

# Maine Home

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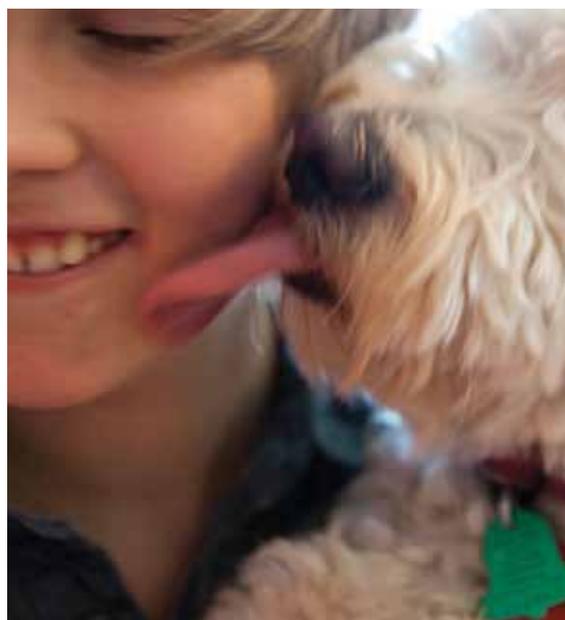
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**HAPPY**





# HOME



**A John Calvin Stevens house in Portland gets a modern family update**

**by Debra Spark  
Photography Nicole Wolf**

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hotographer Winky Lewis and physician Alex Millspaugh were in the midst of a home renovation—a dumpster in their front yard, mess all around—when a beautiful elderly woman stopped on the sidewalk and said, “I used to live here.”

“You’re kidding!” Lewis said. It was certainly possible. Lewis and Millspaugh live in a John Calvin Stevens home that was built in the 1800s.

The woman didn’t come inside, but from the way she talked, it was clear that she knew the interior. She shared her memories of growing up, including one about baking cookies. “It was the happiest house. It always had the best feeling about it,” she said.

Oddly, Lewis had always had the same impression. “It is endless work,” Lewis says, “and we complain about it all the time. But from when we first looked at it, we thought it was a happy house and had a solid feeling.”

Lewis asked the woman if she lived in the neighborhood.

“Oh, yes,” the woman said, “I walk by all the time.”

Lewis never saw her again.

That was in 2006, two years after Lewis, Millspaugh, their three children, and their two dogs moved into their home in Portland’s West End. The house remains a happy one, in no small part for how Lewis has decorated it and for how the renovation—which relocated the kitchen and updated the heating system—improved it.

Lewis describes her style as “totally piecemeal.” She says, “We’ll think we’re not going to redo the whole living room. We’ve got this old couch. What rug will go with it that we can afford and that the kids won’t destroy?”

The result is more exuberant and elegant than the process suggests. Pieces that Lewis has acquired from Design Within Reach and Environment Furniture are coupled with family heirlooms, her children’s artwork, vividly painted walls, and—perhaps most striking—Lewis’s own photographs.

While she has had a long career shooting weddings and parties, Lewis has done considerable commercial, retail, and magazine work in recent years. She is also a fine-art photographer whose subject is childhood. Over the years, she has taken countless pictures of her children. At the moment, her youngest child is her most willing subject, but all the children have an equal place on her walls. They are in the rows of photos that line the dining room wall, in the pictures hanging salon-style in the stairwell, on the canvases in the living room, and in the images scattered on the house’s many shelves.

Lewis says that the decision to photograph children has a lot to do with her childhood. “When I was 8, my mother got very sick with brain cancer, which left her half-paralyzed, though she lived for another 20 years.” At the time, Lewis had a younger brother





(Opening spread, first row, from top to bottom, left to right) Winky Lewis chose walnut for the open kitchen shelves that display her children's artwork. A summer's day in Portland's West End. A poster by Michael Dacey, whose Repeat Press is in Somerville, Massachusetts. Lewis's son Benjamin picked school-bus yellow for his bedroom. Lewis cuts watermelon for her daughter, Lolie, and Lolie's good friend Piggy. The countertop is made of Pietra Cardosa. (Opening spread, second row) A living room pillow. Benjamin gets a lick from one of the family's dogs. A mantel with beach stones and an encaustic photograph of Lewis's son Harry.

The formal dining room (above) includes inherited items (a sea chest and family portrait), new purchases (a table from environmentfurniture.com), and do-it-yourself pieces like the red chairs, which are from an unpainted-furniture store. The dinosaur is a child's toy that was assembled in the dining room and never left. In the background, Lewis's photographs of her sons, Benjamin and Harry, are printed on canvas.







