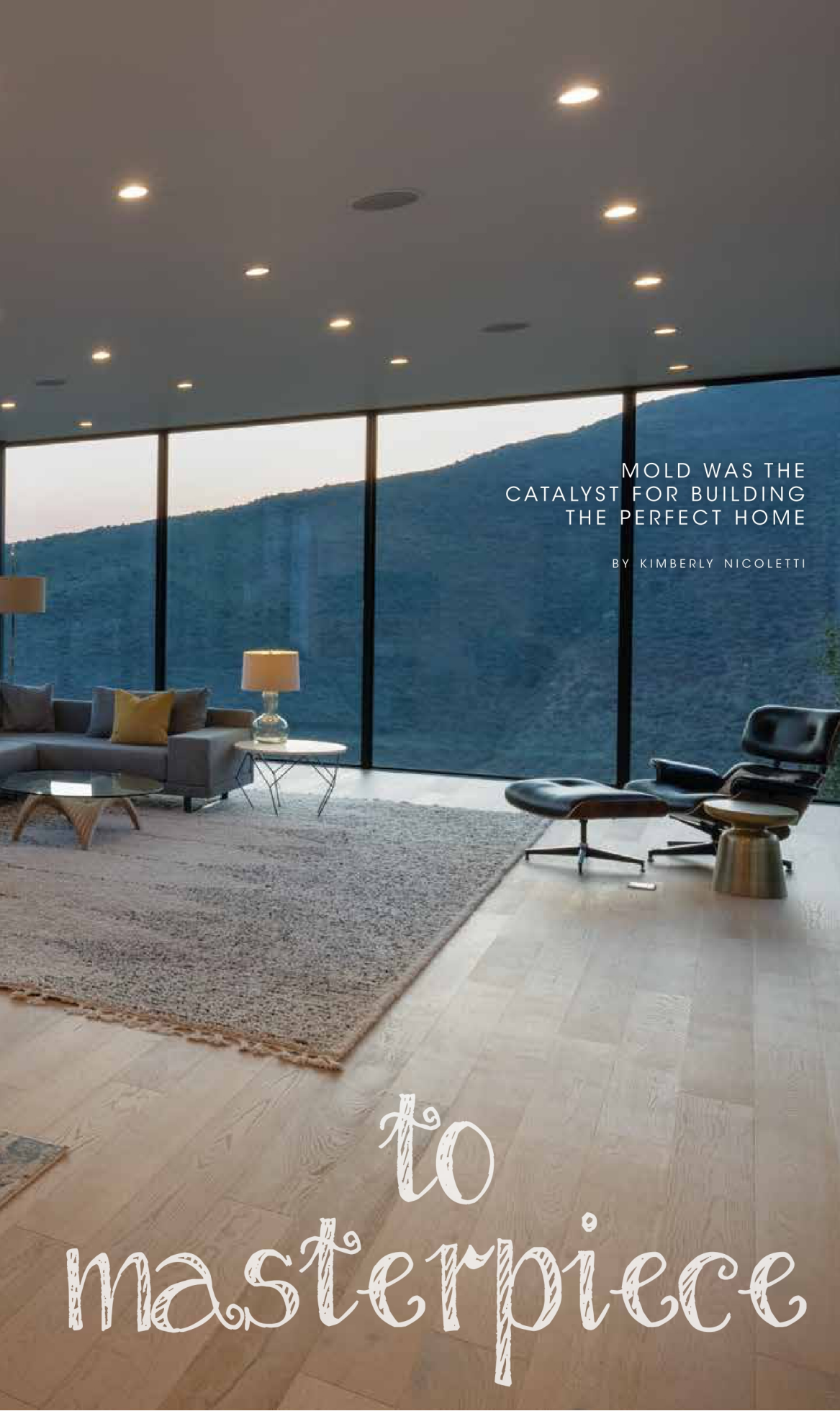


# from Mold



PHOTO BY RIC STOVALL



## MOLD WAS THE CATALYST FOR BUILDING THE PERFECT HOME

BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI

to  
masterpiece

Here is a Finnish word, “sisu,” which entails passion and beauty and loosely translates to: extraordinary determination in the face of extreme adversity, and courage when the outcome seems unlikely. In English, we tend to call that grit. But whether you call it grit or sisu, Neil and Caroline Stewart had the stuff in spades.

