



Photos: Flandl Bye

A Gemmi FOOTPRINT in Bucks County

When Jacquie Lewis decided to enlarge her Solebury home to accommodate social gatherings, she chose former neighbor and gifted builder John Gemmi to do the job BY MARGO ARAMIAN RAGAN

Playing with Legos was an early clue that John Gemmi, owner of Gemmi Construction, had interest and talent in construction. Jacquie Lewis, Solebury resident and former neighbor of John, fondly recalls watching John build homes with his Lego pieces, never dreaming that one day, she would call on him to help her with several major home renovations.

Fast forward to several decades. By this time Jacquie was living in a sprawling Solebury residence, located on a seven-acre property that has the Cuttalossa Creek meandering by the grounds. A stunning waterfall adds its own special magic. However magnificent the existing home was, Jacquie discovered that it wasn't meeting all of her needs.

"As my parents aged, I found myself in the role of family

Above, a wall of boulders coordinates the look of the exterior. Side view of the terrace room curved wall and side of conservatory. Opposite, this frontal view of the fireplace in the conservatory provides some insight into height and depth considerations that were involved in its design and construction.





Above, more than 525 tons of fill was needed to make a level surface out of an existing hill. Note the curved wall of stone. The pergola offers shade on the terrace, which extends the living space out of the conservatory. Right, John Gemmi, the builder and Jacquie Lewis the owner of the this home in Solebury. Right and opposite, the deck is part of a system of decks and terraces surrounding the main house. In the distance is a wonderful view of the bridge and waterfall.



matriarch in that all family gatherings were being held in my home,” Jacquie explained. “Everyone would congregate in the kitchen area. I love to entertain both large and small groups, so bumping the house out from the back and side seemed to be a natural progression for providing space for these social activities.”

Her first step was to call an architect to discuss her vision. Jacquie is a voracious reader, so she wanted special areas where she could cuddle up in a chair and read. Next, she is a natural hostess. “I have entertained as many as 100 people here, and as little as a friend or two,” she informed. “Consequently, I wanted the house to be large enough to accommodate a wedding reception, for example, yet still have the warmth and friendliness to welcome a smaller group.”

More than anything, she did not want the house to be intimidating. She recalls a relative who used to cordon off parts of her rooms so that guests could not possibly damage the furniture or artifacts. “Why have beautiful things if you do not share them with peo-

ple you love?” Jacquie asked.

Therefore, she wanted the house to embrace her guests in comfort. Her first experience with an architect was not too encouraging. “Unfortunately, when I was shown his project plans, it was his vision, not mine,” Jacquie said. She remembered John from years past, and was familiar with the restoration and reconstruction work his company had done with other homes in Bucks County.

“I made the call to John, who recommended Ralph Fey, a Doylestown architect with his own firm Fey and Associates,” said Jacquie. “Ralph came to the house, scribbled some lines on a paper, showed it to me, and lo and behold, he had captured the exact concept I had in mind.”

From that point on, Jacquie and her team went to work full steam ahead. “I did not even try to bid the job,” she maintained.



“Everyone was professional in their approach to the project, we were respectful of one another’s opinions, and stayed focused on the end goal. It was one of the smoothest operations one could imagine.”

From John’s point of view, the project involved tremendous construction challenges, all of which invigorated and energized his creative juices. The first challenge was building what Jacquie calls the conservatory. The 28 feet by 24 feet room is basically built on what was once a hillside. “We had to call in thirty five tri-axel dump trucks, with approximately fifteen to eighteen tons of fill on each truck, to bring the level of ground to equal the existing house,” John said. “The property had to be reshaped on the hill.”

He and Jacquie attended a house tour in Newtown, both eager to find ideas to incorporate into the home renovation. “We walked into an old church and saw these beautiful wooden ceiling beams,” said Jacquie. “John and I looked at one another at the same time, and said, ‘Yes!’”

