

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Welcome mats roll out for house tours

By Pam Starr
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David and Laurie Charlton completely gutted a rambling Victorian house in the Mexican War Streets area of the North Side two years ago.

Formerly separated into eight apartments, the house had seen much better days, according to Laurie Charlton, 54, a seamstress who works out of the home.

"It was such a mess, it was terrible," she recalls. "No floors could be saved. The only element undisturbed was the staircase."

The Charltons, New York transplants, saw the raw potential of the 4,300-square-foot house and went to work shortly after buying it. Laurie Charlton is a Mt. Lebanon High graduate.

"We took it down to the studs and brick, and put it all together," says David Charlton, 59, the director of new business development at Corning in New York. "We've lived here since the end of February."

The Charltons decided to open their home to visitors of the Mexican War Streets House & Garden Tour Sunday because they wanted people to see what can be accomplished when renovating an old house. The tour, in its 39th year, is showcasing 13 homes in the neighborhood, according to Leslie Vincen of the Mexican War Streets Society. Attendance is expected to be somewhere between 800 and 1,200.

"I think people are very interested in the historic aspect of our neighborhood, with all of the beautiful architectural details," says Vincen. "The rowhouses are so narrow from the outside, but once you step inside, the grand spaces are always a big surprise. It's a trip down memory lane, and people like to see how we've preserved the homes and honored the past."

Neighborhood house tours have always been popular, but they seem to be gaining in popularity every year. Sarah Collins, marketing and communications coordinator for Friendship Development Associates Inc., says that the Friendship House Tour gets better every year. This year, the tour will be Sept. 21. Friendship was named one of Pittsburgh's 10 Neighborhoods You Need to Know About by Pittsburgh Magazine in 2006.

"The homes are just beautiful -- each of the homes on the tour has such great character, fascinating architecture, ornate woodwork and phenomenal stained

glass," she says. "We've had several people buy homes in our neighborhood because they've attended the house tour."

Martha Terry bought her 1870 Italianate-style farmhouse in Friendship in 1993, and put her house on the tour in 1996. She's on it again this year because, Terry says, she has a "really big commitment to my neighborhood." Her 3,500-square-foot house is one of the oldest in the neighborhood.

"We've done tons of stuff to the house since 1996," she says, referring to her boyfriend, David Arndt. Terry, 57, is a faculty member of the Graduate School of Public Health, Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at Pitt, while Arndt, 44, is the IT person there. "My house is not Better Homes & Gardens -- this is how real people live. We needed to get more stuff done, and being on the tour helps you to do that."

Renovating the small kitchen was high on their "to do" list.

"When I moved in, this was ugly, ugly, ugly," says Terry with a laugh. "I got a home equity loan, went to Home Depot, and they helped me design it the way I wanted."

Now the kitchen gleams with muted teal counters, white cabinets, under-the-cabinet lighting and sunny yellow walls.

"We love our kitchen. It's a great space," she says. "This is the kitchen I dreamed of having 20 years ago."

The kitchen in the Charltons' Victorian on West North Avenue is accented in bright red, including a red sink brought from their house in Corning, N.Y.

"I love red -- it creeps in everywhere," says Laurie Charlton. "Red accents in a kitchen are not unusual. I've been collecting red stuff for a long time."

The Deutschtown House Tour will be held Sept. 28, in conjunction with the Pittsburgh Design Fair, like last year. Chairwoman Jen Saffron says the primary goal of the house tour is to "bring positive exposure to a neighborhood that has undergone significant improvements." This is just the third tour in the community.

"This partnership with the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh makes the Deutschtown House Tour perhaps the most unique tour in Pittsburgh," Saffron says. "People come on our tour to experience a walking urban community, specifically in a historically preserved neighborhood."

"The Design Fair's theme this year is GREEN, and we are actually featuring a Victorian home that was retro-fitted with green amenities, such as geo-thermal heating."

Not to be outdone, the Lawrenceville community is offering an unusual house tour this year called Snapshots Through Time on Oct. 4 and 5. A variety of

historical re-enactments and living history characterizations will take place, according to house tour public relations coordinator Kate Bayer.

"There will be a young George Washington, Stephen Foster, the 9th Pennsylvania Civil War Re-enactment group, Fritzie Zivic, plus several re-enactors who will portray the immigrant and industrialization era and the 1936 flood," Bayer says. "This is not an ordinary house tour. It's a Pittsburgh 250 Community Connections grassroots event. "

Money raised during these house tours goes directly back into the community. In Wesley Spectrum's case, the money raised during its Tour of Homes in the South Hills will benefit children with special education, mental health and family support needs. Wesley Spectrum serves more than 3,000 children and 7,000 family members, says Jennifer Kostolansky, communications and community relations coordinator of Wesley Spectrum Services.

"This is the 18th year for the tour, and we have seen an increase in ticket sales each year, except for a small decline in 2007," she says. "Attending the tour provides homeowners with great ideas for building, renovating, decorating, designing, furnishing and landscaping."

This is the first time David and Laurie Charlton have put their renovated Victorian on the Mexican War Streets House & Garden Tour, and they are looking forward to it. They love living in the neighborhood and hope that more people will come to live there.

"The difference in lifestyle from living in a company town in New York to this is amazing," says Laurie Charlton. "This is urban. It has been an exciting change. We're still a work in progress, but we're getting there."

HOUSE TOURS

- **The Mexican War Streets House & Garden Tour**, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$18 in advance or \$20 the day of the tour at the ticket booth on the corner of Monterey Street and West North Avenue. Thirteen homes will be featured in this 39th annual event. Details: 412-323-9030 or [online](#).
- **Friendship House Tour**, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sept. 21. Admission is \$15 in advance and \$18 the day of the tour. The self-guided tour of 14 houses takes two to three hours to complete on foot, and trolley tours will depart from the EDGE studio. Tickets can be purchased [online](#) or from the Friendship Development office, 5530 Penn Ave., or the day of the event at the tour's starting point, EDGE studio, 5411 Penn Ave. Details: 412-441-6147, ext. 7
- **Wesley Spectrum's Tour of Homes**, South Hills, noon to 5 p.m. Sept. 28. Admission is \$25. Five homes in Mt. Lebanon and Upper St. Clair are featured. Tickets can be purchased by calling Wesley Spectrum at 412-831-9390. Details: [Online](#).

- **Deuschtown House Tour**, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sept. 28. Admission is \$12 in advance or \$15 the day of the tour. Meet at the Priory Hotel courtyard, 614 Lockhart Street to begin the self-guided tour of seven houses. Details: [online](#).
- **Lawrenceville Historic House Tour: Snapshots in Time**, 5-9 p.m. Oct. 4 and noon-5 p.m. Oct. 5. Admission is \$10 for one day and \$15 for two days, in advance. Day-of-the-tour tickets are \$15 for one day or \$20 for two days. The seven homes featured Oct. 4 during the Candlelight Tour will not be the same homes spotlighted on Oct. 5, when nine homes and a cemetery building are on the tour. Details: Kate Bayer, 412-600-2068 or [online](#).
- **Shadyside House Tour**, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 12. Admission is \$15 in advance and \$20 the day of the tour. There will be eight houses on the self-guided tour, which begins at Winchester-Thurston School. Molly's Trolleys will be on hand to transport visitors. Tickets will be sold at Eureka Chocolates on Copeland Street and the gift shops at UPMC Shadyside, Hillman Cancer Center, UPMC Presbyterian and Montefiore hospitals. Details: 412-361-3771 or [online](#).

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