In late 2017, the Stewarts purchased a home in Wildridge with fabulous views. They planned to renovate it in phases — with new floors, bathrooms, windows and a kitchen — while they lived in it.

“We knew it was going to be a big project, but nothing structural,” Neil says. “But then the builders started pulling tiles off our son’s bathroom and discovered some mold behind the walls. They cut holes in the drywall in the kids’ bedroom and there was mold there. When we touched the outside of the wall, it was wet.”

They found a foundation leak in the basement, and when they removed the upstairs ceiling, they saw mold in the attic. Over a six-month period, they continued to remove drywall from other parts of the home and found more mold.

Unfortunately, they were almost \$200,000 into the remodel when they discovered the extent of the home’s mold.

“Mold specialists told us, ‘don’t live here, it’s full of mold,’” Neil says. “They surgically removed all the drywall, bit by bit. You could see it on the exterior sheathing and framing. Eventually, there was nothing left standing but a frame. With every piece of the onion we pulled back, it got worse and worse. It was a systemic problem in the house, not just in one part.”

As the frame was exposed in the hunt for the mold, structural engineers also determined that the house hadn’t been built correctly, and would need to be fixed structurally.

By September 2018, the Stewarts had decided to tear down the entire house to the foundation because experts said it would be quicker and a bit less expensive. During the renovation, the family needed to rent — something they hadn’t budgeted for and couldn’t easily



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afford — because mold was releasing harmful toxins called mycotoxins.

“It was a tough time,” Caroline says. “We — including our 140-pound dog — were lucky to find a rental house in the middle of ski season.”

To add to the pressure, they faced the uncertainty of having enough money to rebuild or trying to sell the torn-down home as a construction site. And, it wasn't easy on their then-7-year-old, either.

But, the Stewarts and their professional team — made up of architect Brian Sipes of Sipes Architects, Alex Coleman of Coleman Custom Homes and Olivia Grayson of Grayson + Christie Interior Design — looked at every detail to value engineer the project.

“There's no way we could have gotten it done without them bending over backwards,” says Neil. “Without Brian, Alex and Olivia we

wouldn't have been in the house we are today. The entire team helped do this in a cost-effective manner through budgets and spreadsheets. We paid attention to every single detail, from the in-ceiling lights to tiles and outlets.”

#### **Working together to rebuild**

It's probably no coincidence that their architect, Sipes, owner of Sipes Architects in Minturn, chose Sisu Design Group as the legal name for his business. Along with the others, he and his team embodied the spirit of “sisu” as they redesigned and rebuilt the Stewarts home in 13 months. And, even though it used the original foundation, it couldn't have been more different than the original house.

Before, the home's small windows didn't capture the stunning views of the valley, which dropped to June Creek, 800 feet below. Sipes moved

the deck, which blocked the view, and extended the great room 10 feet, cantilevering it so that portion is literally suspended in the air. As people stand at the edge of the great room, punctuated by 270-degree views via floor-to-ceiling glass walls, it's similar to the feeling of flying that Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet depicted in “Titanic.”

“You almost get vertigo walking to the end because you literally feel like you might launch off into space,” Sipes says.

“It feels like you're floating over the valley,” adds Caroline.

Other rooms, like the master bedroom and the office, also highlight 270-degree views and provide the suspended-in-space feeling.

“We looked for opportunities in the project,” he says. “We were constrained two-dimensionally on the ground (with the original

foundation), but where and how we went up was not as limited and allowed us to capture new views the original home ignored.” Sipes says, adding that the new design captures views of Beaver Creek on the upper level's second bedroom that you can't see from the lower level.

