



Photo by Michael Jacobson

After their home was destroyed by an explosion on their farm in March 2007, Angie and Jason Mages unexpectedly had to build a new house on their farm on the Tri-County Road in Union Grove Township.

## Family rebuilds house, shop after farm explosion

By Michael Jacobson

That Angie and Jason Mages needed to build a new house for their family comes as no surprise to anyone who felt the explosion on their farm just over a year ago. In March 2007, their 10-year-old farm shop – apparently due to a cracked fitting on the overhead heater – partially filled with gas and exploded, destroying their house and reverberating for miles.

After the statewide media blitz, the Mageses were left with lots of work: building a new house, rebuilding their shop, cleaning up the debris, and replacing all their other farm buildings, too.

“I’d never planned on building a new house,” said Jason, who moved onto the farm and into the 1970s rambler house with his parents when he was two.

“I guess everyone always dreams of building a new house, but I’d never thought we’d do it,” added Angie. They stayed for one week with relatives and then

found a house to rent, for which they were grateful as there are not a lot of houses available for a short-term rental.

As the fire marshal and insurance adjuster inspected the damage, it took weeks before they could even go into their old house and salvage their personal belongings, including the family photos. Most of their belongings were covered with insulation and broken glass, the amount depending on where it was in the house (i.e. things in closet that stayed shut might be fine, but in a dresser that opened would be difficult to save). They were able to save only a couple pieces of furniture.

Since it took weeks to get back into the house and salvage things, the family used lots of donated clothes and toys from the community. “It was unbelievable,” said Jason of the community’s generosity. “I was pleasantly surprised.”

The decision to build a new house was easy, as the

old house was damaged beyond repair, with ceilings collapsing, walls exposed, etc. “It was pretty obvious,” said Jason. “The garage was falling down. The studs and two-by-fours were sticking through, so you knew it’d had it.”

But they had to wait a few weeks find out about their insurance settlement. Jason began contacting some contractors whom they wanted to use before the settlement was finalized, but they got serious about building a new house when the insurance settlement was confirmed.

“It took a month to find out we had a claim,” said Jason. “It was hard to decide until we knew how much we had to spend,” he added.

Only after the settlement could they start making concrete plans. In a book of house plans, they found one they liked – for a rambler with a full basement – though they did make a few changes. What attracted them to the design was the open floorplan: the

kitchen, living room, and dining room flowing together on the main floor. “One floor living,” Jason called it. “The main living area is up here. We can be all together.”

“I liked the main stuff on one level, as much as possible,” said Jason.

Angie, a stay-at-home mom, can be working in the kitchen or laundry room and still see their four boys – Jacob, 10; Alex, 9; Brett, 5; and Aaron, 3 – watching TV or playing in the living room.

Due to the insurance, the Mageses faced some tighter timelines for rebuilding. Because they wanted to make sure that they met any insurance deadlines and because their displacement cost-of-living, which paid for their rent, ended after six months, they wanted to rebuild quickly.

They also had a second building project: replacing the shop. For that, they used the same foundation, so

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Photo by Michael Jacobson

Angie and Jason Mages chose oak woodwork and trim throughout their new house, including in their kitchen. Angie finds the kitchen island very convenient for breakfasts and quick meals for their four boys.

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it is roughly the same size, though many of the improvements to the shop (that Jason had made over the years to make it more efficient) were incorporated into the initial building of the replacement shop.

They also had to clean up the debris on the farm, fix or replace all the other buildings on the farm (which were all totalled by insurance), and list all their personal items lost by the explosion for their insurance. They spent months making detailed lists of things that had been destroyed, tools in the shop, personal items, etc. “We worked every night and a lot of days on that,” said Jason. They had to list when they bought it, what they paid for it, and what was its current value.

“The house wasn’t so bad because we eventually

had gone through it and looked,” said Angie.

The shop, on the other hand, was harder, as most of the equipment was now burned and unrecognizable or missing altogether. One thing they wish they had done was videotaped the interior of the shop, which would have helped immensely in identifying lost tools.

Like many people, Jason hadn’t really read all the policy details until he needed his insurance, which was replacement coverage. “Overall, we were covered pretty well,” he said.

“I will never complain again when I write a check for insurance,” said Angie.

These hectic early weeks turned into a hectic year for the family. “This last year has just been a blur,” said Jason. “We were pulled in so many directions. We were spread so thin.”

The digging started for their new house in late May, right before Memorial Day; the block was laid over the Memorial Day weekend; the basement was framed in mid-June; floor trusses were put in place and the outside walls in late June; and the rafters, windows, shingles, and siding were installed in July.

They appreciated the fast work by their contractors. “It seemed like they got us in pretty good,” said Jason. “I don’t know if they squeezed us in or what, but we were pretty grateful to get a house.” The family moved into their new house in mid-October.

They built on a new spot, using a second approach to the shop just to the north. “One of the big reasons for that was the time frame,” explained Jason. “We didn’t want to worry about demolishing the old house.” “Everything needed to be replaced anyway,” he added.

