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Personal Property

Beaver County couple spent years building dream home

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The "Graystone" residence was named for the Belgian brick from which it was constructed.



Valerie Tatalovich stands next to the self-supporting staircase in the entrance of her home in Center, Beaver County.

Valerie and Wayne Tatalovich deserve a lot of credit for designing the structure that became their Belgian brick castle in Beaver County. Excavator Joe Hall says Valerie Tatalovich's vision of the project was so good that, "You'd have thought she was in this business 20 years, the way she handled things. Whenever you'd come up with a problem, she would just carry on."

Aliquippa's Bob Goodwald, who did the framing work, agrees — he even thinks the Tataloviches were a little forward-looking. "In the past 10 years, a lot of houses have begun to look like theirs. But then, the roof had a lot more complexity than other jobs."

The couple say they probably couldn't afford to buy a similar home today. What they have now meets everything they had wanted.

"We were hoping that if we were real lucky we could build a house that wouldn't look too new," says Valerie Tatalovich, an interior designer who took her skills in a new direction when planning the home. "And I think we have."

The couple had to deal with floods of rain-soaked clay during construction, lights dangling from wires until the right chandelier came along, changing the angle of a roof to take advantage of an attractive beam and adding walls when material became available.

"I think we worked on that place seven and a half months, six days a week," says Hopewell's Peter Asvestas, who did masonry work on the Center home with Kenny D'Antonio from Aliquippa. "I worked on some smaller walls with Belgian block, but never a project that big."

The self-designed 5,500-square foot home has many personal touches, says Wayne Tatalovich, 66, Beaver County coroner and owner of two funeral homes. "When we built this, we did it for ourselves. We didn't have resale in mind."

For example, the big home has a massive master suite but only two other bedrooms. What could be a fourth is Valerie Tatalovich's 26-by-20-foot office. She owns VMT and Associates interior design firm and is in the process of opening another in West Palm Beach, FL. The clients' entrance to her second-floor office is via a staircase through the garage. The living quarters are not disturbed.

The home is called "Graystone." Although the word is emblazoned on the posts at the entrance to the 4½-acre property, there's no real meaning, the couple says. "The stones were gray at the time," Valerie Tatalovich says with a chuckle. "Maybe I would have called it something different if I knew the stones would turn tan." The home was conceived when the Tataloviches, married in 1988, were living in a three room apartment in Aliquippa and decided they wanted a house. Valerie Tatalovich, 54, says they were getting frustrated at finding a home that satisfied them, so they turned to building their own. That meant finding property. A search led to a wooded lot in Center.

"It was pretty dense here, and you couldn't even see the angle of the hillside," she says about the lot that slopes from the front. "We used to come out here with a picnic lunch, sit there and try to figure out where to put the house."

She began taking her interior design talents outside. Her idea for the home was given logistical life by contractors such as Goodwald, of D&G Contracting. "She would show me what she wanted, and I would tell her how to frame it," he says.



Wayne Tatalovich shoots pool in the family room.

And those ideas sometimes changed, she points out. For instance, when she saw how good one beam looked in the second floor, she asked Goodwald whether there was a way to keep it visible. That led him to raise the ceiling a little.

The Tataloviches also had to deal with land that was mostly clay. Orange rivers would rush down the hillsides in the rain and, she says, excavator Hall more than once rescued them by directing the flow with a backhoe.

They also had to find masons who could lay the Belgian brick they desired. "Kenny and Pete came out and laid a low wall, and we could see they were the guys we wanted," she says.

D'Antonio says the project was time-consuming because they could lay only a few rows of blocks at a time and then had to work elsewhere while the bricks settled in the mortar.

"When we did that chimney," he says, "we would put maybe two bricks in a steel milk case, pull them up to the chimney with a pulley and put them in place. And then do it over again."

D'Antonio says his son, Kenny Jr., helped at the time. The job took 400 bags of mortar.

"If she saw something she didn't like, we'd have to change it," he says of Valerie Tatalovich. "She was real strict that way."

Ground was broken at the site in October 1989. While work went on around them, the couple moved into the basement in July of the following year and were able to move upstairs in December 1991.

The job wasn't over, however. Goodwald kept doing interior trim work long after the framing was done. The swimming pool — off the family room in the basement — wasn't added for several years.

Ivy in the front of the house had to be planted twice because of hungry deer.



The Tataloviches' swimming pool wasn't added for several years after construction began on the Center, Beaver County home in 1988.

The Tataloviches decline to say how much the project cost; Valerie Tatalovich points out, though, that it was an effort of their two careers. Says her husband, "Let's just say, if we had to replace it, we couldn't."

The house looks large, but the interior space is not overwhelming. Ceiling heights change because of the function of the rooms, Valerie Tatalovich says, going from 10 feet in the living and sitting rooms to about 8 feet in the kitchen.

Space on the second floor is dominated by her office and the master suite, which features a bathroom the size of a guest bedroom. A big tub is in the middle of the room with an enclosed shower to the side.

The two guest bedrooms share a hallway bath, but there is space available to add a bath to one of the guest rooms or to connect the other bedroom to the bath that is there. "You're never finished with a house," Valerie Tatalovich says, admitting that changes always are possible.

The two, though, basically are finished with their plans for it. Their thoughts on the home are summarized on a beam separating the two halves of the large family area in the basement.

Painted on one side is: "Believe in your dreams for they can come true." The other side answers: "Graystone was a dream and God saw it through."