The old house also had multiple strange level changes. Upon entering, people walked down stairs and walked through the dining room, which then went down four steps to the living room. The dining room led down a half level to the secondary bedrooms or up a level to the master.

“All of the level changes created very strange ceiling heights that were backwards,” Sipes says, explaining that ceilings transitioned from 12 feet to 8 feet as they reached the exterior views — the opposite of a good design.



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Clean lines, pops of color and natural light grace all of the secondary baths. Parametric wall art, by Highline Wood Art, perfectly complements the clean lines of the home and was created by Neil Stewart, the owner. The windows in the kitchen capitalize on the extensive view. There's a spacious mudroom with adjoining laundry room.*

**TO SEE NEIL'S  
PARAMETRIC WALL  
ART, VISIT:**

***instagram.com/highlinewoodart  
or contemporarydiy.com***



*As seen in the "before" pictures, above, an elevator interrupted the space and blocked the view from the entry, a wrap-around deck, small windows and a large fireplace prevented the full appreciation of the spectacular views, and while the master bedroom was large, individual components such as the vanity were oddly small. The new master bathroom is spacious and inviting. The living room, left, is cantilevered so it seems to float over the mountain.*

“  
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“Former architects ignored, or didn’t give, the views the full level of respect,” he says.

An elevator, added after the old home was built, was shoehorned into the main living space, further cutting off views and causing a 20 x 15 foot space that was only 4 ½ feet tall. With its beautiful hardwood floor and short ceiling, the family dubbed it the “pixie ballroom.”

Now, a huge mudroom and laundry room sits off the side of the foyer, which flows into the kitchen, living room and dining room, without level changes. Downstairs, where two tiny bedrooms with low ceilings and some under-utilized spaces originally sat, Sipes created a family room with a higher ceiling and a guest suite with a bedroom and living space plumbed for a wet bar along with a full bath. Glass sliding doors in the new family room open to an outdoor living area, with shade provided by the great room’s overhang.

### Clean and modern

Caroline grew up in England and Neil grew up in Northern Ireland; both lived in Scotland before moving to the States 11 years ago, so they prefer a clean, European aesthetic.

One of the most striking elements when guests walk in the front door is the 120 linear feet of floor-to-ceiling glass, reaching 9 feet high from the foyer, into the kitchen and great room. European white oak grounds the floor. White countertops and white cabinets with frosted glass and no handles lend a sleek, modern look to the kitchen, which includes a 16 x 8-foot island. By the sink, a window instead of a backsplash overlooks the yard, and the orange faucet gives the room a splash of color.

“I like the clean lines and the unfussiness of it,” says Caroline. “It feels very calming to me. I don’t feel crowded in.”

A floating staircase extends to the second floor, with thick, butcher-block treads. A sculptural, parametric art piece — made by Neil — near the floating staircase adds another pop of color.

“We focused on space, not things,” Caroline says. “We focused on the beauty, the surroundings we have. That’s what’s important to us: the space we live in. The minimalist, clean lines and contemporary European style is all about capitalizing on the views we have.”

In order to stay within an already stretched budget, Neil ended up building his own furniture. He even built a CNC machine to create the parametric wall.

“This approach was born of necessity because the mold caused them to spend more on the home than they intended,” Sipes says. “Neil is an amazing guy who doesn’t let anything stand in his way, and so he just decided to learn how to

build furniture that he didn’t have the budget to buy.”

“Yes, it was a horrible situation and an incredibly stressful two years, but for anyone to look at the house and hear how it almost bankrupted us, it feels disingenuous,” Neil says. “We ended up with a great house. ... Looking back, the only thing we didn’t like was that we didn’t know where our last dollar was coming from, but we would do it all again, paying attention to all the details.”

Without the mold problem, the Stewarts would have ended up with a very nice remodel, but it wouldn’t have been the gorgeous home they have today.

“It was the catalyst to a better design and to a new way of taking ownership of the home by the clients, including making their own furniture and art,” Sipes says. “The story is one of resilience and perseverance and how they ultimately shape a better outcome, and it all started with the mold.” **vvh**