



ONE COUPLE LEAVES  
THE CORPORATE  
WORLD BEHIND TO  
DISCOVER WHAT MAKES  
THEM TRULY HAPPY.

the  
pursuit  
of  
happiness

Neutral furnishings put bright accents and a bold painting in the spotlight. "The beige on the walls throughout the house is the most amazing paint," homeowner Kat Liebschwager says. "It looks great with every color." She even used it to paint the walls of her store.

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For Mike and Kat Liebschwager, life's too short for a career you don't love. After the unexpected death of Mike's mother, the pair left decades of corporate employment behind—Kat for interior design and Mike to launch Re-Bike, a nonprofit that rebuilds bicycles for underprivileged children. Thanks to Kat's success and Mike's business background, they also opened Ruth & Ollie, a home store in their Richmond, Virginia, neighborhood where the two marry their talents and tastes. Kat calls herself eclectic. "I love mixing patterns and pieces that have a funky vibe," she says. Mike leans toward the classics—"neutral colors, monotone schemes, and clean lines," he says.

Naturally, the styles mesh in their home as well. In their historic property, classic pieces wear patterned upholstery and walls are neutral, while art and accessories provide the color. "I love mixing traditional with modern and shaking things up a little," Kat says. But no matter the style of the space she's working on, she always follows her own Design Rules to Live By:

**1 Never settle.** "I always explain the 'Gotta Love It' rule to clients before I start a design presentation. If they don't love it, we're not going to put it in their house," Kat says. A house should reflect the personalities and style of the people who live there, not the designer who worked on the project. She and Mike live by the same rule in their home and in the store. "We give each other veto power," she says.

**2 Take risks.** For Kat, one of the fun parts of decorating is taking a step outside the comfort zone. "I want my clients to get butterflies about at least one thing," she says. In their own home, painting the dining room black made Kat and Mike a bit nervous. "But in a good way," she says. "Taking the risk really charged me up as a designer. We thought it would be cool and dramatic and we love the end result."

**3 Consider the big picture.** Be sure to keep design decisions fairly consistent, Kat says. "The colors of a house should look like they go together so that there is nothing jarring as you move through the rooms," she says. In her own home, walls stay fairly neutral, most painted the same warm beige, but accent colors—turquoise, lime green, and orange—move from room to room, even with just an accessory.

**4 A clean slate.** "Every design project includes incorporating furniture [that the clients own and love]," Kat says, "but that doesn't mean the pieces wouldn't work better in another room." She says she likes to begin a project by drawing the area to scale, then sketching in pieces that make the best use of space and give the room the function the client desires. "Then I place existing pieces and build a list of furniture needs," she says.

**5 Trust your gut.** "If something doesn't feel right or you feel like you're settling, don't," Kat says. "It's your house, and you should design it how you want." Coincidentally, Kat's design rules can be translated into rules for a happy life. "We're so glad we took the leap," Mike says.

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Mike Liebschwager coveted Barcelona chairs for years. "I finally sat on one, and it was so uncomfortable. It was terrible—my dream was crushed," he says. Luckily, he found these convincing knockoffs that provide more support.



## hot decor

"Decorating around radiators is a challenge," Kat Liebschwager says. "The first thing you should do is have a cover made for it." With a surface on top, it's easy to make the heating element disappear. Treat taller versions of the fixture as a side table by adding art and accessories like Kat and Mike did, *left*. Top shorter ones with cushions to transform the radiator into a window seat.

Five years ago, a friend discovered the living room's raspberry sofa in a consignment shop and called Kat right away. "She said, 'It's so you.' And it was!" Kat says. "I love that it doesn't have arms—when people gather here, everyone can just pile on."



TOP: Tufted white barrel chairs tone down the bright pink sofa, Kat says. ABOVE: Built-in cubbies tucked beneath the stairs offer display and storage. RIGHT: The couple didn't want a formal living room, so they divided the large space into two distinct seating areas. "We wanted this to be a social gathering place," Kat says.



Painted-black walls, a vintage sideboard, and a red velvet banquette give the dining room distinct personality. "Dining tables are so large, with so much wood—the settee and upholstered chairs really soften the room," Kat says.



## make it yours

Kat has some hard-hitting advice for homeowners—don't ask for your friends' opinions. "No matter what, your home should reflect your personality," Kat says. "It's not always about decorating. It's about lifestyle and how you want to use the room. What's important is that it feels right to you—even if that's a black dining room."



TOP: The 1921 rowhouse's traditional facade drew the Liebschwagers inside. ABOVE: Mike and Kat have found happiness in the world of home design. LEFT: The couple considered enlarging their kitchen, but that would require taking down this three season porch, Kat says. "And I just can't do that!"