

# Lifestyles Home Scene

## Flipping it around



COURTESY PHOTO

The mother-daughter duo of Abby Haug and Shawna Huston remodel homes and properties in Clark and Cowlitz counties.

Local spends time flipping houses all over the county

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At 16 years old, Shawna Huston found herself homeless after her mother died in a car accident. At 21, she remodeled and fixed up a rental she was occupying in exchange for lower rent. Three decades later, Huston would

continue to “spruce up” and update living spaces and homes all around the county, finding her home in many.

“There is something that my friends call a quintessential ‘Shawna House,’” Huston said

about homes she chooses to remodel. “Generally, the home will have a big, beautiful front porch, be a beautiful farmhouse style with a lot of character. Those are signs of what people would call a ‘Shawna House.’”

Huston got her start in remodeling homes not long after she fixed up her rental, and her inspiration to work in real estate goes back even further. When she was a child, she would ride in the back of her parents car as they looked at real estate. While she might not have understood everything her parents were talking about she knew one thing: real estate was exciting and there were opportunities everywhere. Following her rental fixup at 21, Huston

bought a 10-acre parcel of land in La Center and divided the property into two separate 5-acre plots. She sold one of the 5-acre plots and used the funds to put in a well, septic system and build her first “spec-house,” a house you build for profit. Once she was finished, a career was born, and for the next 30 years, Huston would see, do and participate in every part of the remodeling process.

“Buying, selling, designing, flipping. After 30 years, there isn’t much I haven’t seen or done,” she said, mentioning that she has worked on everything from tiny houses to homes with more than five bedrooms.

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COURTESY PHOTO

The home Shawna Huston is currently living in was built around the time of the Great Depression and housed people building the railroad. Huston said the home was in "terrible condition" when she bought it and is hopeful for its future.

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While there are a few aspects that make up a typical "Shawna House," Huston said she has done everything from a small remodel that required just a new paint job, to completely renovating a house from the ground up.

When looking at homes to fix up, Huston uses a two-step process. First, she decides whether or not the project will "pencil out," a phrase she uses to describe whether or not the project will work out financially. To decide whether or not it's worth it, Huston takes into account finances and how much work she is going to need to put into the house. Because Huston does nearly every part of the remodel on her own accord without contractors, some homes can take years to complete. Secondly, Huston takes into account what the house needs and where she is at personally.

"I ask myself, 'do I want to bust my butt right now or just make this a quick flip?'" she said.

Instead of living in a permanent residence and flipping homes on the side, Huston moves into the house she is working on so she is "always there." The home she's currently residing in was built around the time of the Great Depression and is a "four-square with a big solid porch" and has six bedrooms. According to Huston, the Woodland home was built to house workers building the railway that runs through the town in the early 1900s. Huston said it was in "terrible condition" when she bought it a year ago as the home lacked heating as well as having both porches caved in when she bought it. She finally moved into the home in July.

"It's starting to get very cozy now," she said, mentioning that while she's doing the remodeling work, she does everything she can to "not get emotionally attached to the home."

Another "Shawna Special" is the presence of a real wood fireplace or wood stove. Many places Huston chooses to remodel have them already installed, but if they don't, Huston makes sure they do. As to why she does it, Huston said she grew up with wood-fired heating in her home and went to bed with a potato at her feet to keep the bed warm. She wanted those memories in

every house.

"I just love a home that oozes comfort and joy," she said. "I want everyone to feel welcome."

Huston does nearly every single part of the remodeling project on her own. If a house needs tile, she's there to install it. Fresh coats of paint and primer are applied by her as well. Everything down to the foundation is touched by Huston to ensure the final product is perfect.

"I've knocked down so many walls you wouldn't believe," she said.

Even though she does most of the heavy lifting, Huston said her favorite part of working on homes is the design process. She said houses and real estate are her art form and compared a piece of real estate to a blank canvas. She said many people will look at a house and think "what a piece of crap," but Huston said she can see the end product in her mind, no matter the current situation.

"People will come back a year later and see the work I've done and just be blown away," she explained. "In my mind, all I ever see is the end product."

After completing 24 homes in the Clark and Cowlitz county areas, Huston said she isn't done fixing up houses yet, but does hope to eventually retire to a piece of land with property. For now, she is the self-described "queen of the five-year plan" and said she always plans



COURTESY PHOTO

Shawna Huston holds her son, Sean Haug, on the porch in front of one of her favorite projects that she dubs the "Battle Ground Parkway House" in 1999.

out five years in the future. The five-year plan "keeps her on her toes" and holds her accountable for her projects. Some of her favorite projects of years past were an older farmhouse in the Hockinson Area she dubbed "the Original Hockinson Farmhouse" and a project where she worked on a cottage near Lake Merwin with her daughter.

As Huston looks at prospects of retiring from the business, she continues to make a mark in her family. Her daughter, currently abroad in the United Kingdom, seems to have found the same love of real estate as her mother. Huston said her daughter's love of house flipping was inspired by growing up in it. Because the family never had a permanent residence, her kids were used to moving into a house and seeing every aspect of the remodel process.

"They see value in something that no one else wants," Huston said of her children.

As far as permanently settling down in the future, Huston said her dream is to own a large plot of land to stay on with a beautiful house and landscaping. Because she gardens in her free time, she wants her permanent residence to have a place for garden and landscaping work. Most of all, she wants a place where she can enjoy life and create a place where a family can thrive.

"Coming where I came from at 16 and not having those things, it's extremely important to me," she said. "I'm looking for a place where I can enjoy my grandkids and a life well lived."

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