They chose a small hilltop for their house, because they wanted a basement. They did end up turning it, to face more east-west, to minimize the amount of fill needed.

Because they were so busy, they hired nearly all the work. They thought about painting but then reconsidered. “The best thing we ever did was hire it done,” said Jason. “We’d probably still be painting a few rooms.”

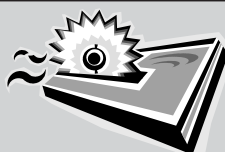
In addition to clean up, insurance paperwork, and farming, they also had to make all the decisions for a new house. Unlike many couples who build, they had not spent any time previously thinking about these decisions.

“Picking out knobs for Pete’s sake,” said Angie of

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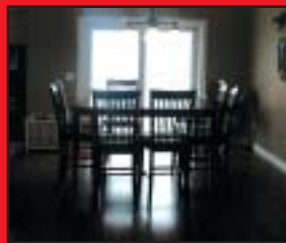
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Photo by Michael Jacobson

Angie and Jason Mages wanted an open floor plan on the main level of their new house, with the living room (left) flowing into the dining room (back), and to the kitchen (at right, not shown).

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all the decisions. “Picking out plug-ins. There are a couple spots where we wish we had plug-ins. Some of these small things get forgotten.”

When it comes to siding, added Jason, there is steel, vinyl, and cement board siding. Then you have to choose the color. Then the shade!

Their builders helped with lots of ideas, treated them very well, and they relied on their expert advice. “They did a pretty good job of watching over us,” said Jason.

“They were very good about accommodating us,” agreed Angie.

For instance, their builder suggested that they widen the curved hallway to the two back bedrooms on the main floor to help carry furniture down the hall. Their electrician, on the other hand, suggested LED lights to illuminate the stairs to the basement at all times.

It seemed like every day they had to walk around the house and make decisions. Or they would have a list of items to buy for the construction. “We tried to get it figured out as soon as we could,” said Jason. “As we needed it for each room,” added Angie.

Having lived in several older farm houses before, all with small bathrooms and bedrooms and a lack of closet space, Angie and Jason wanted bigger rooms in their new five-bedroom, four-bathroom house, which has 4,800 sq. ft on two levels. They also did not want a lot of stairs, which is why they eliminated the sunk-in living room, as originally designed in their house plans.

The main level of their house includes the main area of the kitchen, living room, and dining room. Another design change they made was making the division between the kitchen and the living room into only a half wall. They carpeted the living room as the only distinction, while they used a tile-patterned vinyl flooring in the dining room and kitchen.

They liked the look of tile and the price of vinyl, said Angie. “Everyone that comes in here thinks it’s tile,” she said. It has a contoured surface to enhance the look, though it is hard on socks, she noted.

From the living room and dining room, they can see over a mile across the farm fields. “It’s a big view,” deadpanned Angie, a “city girl” from Olivia who is not as enamored as Jason with the sight of their crops. Still, “I don’t know if I could go back,” she said of living in a town again after living on a farm. “There’s just room to run.”

(One thing they did like about renting close to Paynesville was the shorter trips, instead of driving 10 miles into town.)

They used oak woodwork and trim throughout the house and for all the cupboards in the kitchen. They have lots more storage space in their new house, in their kitchen, in closets, etc., said Angie. She also likes their walk-in pantry in the kitchen and the built-in china closet in the dining room.

Their new kitchen also features an island, which they use frequently. It is a lot closer to the kitchen than the dining room table, making it more convenient, said Angie. “When it’s a quick meal or sandwiches, it works great,” added Jason.

Angie chose a stainless steel oven/range and ultra-satin refrigerator. “I wanted to get away from white,” she said of her kitchen appliances. The ultra-satin finish is metallic to match the stainless stove but shows fewer fingerprints.

Angie also likes that she can see their driveway and front yard from the kitchen.

Next to the kitchen is a mud room/laundry room entryway. They liked the mud room in their old house, “That’s one thing we wanted to keep,” said Jason, as it helps to keep dirt from the farm and the yard from the rest of the house. They have a bathroom off this mud room to use by Jason or anyone coming into the house from outside. Angie wanted

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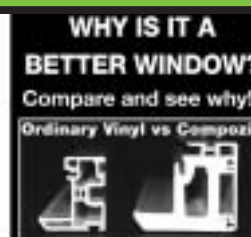
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# HOME Improvement

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big closets in the mud room; “I like putting (things) away and shutting the doors,” she said.

The mud room connects to the three-stall garage. They wanted a big garage for bikes and other family stuff (and eventually for more cars as the boys get older).

Angie loves the central vacuum in the house for its convenience. All the dirt, she noted, goes directly to the garage.

Because their family accesses the house mainly from the garage, they switched the direction of the staircase on the main floor. It was supposed to open to the front door, but they turned it to open from the kitchen and the mud room. “For our living, that’s our main door,” said Jason, of the mud room, not the front door.

The front door has frosted glass panels to dress up the front of the house and to be able to see when someone comes to the door; without their visitor being able to see into the house.

To the left of the front door, leading away from the main living space on the first floor, are an office, the master bedroom suite, and two bedrooms for their youngest boys.

