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HGTV spotlights renovation of South Side row house

BY JONATHAN BARNES

In 2005, Blue Tomato Design owner Kim Collins planned to refurbish a century-old South Side row house into a home and studio boutique for her graphic and web design company. Months into the project, she was living there without plumbing, climbing a ladder to get to her bedroom and realizing what she'd undertaken.

"I thought it would be fun," she said.

Despite having few construction skills, with some help from her father and a few others, Collins managed to transform the dilapidated house into a sleek, modern space. HGTV producers liked her story so much that they recently filmed the designer at her Wharton Street boutique for the program, "My House is Worth What?"

Collins was picked for the show after sending in an audition tape and hearing from HGTV producers the next day.

Richard Wells, segment producer for the show, said that after seeing Collins' tape, HGTV was sold.

"We consider the personality of the homeowner, as well as the space. Kim's got a great story, and a really great presence," Wells said.

The renovation had its problems, including an unreliable masonry contractor who didn't properly repair a brick wall. A heating/ventilation contractor left her heating system unfinished.

While ripping up the first floor, she found the joists rotten and sitting on dirt. Foundations had never been set for the floor, which tied into the brick structure. After digging and setting a foundation and rebuilding the floor, Collins installed wide-plank red oak flooring.

The project had its quirks.

The weekend before Collins moved in, another homesteader broke into the place, and slept on the floor on a piece of fiberglass insulation next to Collins' hammer.

While she was tearing out the concrete in the courtyard, she found a large bone embedded in the slab. It looked human so she asked the people next door at the prosthetics company to check it out.



Kim Collins spent 18 months renovating her studio boutique in South Side, Pittsburgh.

They said it could be a human femur, so she called the Pittsburgh Police. They took the bone and later told her it wasn't human, but she's unconvinced.

Collins didn't tell her father, Jamestown, New York contractor John Collins, she bought the house until three months after she closed on it. Collins was afraid her father would tell her she shouldn't have bought the house.

"She had it in her mind that she wanted her own house," John Collins said. "With determination and energy, she just pushed forward."

The renovation took 18 months. An initial investment of \$42,000 for the house was increased by \$65,000 spent on contractor's fees and construction materials. Collins hopes to have the 1,100-square-foot home valued at \$200,000 for the show.

"I was a single girl in a tough situation, but I stuck it out," she said. "Now, I feel like I can do anything."

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