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(Previous spread, clockwise) Although most of the fireplaces in the house aren't useable, they've been kept for their beautiful woodwork. The mirror is a family heirloom. Harry in the TV room. The pillow has the name of the New York street on which the family once lived. A photograph of the family dog, when he was still a puppy. The image is printed on canvas and hangs above the fireplace in Benjamin's bedroom. Living room shelves with books and framed photographs. The Jens Risom chair to the left was purchased on eBay. The central staircase.

Lewis found the living room (above)—with its many doors and windows, built-in shelves, and long fireplace—tricky to arrange. Paintings by the children sit on the fireplace mantel. A work by landscape painter Thomas Connolly of Portland is on the opposite wall. In the background is a desk from Lewis's mother's family.

who was 2 and an older brother who was 11. Her response to her mother's sickness, she says, "was to take care of my younger brother, who was the cutest and happiest thing around. I would take tons of pictures of him. He was happy and beautiful." Since that time, Lewis never changed her focus, and photography only became "more and more fun" as she got older.

Lewis and Millspaugh's children are rather stunningly attractive, all the more so for how Lewis captures them in black-and-white or in muted colors, often in minimalist scenes suggesting summer pleasures: in the water, behind the translucent curtains of a summer house, with hair slicked back from swimming, atop a rock on an Isle au Haut beach.

Not all of Lewis's photographs reflect the happier side of childhood. There's a real darkness to some of the work, with loss, the passage of time, and even dread as a subtext to images that seem, on the surface, quite lovely. Although some of these darker images—including those of her children with costume animal heads—are on the tables in her third-floor studio or are being readied for exhibition, they aren't on the walls of her home.

Lewis and Millspaugh decided to undertake a partial renovation of their house because, while it always felt happy, it didn't always feel comfortable. In fact, before they decided to make the changes, the family suffered through a winter in which they wore down parkas indoors. To execute the renovation, they hired Phil Kaplan of Kaplan Thompson Architects and builder Ray Keith of Raymond T. Keith Carpentry, both in Portland.

"It's a great structure—a classic John Calvin Stevens—but not very modern, not for how we typically live," says Kaplan. The original kitchen had been moved from the front of the house to the back, and Lewis and Millspaugh wanted to restore it to its former location. Of course, old kitchens weren't the focus of family social life the way they are now, so it wasn't enough just to return the kitchen to its original, somewhat cramped, location. To get more space, Keith removed a back staircase that led upstairs to what was likely the maid's quarters and what subsequently functioned as an apartment. Once it was opened up, the kitchen was outfitted with contemporary appliances, Le Klint pendant lights, Custom Wood Products cabinetry, Pietra Cardosa countertops, black-walnut shelves, and a large central island with a black-walnut top.

"I have a thing about black walnut," Lewis says. Her father always loved the wood. In fact, he loved it so much that when he saw a dying walnut tree on someone's property, he used to ask if he could have it. Often enough, people said yes, and he would cut down the tree and bring it home. A walnut desk that Lewis's father made when she was in high school now sits in a corner of her eldest son's room.

By moving the kitchen, Lewis and Millspaugh were also able to restore the dining room. Darien Brahms, a singer-songwriter of eclectic roots rock, has a day job as a painter, and she helped Lewis paint some of the home's interior spaces. The dining room,



Kaplan Thompson Architects and Raymond T. Keith Carpentry restored the kitchen (top) to its original location, while updating the room with modern appliances, a large island, and an office alcove. The kitchen cabinetry is from Custom Wood Products. The pendant lights and stools are from Design Within Reach. The red accent wall has a photograph of son Benjamin draped over a rock on an Isle au Haut beach.

Lolie, Harry, and Benjamin spitting watermelon seeds (above).

Brahms says, was her favorite room to work on “because of the gray color and the really nice space. I felt like I was helping to transform it into a space where they could have some great dinner parties.” One of the dining room walls has no windows. A strange choice, Lewis notes, and speculates that John Calvin Stevens didn’t put windows there because he once lived in the house next door and didn’t want the neighbors looking in.

As for the heating, Ray Keith replaced the original steam heat with a modern hot-water system and additional radiators, which split the house into nine different heating zones that can be controlled by separate thermostats. Insulation was pumped into the exterior walls, and the windows were fixed and reglazed. The basement also got a face-lift. A new floor was poured, and a door now allows the family to walk from the driveway into the basement (where the kids can drop all their belongings) before heading upstairs into the kitchen.

Lewis and Millspaugh’s children are now 11, 9, and 8. When asked what their favorite room in the home is, they have various sweet and funny answers. “The kitchen,” says the eldest, “because you can get to just about anywhere from there.” “The kitchen because that’s where I get my food,” echoes the middle child. “My room because it’s where you play,” says the youngest, bringing to mind the elderly woman with so many fond memories. **MH+D**

*For more information, see Resources on page 106.*