

Last Christmas

Virginia-based designer Josh Hildreth gives his mother a beautiful gift of design.



Interior designer Josh Hildreth likes to say that his mother was his first client. “I was probably six or seven years old when I started moving the furniture in our living room,” he says. The bond they formed over style and design was cemented at an early age and only grew stronger over the years. After his mother, Maureen, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in January of 2019, Josh had the idea in October to revisit her home, apply his professional expertise, and dress it up for the holidays. “She was my mom, but she was also my best friend,” Josh says. “It felt really fitting to be able to do this for her.”

The task at hand required nothing short of holiday magic. Josh’s parents agreed to move out for two weeks so he and his team could get to work. “It was almost like a Hallmark Christmas story,” Josh says. “We had to get the house ready for my parents to come back. I don’t think we’ve ever worked harder to create.”

Built in 1931, the 1,152-square-foot cottage was Maureen’s dream home—a charming cottage with an enchanting garden. “The first time she went through the front door, she walked through the living room and into the dining room where there’s a big window that overlooks this beautiful garden that has a pergola and fountain, and she said, ‘Call your father, we’re buying this house,’” Josh says. So, in 2006, Maureen and Roger Hildreth moved from Chicago, Illinois, to Richmond, Virginia.





The project's two-week time frame put some obvious limitations on the scope and scale of the refresh, but Josh is quick to admit that he called in every possible favor to get it done. "Everyone—whether they knew my mom or not—chipped in to put some extra effort in to make this happen," he says. "It really was something that should have been impossible that we were able to make happen."

For the living and dining rooms, Josh and his team chose to create a large tone-on-tone diagonal checkerboard across the original oak floors, and they hired expert artisan Paul Robson to complete the paint job. "When we finished the floors, it changed the whole feeling of the house," Josh says. "It really gave the house this wonderful lightness that wasn't there before. It made a lot of things my mom had that were being reused feel fresh and brand-new."

"It wasn't just decorating; we needed to do an edit," Josh says. "When you live in 1,152 square feet and you love to go out antiquing and shopping every weekend, your house can turn into a gift shop without realizing it."



The living room's beautiful cathedral ceiling with its antique reclaimed beams gives the space a fantastic feeling of height, and the rock fireplace adorned with a garland of fresh-clipped greenery from the garden and a collection of mismatched family stockings exudes a welcoming warmth.

Glowing with 5,000 warm white lights, the Hildreths' Christmas tree is of the utmost importance. "We tried to maneuver the biggest tree that we could so that we could get every ornament on it. I learned from [my mom] as a child that we don't do trees that match rooms—our Christmas trees tell our family story," Josh says. "This was something that was really special to her. She's someone who would buy a Christmas ornament in July. Her love for Christmas was over the top."

Throughout every decision during the two-week update and overall styling of the house, Josh was sure to keep things personal. "My mom was a deeply sentimental person, so there was no getting rid of everything," he says. "It was very important to her that this refresh was still her house and felt like she lived there."

When decorating for the holidays, Maureen always used fresh greenery. So, Josh gathered clippings from her beloved backyard garden to add a Christmas touch to the mantel, chandeliers, and mirrors.





In a galley kitchen, adding wallpaper that goes up the walls and over the ceiling stretches the room to make it look bigger. Josh used a cream-and-green wallpaper and had Maureen's white cabinets painted in the complementary shade of Card Room Green by Farrow & Ball. He splurged on synthetic ivory, bone-colored cabinet knobs from Chloe Alberry. "It's a trick that immediately elevates the look to something custom," Josh says.



Welcoming his parents back home after the project was completed is a time Josh will always remember. “I will never ever forget the day that she returned to Richmond,” Josh says. “She just was overcome with emotion.” Before she passed away in May of 2020, Maureen was able to have a beautiful last Christmas with her family at home, filled with memories and stories of years past. “I think that’s what it’s all about,” Josh says. “And I think that’s why interior design is so important. The whole process of making something beautiful for someone—it can’t take the [sickness] away, but it can make the day better, and it can make life feel a little bit warmer and cozier. I feel like I gave [my mom] the very best thing I could have given her.”

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