

Christmas at home with the mayor

BY KATHY TRETTER

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Mayor Gay Ann Harney fell in love, first with her husband of 40 years, Kim. The couple were high school sweethearts in Owensboro, Kentucky and started their married life there. They settled in a brand-spanking new house. "We wanted an old home, had a new home and wanted to make it look old," she explains, her customary grin lighting a face framed in auburn waves. "Then I saw this one."

They had scoured Owensboro for a house with character but just didn't find it. And while they were married to each other, Gay Ann and Kim (she doesn't stand on the formality of always being called Mayor), they weren't married to Owensboro.

Gay Ann, in fact, was an army brat, born at Ft. Bragg in North Carolina. Her dad completed two tours of duty in Germany and they didn't move back to the states until Gay Ann was 13, when her father, Jack D. Booth retired. A Kentucky native from Muhlenberg County, the family settled in Owensboro.

But it was in Germany where Gay Ann Harney's Christmas spirit flourished.

"My first memory is when we moved to Germany for the first time when I was four-years-old. Dad went over first and had an apartment over a bar. We went up to this little apartment and he had decorated a small tabletop aluminum tree with lights on it [remember those colored light wheels?]. He placed presents under the tree, he was so proud of it!"

For Gay Ann, the aluminum tree, the storybook village, the Christmas magic — everything about it spoke to her heart.

Which is probably why she decorates her house from top to bottom and misses nothing in between.

Oh yes, back to the house the Harney's found about 25 years ago that led her down the path to becoming mayor of Spencer County's only city.

Nothing to suite could be found in Owensboro so she crossed the blue bridge to see what might be available on the Indiana side of the Ohio River.

She saw this house and "I was appalled by it," she recalls. "It was dirty."

Luckily she brought a girlfriend with her who pointed out the cupboards, the ceilings,

the pocket doors and other details hidden beneath the grime. "Look at this, look at that," her friend enthused, making Gay Ann decide the residence bore a second look. So she brought Kim and her grandparents back to tour it and they pointed out how well built it was, what good shape the attic was in and what could be done to return it to its former glory. So Kim and Gay Ann made an offer. As fate would have it, the offer was accepted.

"The house had been vacant for awhile," Gay Ann notes. "It had been used as a gift shop or antique shop for the Rockport Inn so it didn't really have a kitchen."

So first up, besides ridding the home of dirt and grime, was creating a kitchen. "There was an old metal sink, rusted through," she recalls, "and two wooden cabinets, but nothing usable."

As fate would have it some friends were remodeling their kitchen and gifted their old cabinets to the Harneys. "We picked them up and then put them up," she explains, "painted, added wallpaper and appliances. The cabinets were a lifesaver."

They have since remodeled the kitchen — twice — but that first kitchen worked quite well.

Gradually they restored every room. And as readers can see from the accompanying photos, they did an amazing job.

That was the assessment of two visitors who

came knocking on the door from Tacoma, Washington, a grandmother in her 80s with her granddaughter. The grandma grew up in the house, which was owned by her grandparents at the time. Her grandpa was the county clerk and she recalled running from home to the courthouse and back again on errands for her grandparents.

Ironically, Gay Ann was Spencer County Clerk for seven years (2008-2015) before being elected mayor in November of 2015 (taking office January 1 of 2016), so finding out the former owner was also county clerk must have seemed like kismet.

The Harneys raised their two sons in this house.

Chris is a Realtor with Keller Williams, married to labor and delivery nurse Erica, whom Gay Ann claims is "The best daughter-in-law ever!" She also teaches some classes at the Tri-County YMCA in Ferdinand. Chris and Erica live in Lamar with their three children, Luke, 8, Kate, 6, and Paige, 3. The three tots absolutely love coming to grandma and grandpa's house, proving it when they arrive during the interview and settle down in the room designated for family gatherings, complete with all sorts of wonderful things to both look at (like an antique train set) and play with.

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Gay Ann's grandchildren arrive on a day off school to play with their grandma. From left they are Luke, 8, Kate, 6, and Paige, 3, cuddling up with Mayor Harney. The children attend Lincoln Trail Elementary near Santa Claus.