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PHOTO G. FRANK HART

The back of the house opens up completely with accordion doors welcoming a wonderful breeze throughout.

A Family Affair

Building a forever home for mom and dad

By CHRISTINE HENNESSEY » Photos by G. FRANK HART



VICKY AND VAN BELL began dating as high schoolers in southern Illinois and have been together ever since. As a married couple, Van spent four years in the army and for that final year, the family was stationed in Germany. It was their first time overseas and sparked a lifelong love of travel—to date, they’ve visited 71 different countries and lived abroad for ten years collectively. When Van left the army, he returned to his job at Monsanto where he stayed for 38 years, and was responsible for all Monsanto manufacturing in the Asia Pacific, South America, and Mexico operations. By this point, the kids were grown and Van and Vicky were able to travel together often in their free time.

When the Bells were ready to retire, however, they chose North Carolina and built what was supposed to be their “forever home” just outside of Asheville. Everything was going according to plan, and then their son, Cress, owner of Bell Custom Homes, moved from California to Wilmington with his wife and two young children. Vicky and Van visited often, renting a home near the beach for a few months each winter. “We were talking one day and Cress said, ‘Why don’t you move to Wilmington? Let me build you a house,’” Vicky says. The opportunity to live close to their grandchildren was too good to resist. The Bells made the decision to sell their mountain home and build a new forever at the beach.

Bell Custom Homes

Cress Bell founded Bell Custom Homes three years ago, but he’s been building houses for over 22 years. “I had the opportunity to learn the craft and business of building homes early in my career through a couple of other great companies before starting my own,” he says. “It was a great experience that I wouldn’t trade for anything.”

Bell Custom Homes is a full Design Build General Contracting Company known for the quality of their work and the integrity of their operation. “We really want our clients to enjoy the process,” Cress says. “It’s our job to manage the complexities of building a home. There are so many



Vicky's favorite part of the house is the kitchen. "We have a huge island. I've already had the gals I play tennis with over, and everyone always gravitates there. I love that," Vicky says.

different components and variables to navigate. We also love what we do and I think our clients find confidence in that. I still find it really cool to be able to go back to the first homes and communities I built and drive through them, twenty years later."

While Bell Custom Homes is guided by their clients, their clients tend to gravitate toward them at least in part for the look and style they've cultivated. "I've always found it fun to blur the lines between styles," Cress says. One of those styles is what Cress likes to call "modern coastal." "You take the clean lines and minimalist approach of a modern style and blend it with the fun components of a coastal design," he explains. This method creates a home that is both current and classic, a design that will still look great twenty years later.

When clients come to Bell Custom Homes, they go through the entire home building process, from initial consultation to finished construction. "It all starts with the first orientation meeting to establish what the goals are of our clients and where we need to go from there," Cress says. If, for example, a client has a good idea of the style of home they want but don't yet have a floor plan, they'll be paired with one of Cress's partnered architects to bring their ideas to life. As the home begins to come together, a professional designer can guide the client through their showrooms, helping them select products, colors, and textures. "We handle it all," Cress says. "It's our job to help our clients execute the best version of their vision, whatever that may be."

Warm and Inviting

For Cress, this particular build was more than a project—it was personal. "It's my parents' house," he says. "And it was so much fun to build! Not only do I think my parents have a very cool, specific style, but the house reflects their lives in the right way." For Cress, this meant building a home that captured who his parents are and the unique life they've built. "Living abroad for so many years is a big part of





The Bells were able to take advantage of Bell Custom Homes' partners, especially when it came to the finishing touches and small details. Seeing their lighting options in person, aided by an expert, was a huge help and something Vicky in particular really enjoyed.



(above) One of Van's unique requests was to include a library in the design. "Books have always been a big deal to me, and I enjoy being around them," he says. (left) The house incorporates an art collection (collected from their travels abroad) through a dedicated art gallery with special lighting in one hallway.

who they are, so that was the goal when we started creating their home," he says.

Vicky and Van also appreciated the opportunity to work with their son. "I didn't have all the worries some people have when they move at our age—it can easily become overwhelming," Van says. "With Cress being our son and a builder and helping design it, all I had to do was pay the bills!"

The fact that the Bells had been through the building process before helped. "When we designed the house in the mountains, I kept a big binder for years of things I liked and didn't like and might want to try," Vicky says. "I enjoy decorating and the

whole process of building. Knowing this house is our forever house meant we were more open to saying yes, let's try that, we haven't done that before."

The Bells were also able to take advantage of Bell Custom Homes' partners, especially when it came to the finishing touches and small details. For example, seeing their lighting options in person, aided by an expert, was a huge help and something Vicky in particular really enjoyed. "With us living overseas and building the last house, we didn't know a lot of the new products and new ways of doing things," Vicky says. "The goal was basically to tie everything together that

we wanted in the house, and just make it our forever home. A warm, inviting home."

Forever, Take Two

The Bells have been in their new home since May, and they couldn't be happier with how things turned out. "It's actually a little more than we anticipated," Vicky says. "We walked over here and saw things as they were being put together, the paint, the counters, the things we picked out. But seeing it all finished, it's even better than we thought."

The home is in Landfall and just a block away from Cress's home, a location that can't be beat. "The grandkids can walk here," Vicky says. While that may be the highlight, the finished product is perfect in many other ways as well.

"We lucked out in the way the house is situated so that the prevailing winds blow right through it," Van says. "The back of our house opens up completely with



Another highlight the couple thoroughly enjoys is the natural stone turquoise water feature in the foyer.



(top) The best part of the home is the fact that Cress built it. “You walk through this house you love and then it hits you - oh my gosh, my son built this,” Vicky says. (bottom) The Bells enjoy spending time outside on their large screened-in porch. They open the doors as soon as the humidity passes.

accordion doors and we get a wonderful breeze right through the house. That was a surprise, a very pleasant surprise.”

“We also have a large screened-in porch and we’ll open those doors as soon as the humidity passes,” Vicky adds.

Vicky’s favorite part of the house is the kitchen. “We have a huge island,” she says. “I’ve already had the gals I play tennis with over and everyone always gravitates there. I love that.”

Another highlight the couple thoroughly enjoys is the natural stone turquoise quartz water feature in the foyer. “Every morning when I get up, I go and flip the switch,” Vicky says. “The water trickling over the stone is the perfect way to start the day.”

One of Van’s unique requests was to include a library in the design. “Books

have always been a big deal to me and I enjoy being around them,” he says. “We’ve always had a library of sorts and this one turned out really nice. I can sit down and be amongst books, and I like that. It’s even nicer than we envisioned.”

In addition to books, the couple has also amassed quite an art collection, especially as they traveled and lived around the world. The house incorporates that collection through a dedicated art gallery in one hallway. “It’s lined with the art we’ve accumulated, with overhead lights shining on it,” Van says. It’s a great way to bring the memories of their overseas adventures into their current home.

But the best part of the home is the fact that Cress built it. “You walk through this house you love and then it hits you—oh my

gosh, my son built this,” Vicky says. “I tell Cress all the time, thank you, because I just can’t believe it. He found his niche, and we just happened to benefit from that talent.”

Van agrees. “My father, myself and Cress all found careers where we really enjoy doing what we did and made a decent living at it. Not everybody gets to say that. He’s been fortunate to find that, and he does top notch work. This house proves that.”

Cress echoes this sentiment. “The best part was just building for my parents,” he says. “It’s pretty amazing to work in an industry that gave me the opportunity to do this for them. They did an amazing job with the home. And we get to continue to enjoy it as a family!”

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