



# ONE EXTREME RANCH HOUSE

ON FEBRUARY 1, ONE OKLAHOMA FAMILY RECEIVED A LIFE-CHANGING KNOCK ON THEIR FRONT DOOR. TY PENNINGTON, HOST OF ABC'S REALITY-TELEVISION SHOW "EXTREME MAKEOVER: HOME EDITION," GREETED BRIAN AND AUDRA SKAGGS AND INFORMED THEM THAT IN 106 HOURS, THEY WOULD BE LIVING IN A BRAND NEW HOME!

By Amy Dee Stephens



PHOTOS BY JUSTIN SHOTTON

## EXTREME HOME

"We were so excited," said Audra. The kids were screaming and jumping up and down. They watch the show, so they knew a little about what was going on."

That morning, the Skaggs were living in a small house, a converted general store from the 1920s, located at the border of Lexington and Slaughterville, Okla. The home's gray paint looked gloomier than usual against the backdrop of fog and ice-laden branches. The bleakest part of the picture, however, was the mold hidden inside the house – mold that compromised the health of their youngest child.

In 2007, the Skaggs' infant son suffered multiple cardiac arrests. Jhett underwent a miraculous heart transplant, which required constant, expensive care. The family struggled to pay medical bills and maintain home repairs on the salary of a cattle rancher and pre-school teacher.

But one cold week and 50,000 volunteer-hours later, Jhett, his sister Merit and his parents were surrounded by a camera crew and a freezing-but-jubilant crowd yelling, "Move that bus!"

When the bus rolled away, the Skaggs saw their new ranch house for the first time. The family cheered, cried and danced.

Ten minutes later, the atmosphere went strangely quiet. The camera crew relocated, the crowd drifted off, and Pennington privately escorted the Skaggs up the long

walkway to see the interior of their house – a secret from the public until the show aired on March 14.

The inside design is spacious; an open floor plan of earthy materials and rustic colors. Like the traditional ranch-style homes of the 1950s, the floors are brick or wood, with an occasional wall of rock and exposed ceiling beams. The organic look fits well with the Skaggs' western décor, but will also help keep the home clean and healthy for their immune-compromised toddler.

Large kitchen and living spaces flow naturally into one another. Even the halls and doorways are unusually wide, which was no accident; it was a conscious decision by architect Mack Caldwell of Ideal Homes, the company that sponsored the building project.

"It was important to me to provide disability access in the house," Caldwell said. "No one is in a wheelchair now, but it might occur in the future."

Additionally, Caldwell was aware that the sheer number of volunteers working on the house would require extra "elbow room," and camera crews would need unobstructed views for filming.

Although the Skaggs family was whisked off to Disney World for the week, the design crew had time to speak with Audra about her preferences for the home. Her main request?

"Anything new! We've been getting along with second-hand things, just trying to be comfortable," Audra said. "The kids were concerned about all their toys being transferred to the new house, though."

"From interviewing her and touring the original home, it was easy to see what was really special to them," said celebrity guest designer Jillian Harris (previously seen on *The Bachelorette*). "I could tell she had a rustic cowboy taste, with a polished charm."

Many of the finishing touches, both new and previously-owned pieces, reflect the Skaggs' western taste. Light fixtures are hammered metal and iron. The kitchen backsplash and



*The Skaggs' new home*



Volunteers



PHOTO BY AMY DEE STEPHENS



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Above: Ty Pennington, Brian Skaggs, Audra Skaggs holding Jhett, Merit Skaggs, Michael Moloney, Jillian Harris, viewer volunteers Tanya Medina and her son, Santino



Living room with teal and Indian red accents

dining room chair rail are lined with pressed copper. Seating and side tables are covered in cowhide. Brian's hats, ropes and belt buckles from his various cattle shows are sprinkled among the décor, paying homage to his life's career.

Jillian also found inspiration in the pale teal dishes from Audra's kitchen. It's a color found throughout the house, often paired with Indian red in the fabrics, artwork and wall treatments. According to Betsy Loffland, a local designer with Celebrating Home who donated pottery, glassware and frames to the house, "Teal and turquoise are this year's hot new colors in home decorating."

The exterior of the ranch house makes a bold color statement as well. The shutters and garage door are painted in neon turquoise, then dry-brushed to give them an antique

look. Against the prairie backdrop, it lends a splash of color that is unexpected, yet appropriate.

Another non-traditional touch to the exterior is the raised roofline. Originally, the Extreme Makeover producers asked architects to create a Texas-style look to the front, with a low-pitch metal roof.

"We had to persuade them otherwise," said Caldwell. "First, this isn't Texas; we also had concerns about ice and weather damage."

Considering the ice and snow covering the ground throughout the construction process, it was a reasonable request. Photographs taken of the Skaggs family, standing in the frozen field on that first day, are placed in every room of the house, a constant reminder that living on an active

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ranch means working in harsh conditions; but also a reminder that over 3,000 people volunteered their time in such conditions to make life a little sunnier for this family.

Perhaps the sunshine that week spilled over into the kids' rooms. Both are brightly colored and quite different from the cowboy décor elsewhere.

Merit, the Skaggs' 5-year-old daughter, now lives in her own color-by-number room.

"She's a really creative girl who likes to color and draw," said Tosha Davis of AveryElla Mural Painting. "Her bed is a set of crayons and her chair looks like a paint can overflowing with pink paint."

Jillian Harris, the lead designer on the room, included plenty of worktables and display boards for Merit's artwork. Merit also loves animals, especially giraffes, which inspired the giraffe bedside table. Harris, who has a special fondness for the Skaggs' daughter, was helping Davis paint the table up to the last minute when the family arrived for the unveiling.

Davis also worked with show designer Michael Moloney to create the finishing touches for Jhett's dinosaur-inspired room. The goal was to create a pre-historic wonderland for the 2-year-old, but to cartoonize the dinosaurs so they wouldn't look mean or scary.

Before finalizing the room, Moloney visited the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History in Norman, Okla. to meet with Kyle Davies, Fossil Preparator. Davies helped Moloney get a close-up view of the dinosaurs from angles that museum visitors are usually unable to see. As a result, Jhett now sleeps on a fairly-accurate, soft-sided pentaoceratops bed, complete with gradual



steps that provide easy access for the toddler.

The final bedroom, Brian and Audra's master suite, was designed by Ty Pennington. He created a calm atmosphere, using the pale teal color on the walls, and accenting the room with wooden furniture and pieces from the Skaggs' original house.

At the edge of the bed lay

a hand-made quilt of heart blocks, sewn by local quilters, many with children who also have heart problems. A painted mural on the opposite wall mimics the quilt pattern on a much larger scale.

Pennington found the bedroom's headboard to be a fitting place for his crowning touch – a decorative heart.

"That heart symbolizes the fact that they almost lost their little boy," said Pennington, "but because someone gave their heart [as an organ donor], he's still here today."

Brian and Audra were quick to pick up on the heart's significance when they saw their bedroom for the first time. "The heart is a symbol of everything we've been through," said Audra.

Brian agreed, "The heart, that's the icing on the cake."

Now, instead of living in a crumbling general store, the Skaggs are safe in a mold-free house, complete with a state-of-the-art air-filtration system. That's an extreme change for this family, and Jhett's parents find great comfort in knowing that they now live in a healthy environment.

So how is it that a house constructed and designed by thousands of people in one week could look both beautiful and completely pulled together? Maybe it's because the theme of the house is clear: It's all about heart.