Jason likes that their master bedroom faces the road and the shop, so if he hears something at night he can check it out and quickly go back to sleep. Their bedroom set was severely damaged in the explosion, but it was one of the few pieces of furniture that they saved. It was one of the first things they bought when they got married 13 years ago, they both really liked it, and they couldn’t find anything that they liked as well, so they had it repaired and refinished.

The master bathroom includes a walk-in closet a linen closet, a vanity and sink, a shower, and stool. Jason had always wanted a jacuzzi, and by chance their rented house had one. When he only used it a couple times in three months, he decided that he really didn’t need one in the new house.

They picked bright colors for the walls in their new house. They had always had white walls, said Angie, until panting their old living room blue a few years ago. The upstairs bedrooms for the youngest boys are windjammer (a bright blue) and grassy green (to match the John Deere decor). Before carpet and trim, the brightly-colored rooms really were bright. “We were a little scared,” admitted Angie.

The oldest boys have similarly brightly-colored rooms in the basement. Because they wanted to be sure that the lower level wasn’t cool, they installed electric in-floor heat in the basement.

They also opted for a geothermal heat pump as their main source of heating and cooling. It circulates a refrigerated liquid, basically antifreeze, through six wells, using the earth’s warmth in the winter to heat the house and its coolness in the summer to cool the house. It was costlier to install, noted Jason, and you need space for six wells, but with fuel prices at record highs, it should pay for itself over time.

“Basements are usually warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer,” said Jason. “It’s the same sort of principle.” They were a little apprehensive about being able to heat the house enough with 50-degree warmth from the ground, but it worked well over the first winter.

The geothermal heat pump also heats some of the hot water they need for the house.

The furnace room doubles as a game room, with a pool table and dart board, and Angie has a scrapbooking room in the basement.

They also installed a gas fireplace in the basement family room as a second heat source to qualify for dual fuel. They actually use the large family room in the basement more than they thought they would.

In a family of wrestlers – Jason is an assistant varsity and youth coach – sometimes wrestling matches break out in these living spaces. The half walls in the boy’s bedrooms provide great storage for wrestling trophies, added Angie.

What remains to be done for their new house is mostly outside. The grass is planted and just needs to grow, though Jason expects he will have to replant spots. “That’s one thing we’re looking forward to with the kids is some grass,” he said. “Our dog looks like he’s got a permanent set of boots from walking across (the dirt).”

They also want to do other landscaping and plant a grove. “We found out this winter that the wind really blows,” said Jason, as their new house is exposed to the north and west.

Angie would like to do a little more decorating inside, as well.

They chose steel siding and a composite decking for their house, as they wanted it to be as durable as possible. “Everything we did, we tried for as little maintenance as possible,” said Jason.

Now, with spring coming, they are excited to be able to enjoy their new deck, as well as their new house. And, after a busy year, they hope to have some time to relax.



Photo by Michael Jacobson

Watching their oldest brother Jacob’s wrestling highlights on TV in the downstairs family room are (from left): Alex, 9; Aaron, 3; and Brett, 5. The Mages family’s new house features electric in-floor heat in the basement, a gas fireplace (shown), and a geothermal heat pump as its main source of heat.



Photo by Michael Jacobson

Not only did Angie and Jason Mages have to build a new house on their farm, they had to replace their shop, clean up debris, and finalize their insurance.

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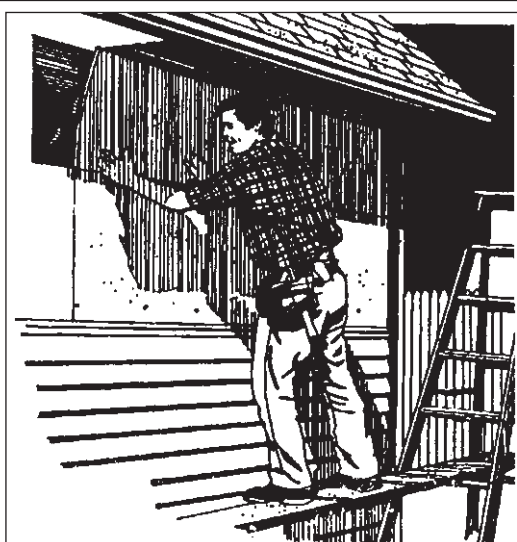
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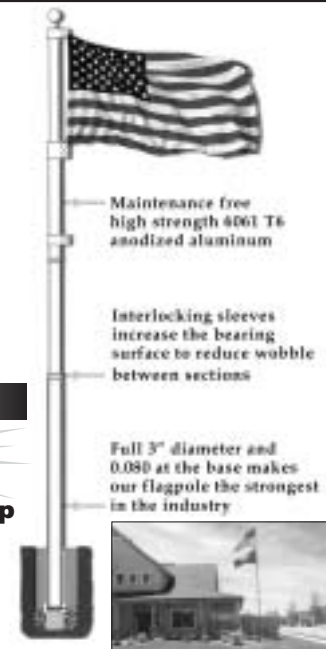
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