

Marni Jameson

Character Development Begins at Home

By Marni Jameson

“What are you doing?” My husband asks the other day when he hears a hammer banging.

The combination of me with a hammer always makes him nervous.

“I’m building character.”

“Your character is fine.”

“Not mine, the house’s.”

“What’s wrong with the house’s?”

“It needs more. I’ve given up developing character in you and the kids.”

“Why, because we still make sounds with our armpits?”

“I’m putting my character development energies in the house. For starters I’m taking out this new mirror and putting in this old one.”

“I’m confused,” he says. “When we had an old house, you wanted it to look newer. Now you want our new house to look older?”

“It’s the curly hair straight hair dilemma,” I say. “Have one want the other.”

True, everyone’s idea of character differs. Even mine has changed over the years. When I was younger, my mother used the word to describe the unredeemed, as in: “You’re not still dating that character!” Later, the word described an upstanding person, as in someone who did right when no one was looking, and did not mess around with interns. Then, character became something someone had when they’d reached a certain age, had crows feet, a religious position and Preparation H in their bathroom drawers. Today, however, when I think of character, I don’t picture Tommy Lee, Billy Graham, or Mel Gibson.

I picture houses. Some have it. Some don’t.

To me a home with character has a timeless classic appeal with custom touches. The home doesn’t have to be old, but that helps. The first house Dan and I bought, a California bungalow built in 1936, oozed with character: real wood burning fireplaces, plaster walls, wood ceilings, and a stand of 50-year-old trees. But the roof leaked as if it had been sealed with cheese cloth. The floor had more waves than the Pacific. And the wall rats had pedigrees dating back to their ancestors who came on the Pilgrim. When we bought the place, the realtor said: It has so much character. Now I know that’s realtor shorthand for a place with old plumbing, small rooms and bad light. I spent the next five years restoring it for the 21st Century. We expanded the kitchen and master, raised ceilings, updated baths, and turned one bedroom into a closet, which is what I thought it was in the first place.

Our next home was so new that when we moved in it still had stickers on the windows. I spent the next five years trying to age it. Unfortunately, in the process, I aged more than the homestead. (Here I pause to give thanks to Retin-A, Clairol, and pink light bulbs.) I added wood beams and moldings, and faux finished walls so they looked as if they really needed a coat of paint. My kids contributed their own patina by running their hands up the wall every time they climbed the stairs and carving their initials in the banister.

Now we're in another new home, trying to add an aura of establishment, which is difficult when you're surrounded on three sides by bulldozers. But here are a few character building tricks I've stumbled across over the years:

- Plant mature trees – or at least one. Nothing screams new home louder than trees on sticks. Even though big trees cost more, they help a home look established. For the same price, one big tree offers more gravity than three small ones. Be sure to work with someone who guarantees trees, and knows how to transplant, or the large tree will be a dead tree.
- If your driveway is just cement, repave it with stone pavers or a cut-in a border of used brick to soften the starkness.
- If you live in a production home, chances are everything from your mailbox to your mirrors match your neighbors'. The less you match, the more your home looks like a custom home that evolved over time. Pick a style – say modern, rustic, French, Mediterranean -- then change light fixtures, faucets, door knobs and drawer pulls to fit. Frame production mirrors with custom tile work or remove and replace them with framed mirrors.
- Add moldings, baseboards and wainscoting where you can. If you have small 3” baseboards, change them out for ones 5” or larger.
- Change flat doors to raised panel doors, and sliding glass doors to French doors.
- Make your fireplace an original. Old homes often have great hearths. The fireplaces of new homes tend to be from molds. Go to an antique store and buy an old mantel to retrofit to your home, or faux finish the existing white plaster to look like stone, or cover it with a veneer of stone or ceramic tile.
- Take your time. The cheapest way to add character to your home is to wait 15 years. In our case, by the time we can afford to implement all these age-enhancing changes, our home will be that old anyway.

Meanwhile, I'm still working on that other brand of home character, hoping that some day my kids will tell the truth when I ask who stuck the chewing gum on the barstool, and my husband will honestly prefer spending Sundays at church instead of with the NFL.

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