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MAKEOVER

Through the help of friends, professionals and volunteers, a Lynden single mother's house becomes a sanctuary



BEFORE: Shannon Waterman sits amid the clutter of her desk in her living room and plays with Minnie in November. A few weeks later, friends, volunteers and businesses would pitch in to de-clutter and re-decorate the home for Waterman, who needed help after her husband Paul died in May and she became a single mother of two young girls *MAME BURNS HERALD PHOTO*



AFTER: (From left) Personal organizer Julie Clarke, Shannon Waterman and decorator Misty Thomas sit in the living room of Waterman's Lynden-area home. Clarke and Thomas marshaled donations and a small army of volunteers to make over the house on a budget of \$554. Without everyone's generosity, the project would have cost \$5,265. *COURTESY PHOTO*

"I just don't know where to begin," Waterman told Clarke. "I'm just so overwhelmed everywhere I look."

SCALED-DOWN LIFE

He was her organizer. They met while working at a Christian youth group in Bellevue. Paul Waterman was a tall and introspective man who loved his Lord. He and Shannon married in 1993 and traveled to Spain to work at a Christian youth camp and to near Tijuana, Mexico, to serve as missionaries before settling in Bellingham.

Then he was stricken with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was diagnosed in October 2003. He went into the hospital in March and died in May. He was 36.

Waterman took her husband's life insurance money and bought a small house with a big yard so her two young girls could run around and learn how to be children again.

But staying organized was never her thing. Nor decorating. Especially after Paul's death, when the grief turned her days into a fog, and she became a single parent.

"The biggest thing about being disorganized and on top of that being a single mom and missing my organizational husband, I just notice that I waste a lot of time trying to find things," Waterman says in the days leading up to the makeover.

The papers piled up. So did the dishes and laundry. It was more important that her girls were fed and their clothes were clean.

"You very much learn to scale down your expectations of what life should look like," Waterman says.

But she yearned to make their 1,000-square-foot house into a home.

FELL INTO PLACE

Going into the makeover, Clarke and Thomas had a \$554 budget. Since they didn't have a lot of money to spend on furniture or other decorations they worked with what Waterman already owned.

Waterman could spare \$154. Her best friend's family donated \$200. The girls' preschool teacher Kodi Aubert collected \$200 from her family and put it into the pot. Then with Clarke and Thomas' organization, the pieces fell into place.

"When people heard the story of her situation they were like, 'That's cool,'" and jumped in to help, Thomas says.

That included businesses like Bellingham-area Custom Closets. In late November before the main reorganization began, they installed a closet system in Waterman's bedroom, one in a hallway off the kitchen, and in the coat closet in the foyer, where they put up shelves and a hanging bar down low so it was at kid level.

"They worked incredibly hard," Waterman says.

COMING HOME

Waterman and the girls were out of their home shortly after 9 a.m. on Dec. 3.

Her sister, 31-year-old Kelly Fisher, was among the group who stayed all day Friday to clean up. Fisher also helped sort through her sister's things, telling the organizers what could go and what could stay.

Meanwhile, Waterman enjoyed a pedicure at Zazen Salon Spa in Bellingham.

At noon, a friend took Waterman to lunch at the Olive Garden. Then she ran errands before picking up her girls from school at 3:15 p.m. Next, they headed to the Best Western Lakeway Inn for the night, the girls splashing around in the pool while Waterman relaxed in the hot tub.

The next morning, they ordered breakfast - "It's a special treat to go out to breakfast because it doesn't happen very often," Waterman says

Meanwhile, volunteers, Clarke and Thomas returned to the family's house.

As Fisher cared for the girls and their puppy, Minnie, Waterman returned to Zazen for a manicure, a foot soak, a facial, a massage and a haircut. "I got quite the

treatment," she says.

At 2:30 p.m., while friends did one last wipe-down of doors and counters, Clarke's husband, Steve, who is the principal at Bellingham High School, showed up to check out the results. Within minutes, he was leading efforts to clean and organize the garage, which was so crammed with things you couldn't walk through it, so Waterman could park her van inside.

"They found treasures in the garage. Let me get my hammer and nails," Thomas, 50, said, as she hustled by, carrying two prints found in the garage. "They were laughing at me out there because I got all excited."

Thomas hung one print, which showed two girls at the beach in Waterman's room.

At 3:20 p.m., the garage had nearly been cleared. "Way to go, guys," Julie Clarke crowed.

At 3:24 p.m., more treasure.

"Misty, Paul's guitar stand!" Clarke said.

Thomas grabbed the stand, cleaned it, and propped up the guitar that had been leaning against a wall in the living room.

At 4 p.m., Waterman walked through the front door to a home that had been cleaned up, de-cluttered and decorated with simple touches.

A smaller table replaced a larger one that had hogged space in the tiny dining room. Prints hung on what had been bare, desolate walls. Scads of baskets and plastic containers - many of them labeled - helped organize everything from towels to paperwork to crafts items. Even the freezer had been packed with meals donated by Mealtime Solutions.

Clarke and Thomas walked a stunned and nearly speechless Waterman through her home, explaining what they'd done along the way.

"It's beautiful. Oh, thank you so much," she said, hugging friends and volunteers, and blinking away tears.

"So, are you a little overwhelmed?" asked Connie Dyer, the mother of Shannon's best friend.

"It's like a home you want to come home to," Waterman said.

SANCTUARY

One month later, those involved still ride a wave of good feelings.


"I was pleased. I was just tickled," Thomas says of the results.

For Clarke and Thomas, the makeover has been an uplifting blast. They remain excited about the way businesses and friends helped and recall still the breathy wonder of Waterman's little girls.

As for Waterman, she says it felt good to decorate for Christmas in a space that had been organized.

"I didn't feel like I was adding more clutter to the room," she says. "I felt like I was accenting."

As for the made-over rooms, they've all been enjoyable in different ways. But Waterman especially likes eating at the smaller table in the dining room. "We're sitting closer to each other and that's nice."

 Plus, the smaller table is less of a magnet for mail and other things. She's trying to follow Clarke's admonishment that you should touch paper just once before putting it away. It's a lesson Waterman says she's trying to share with her girls.

On the day before she flies to Arizona to walk a half-marathon to raise money for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (maybe one day "another family won't have to lose somebody") she talks about how it felt to come home on Dec. 4.

That night, maybe the next, she rented a movie - just for herself.

She sat, freed from the stuff that had piled around her like nagging reminders, and she relaxed for the first time in months.

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