

HOW RICHMOND LIVES
R·HOME

Rooms With a View

BY SANDE SNEAD

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Faison School benefit offers glimpses of fine art and elegant interior design

Walking into the Hanover County home of Markel CEO Alan Kirshner and his wife, Deb Mihaloff Kirshner, is a delight. Windows line the walls of nearly every room, providing uninterrupted views of their 185-acre internationally acclaimed Arabian horse-racing and -breeding farm, Cre Run (Creating Runners).

There are no window treatments here. And the rooms are not overdone. The floors are Jerusalem limestone, selected for its neutrality, and also for ease of cleaning muddy boot and paw prints. This is a working farmhouse with two resident Rhodesian Ridgebacks who have the run of the place.

The interior is elegantly appointed, however. It's the culmination of nearly two years of weekly meetings with interior designer Robert Rentz, who helped the Kirshners furnish their 15,000-square-foot Mediterranean-style house just in time for the 2004 Autism Center of Virginia Art Gala.

"Things went very smoothly, and we finished the project a week before the gala," says Rentz. "There was a lot of good fun involved."

The fourth annual art gala will be held on April 16 at the Kirshners' farm again this year — the last at this venue for a while. A cocktail reception will be held in the Kirshners' home before the gala for all sponsors. These guests will get a chance to see the handiwork of architect Alex Engart and builder Tony Pitts, as well as local artisans and craftsmen who had a hand in various aspects of the home's construction. The front door to the house, the staircase banister and the furniture in Alan's office were created by local furniture designer Maurice Beane. The kitchen cabinets were designed and built by Vangarde Woodworks and are made of wormy chestnut reclaimed from old barn siding and timbers from West Virginia. Vangarde also constructed the 10-foot wormy chestnut door that separates the main kitchen from the caterers' kitchen.

Opening to an elegant dining room and an unusual kitchen, the home's great room is centrally located.

Here, as in most rooms of the house, the color is neutral, to blend with the setting and allow for bringing in the outdoors. You can see horses grazing in a pasture from one window and running down the backstretch of the racetrack from another.

“We used warm earth tones and woods that were rich and warm such as the wormy chestnut of the kitchen cabinets and entertainment center,” Rentz explains. “The fireplace mantel in the family room is made of cypress, and the beams are heart pine. These are all materials you would find on their farm.”

The Kirshners are major art collectors, and a variety of styles can be seen throughout their home, including the work of equine artists such as Edwin Gogucki, Judy Norquist and Antoine de la Boulay, as well as artists from Wolf Kahn to Sally Mann.

Furnishings are comfortable and overstuffed. A pair of sofas is situated perpendicular to the fireplace, and two swivel chairs face it. A huge square table serves as a coffee table and features a bronze horse sculpture created by Norquist. Also here is a hurricane candle lamp.

The mantelpiece is a gift from Mother Nature. When Hurricane Isabel took down cypress trees on the farm, the Kirshners asked Vangarde's craftsmen to create a mantelpiece from the wood. A Ray Kass painting hangs over the mantel.

Antiques were found locally, and much of the furniture was special-ordered to fit a particular space, such as Deb's desk.

“It's a reproduction of an old piece that we found, but the antique desk didn't have drawers, and I wanted drawers, so Bob had it made,” Deb said. “I use it to take notes on what the mares are doing — what time they lay down, what time they got up.”

With television monitors in every room of the house (including bathrooms), the Kirshners keep a close watch on their award-winning horses. Deb frequently pulls all-night foal watches.

Deb's desk features a computer monitor that can also be used for foal watching, in addition to books, figurines and a bronze racehorse lamp by Jonathan Moeller called “They're Off.”

“The great room is our favorite room of the house because it is beautiful and you can really see from one end of the farm to the other from the windows,” Deb says. “The wormy chestnut cabinetry in the kitchen and in the television cabinetry gives the room a real warmth. It really makes you feel you are a part of nature.”

The Kirshners supplemented new acquisitions with their existing treasures,

including Arabian-horse trophies, equestrian mementos and items they have gathered in their travels. Deb collects Italian pottery that fits well with much of the house, given that the design was inspired in part by a trip to Positano, Italy.

"We stayed in a monastery," Deb said. "The stone you can see coming out of plaster on the back patio was designed to give the Old World feel we saw there."

Terraced flower beds and two herb gardens are located just outside the dining room doors. The patio looks out over the lower courtyard with a water fountain that was given to Deb for her birthday by her parents and sister. She dubbed it her "fountain of youth." Future plans call for a swimming pool out back and a water feature out front.

The most formal room in the house is the dining room, which features a glass-top table with two round stone bases and Italian wood-frame upholstered chairs.

A contemporary fiber-optic chandelier is made of hand-tied clear and amber Swarovski crystals. Dutch artist Tord Boontje crafted the chandelier with more than 200 lights.

Another focal point here is a painting of two of the Kirshners' race fillies commissioned from Poland's Andrew Zemplinski, whom the couple considers one of the greatest equine painters in the world. Zemplinski will come to their home sometime in the near future to touch up the painting and to seal it.

"The painting wasn't here for the gala last year, so that will be something new for people to see this year," Deb notes. "It is so realistic-looking that people want to touch the horses."