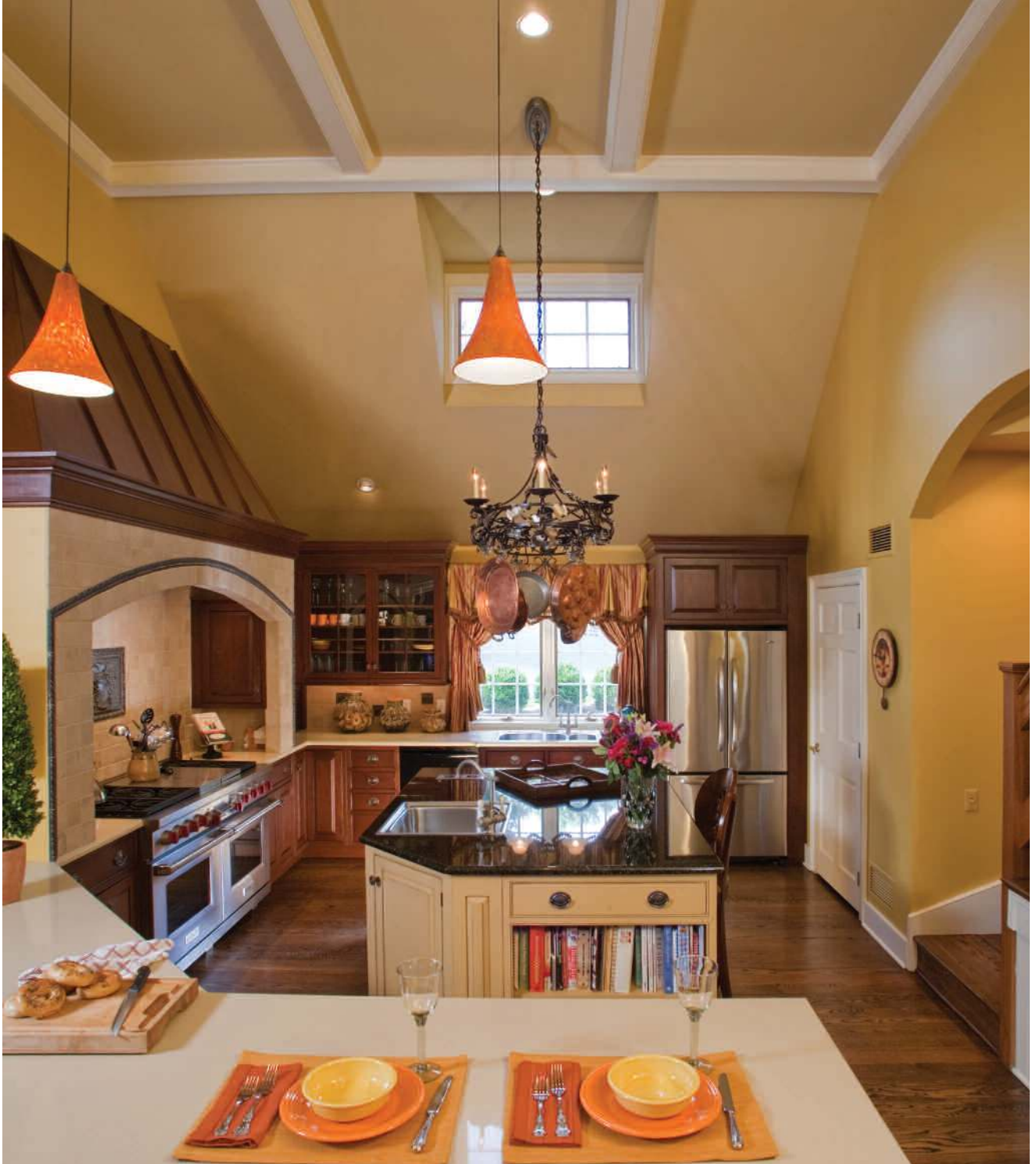
Saying yes, and getting it done are two separate matters. John found a barn in Souderton that was being dismantled, and the beams were exactly what he and Jacquie had in mind. The timbers are white oak, and probably 150 years old. “I contracted a local timber framer, who disassembled each piece, and brought them to the job site,” said John.

Each piece was hand selected, chiseled, mortised and tooled into shape. Installing the cross beams, however, continued the challenge to John and his team. “We had already constructed the roof, so we had to present the new structural components to our engineer so that he could reconfigure how the room could hold this added stress,” said John. “We added hand-hammered iron straps that held the cross beams together. They were aged to give them a rusty color, appropriate to the original cross beams.” A hand cured metal chandelier coordinates with the theme.

Once the cross beams were properly reconstructed, they were



Top left, this is an intimate dining area for small gatherings. The archway opens up to the terrace room on left, and the doorway in the front opens to the conservatory. Top right, this cozy and inviting spot in the terrace room, is one Jacquie's favorite places to read. Bottom left, large and visible, these crossbeams frame and define the soaring height of the conservatory room. Bottom right, in this view from the kitchen looking into the terrace room, you can see the black countertop that has electrical outlets on either side, making it handy for buffet service. Opposite, this large kitchen center island and the double Wolf stoves are a busy hostess's dream. The changes that were made in kitchen were mainly in appearance and actually didn't involve extensive construction.



installed carefully within the confines of the existing room. “We all held our breaths as the beams were hoisted,” admitted Jacquie, “but there was not a hitch to the whole process.” The cross beams architecturally frame the room, and cut down the soaring space of a 22 foot high ceiling. A fireplace mantle from the same wooden beams was constructed, nicely tying in the elements.

A room as large as this one presents a heating challenge. Jacquie loves the warmth and ambiance of a fireplace, and has eight of them in the home. John suggested a Rumford fireplace, a style that was very popular in colonial Bucks County. The fireplace is tall and shallow, with stacks of wood leaning against the firebox, reflecting heat more efficiently back into the room.

“The colonists thought the Rumford fireplace was an efficient

means of heating a room, and the elegant lines of the fireplace complement the Conservatory perfectly,” said John.

