thought they were inappropriately contemporary for a home inspired by turn-of-the-century-farmhouse architecture."

A large refrigerator blocked much of one wall. Across from it was an eight-foot long corkboard surface covered with children's art, family photos, and old cards. A massive central island dominated the space.

"It was a good work surface," Nancy acknowledged, "but most of the time it served as a junk repository. And the kitchen table was shoved to the side, like a naughty child sent to the corner."

Nancy considered how the kitchen ought to look for some time, then began making secret preparations. When Mark and his son Jonas left for a family Thanksgiving she sprang into action.

"I took out the wall of corkboard and replaced it with a built-in cabinet built in three sections," she said. "It has practical pantry function. It holds the mixer, the Tupperware, aluminum foil and small appliances." The new built-in provided counter surface, display shelves, cabinets and drawers. Not only handsome, it greatly improved the kitchen's storage capability.

When Mark and Jonas returned after the holiday, their jaws dropped.

"I 'surprised' them, thinking there was a possibility that our relationship might end," she admitted. "It took a little getting used to, but Mark thought it was okay. The next year was the scary part; that's when I started encroaching on the actual cabinets. That year I really worried when they went away for Thanksgiving, because I wasn't just messing with children's art but messing with Mark's red elm cabinets!"

She removed a chunk of the custom cabinets and installed her own built-in, which was inspired by a 1920s kitchen cabinet. Looking at the glass-fronted upper shelves, the counter area and the lower cabinet with drawers, Mark had to admit that it was an improvement.

"Mark's original red elm cabinets had two doors opening out with a central divider," Nancy explained, "which meant that you had to get on your knees to get anything out of the back. I knew we could accommodate more using slightly less space with drawers on full-extension slides, and everything's much easier to get to. And the look of the piece is more in keeping with Mark's original conception of early 20th-century rural farmhouses."

When Mark returned home and found his second surprise, he was impressed again. Nancy was winning him over by degrees.

The next thing to go was the central island, which Jonas helped her take apart when Mark was not around. She replaced it with a beautiful long farmhouse table that she built mainly from cherry, with legs made from a chunk of mahogany given to Mark years earlier by a friend. It's long enough to seat eight to ten people, and because it's table-height instead of counter-height like the old island, it's actually much better for kneading bread dough and rolling piecrusts, which Nancy and Jonas regularly do. It's also inviting for friends and family to gather around.

Mark was by this time fully on board with the changes.

"Taking out the island and replacing it with the table was the transformative element as far as the function and usability of the space are concerned," he admitted. "It's all very beautiful, and it's much more functional than it was originally. I trusted her professional design sense and stayed out of it."

She replaced a second section of red elm cabinet with a traditional plate rack she crafted based on her years in England working for Roy Griffiths. She also installed a handsome Hoosier cabinet that she painstakingly reproduced from an antique original.

By that point it was time to get rid of all of the remaining red elm cabinets. Mark made two requests: a bottom-mounted new sink (which rationalized the change from green Formica counters to black soapstone) and a range vent. Nancy jigsawed the fan and motor out of the old range hood vent and built an ingenious disguise for them.

"It looks like a freestanding wooden box on a shelf, intentionally off-center," she pointed out, indicating an object that I had assumed was an antique coffee bin on the shelf above the stove.

"The result is a much more spacious kitchen," Nancy said with satisfaction. "It holds more, it works well, and it's finally in keeping with the farmhouse theme."

"It's wonderful!" agreed Mark.

Contact Nancy Hiller at www.nrhillerdesign.com.

Nancy built all of these cabinets as well as the kitchen table.



Nancy based this reproduction Hoosier cabinet upon the measurements of an antique she bought.



A still life is carefully arranged on the farmhouse table.



The vent fan is cleverly hidden inside the “box” on the shelf over the stove.