To further respond to the heating challenge, John installed a radiant heating system under a flooring of blue stone. Complicating the challenge is that there is a seven-inch step, from the foyer leading into the conservatory. It was critical that the height of the stone be correct. “We installed a wet bed of cement on which we had placed the radiant system tubing,” said John. “The challenge was that the blue stones all vary in thickness, so each stone had to be hand set and calculated to the same height in order to meet the seven inch step properly.”

Banks of windows line the walls, with light streaming in from

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room is adjacent to the kitchen, which was original to the house.

I really did not want to change the kitchen layout," said Jacquie. "What John did was to fine tune the existing cabinetry by repainted their surfaces, and installing new knobs. He added more storage space by building a matching cabinet over the refrigerator, making better use of what was dead space."

One major change to the kitchen was the installation of Caesarstone quartz countertops. Aside from its eco-friendly aspects, Caesarstone is a non-porous, scratch resistant and almost maintenance free premium surface, making it a contrasting companion to the dark granite surfaces on the counter opening up to the terrace room, which is directly opposite the kitchen.

A wall of built-in cabinets and display shelves separates the kitchen from the Terrace Room. A large opening in the wall visually connects the two rooms so that Jacquie can prepare food while still interacting with her guests. John installed a dark granite surface on the counter of this opening, with electrical outlets on either side of the walls. "When I prepare a buffet, this counter is perfect for placing food platters and appliances to keep food warm," Jacquie said.

She also wanted a room where her daughter Tracy and grandchildren Harper, Georgia and Finley could be comfortable and play. Her son Craig is also a frequent visitor, bringing his friends to the home. The terrace room recalls the feeling of an English pub room, with commodious upholstered chairs, game table with leather seating, and built-in book shelves, reminding one of Jacquie's passion for reading.

Jacquie frequently changes the location of her furniture, depending upon her mood, season, the number of guests she is entertaining. The layout of the room allows for that kind of freedom, because the furniture does not need to be placed against a wall, but can "float" in the interior space.

This room also has a fireplace with chairs arranged nearby to take advantage of the pleasure of a fire. On an opposite wall, is a watercolor painting by Fred Place, a for-

mer neighbor of Jacquie when she lived in Furlong. "He retired as an accountant, and began to study painters such as Chester County's Andrew Wyeth," Jacquie informed. "He has become a noted painter of Bucks County scenes, and I am proud to own one of his artworks."

From John's point of view, the terrace room presented construction challenges. The room was actually constructed on an old terrace foundation, which had a gentle curve. "Since we used the old foundation framing members, we had to remember that shape," John said. "Each floor joist had to fit into that curve while remaining true all the way to the roof line."

Installing the windows correctly meant that all the reveals of trim and cornice walls had to be equidistant and balanced. "Each window was treated as a separate entity, then joined mathematically correct with the next, so that the curve was maintained visually," said John.

Getting the terrace room constructed properly was of utmost importance because the view in front of it is reminiscent of an Impressionist painting. Picture a stone wall waterfall with a creek moving lazily behind it, the foliage surrounding it reminding one of Monet's garden at Giverny.

"This stone wall was probably built during the 17th century. The farmers dammed off the stream to create a reservoir as a watering hole for their cattle, but throughout the decades, water was seeping through the stones," said John. The wall was becoming compromised, and both John and Jacquie feared that a severe rainy season with accompanying flooding would cause the wall to become unstable and collapse.

John contracted an excavator who re-diverted the stream and dug up all the dirt that was on the back side of the stone wall. Then the next steps involved installing an epoxy vinyl coated rebar, thus creating a skeletal wall, on which John then applied several feet of special cement for wet walls. The combination of wet cement and tons of topsoil brought in to shore up the wall worked! The stone wall was secure, and John's team repoured the still way.

The job was completed just in time because Bucks County had severe flooding that summer, but not a single stone was dislodged from the wall. John discounts the challenge that the stone wall presented, saying that it was more difficult to get special permits from the EPA because the Cuttalossa Creek is a main tributary to the Delaware River. The fear was that sediment from the construction would go downstream, and an EPA dam specialist had to be consulted. "It took four months of paperwork going back and forth to the dam specialist before we got his approval," said John. "That process seemed more difficult than the actual construction work because the dam specialist seemed more interested in offering us funding to take down the wall, which wasn't what we wanted at all."

The dam specialist earned himself the nickname of "damn specialist," but in the end, John prevailed, and received the necessary permit needed to save the stone wall for the waterfall. Now every window on the backside of the house allows the viewer to relish in the beauty of the water, the sound of the falling waters. John's construction expertise and Jacquie's vision have preserved a Bucks County treasure.

Since the reconstruction involved eliminating, then creating hillside slopes, John leveled off areas surrounding the extended decks and terraces. Huge boulders were hauled to the property, making walls of stone that demarcate the grassy areas while complementing the rustic setting.

Jacquie is effusive in her praise of John, his construction crew, and architect Ralph Fey. "There were many times when the process presented obstacles, but we all worked together toward a common goal," she concluded. "I told John that there would be a Gemmi footprint in Bucks County, and my home is evidence of that."

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