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By [Mike McGinley mmcginley@timesleader.com](#)

Features Writer

Home renovation these days can be an interactive proposition.



[click image to enlarge](#)

Fresh wood stain and fresh paint provided a perfect pick-me-up in the country home.



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An old, peeling porch has brand-new life thanks to the efforts of Amber Vargo and Jason Miller.

FRED ADAMS/FOR THE TIMES LEADER

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Sure, you and a significant other might have to interact with each other or a handful of contractors.

But you also might find a project so thoroughly adventuresome you're compelled to lay out all the details, in the name of camaraderie or commiseration, on the Internet.

And if, as a home-improvement team, you're "the nice one" while your partner is more likely to "ruffle everyone's feathers," that just makes the story all the more suitable for sharing.

Meet Amber Vargo, a 26-year-old Wyoming Seminary graduate and first-time homeowner who spends most of her downtime these days tending to her very demanding new "baby," which spends most of its time crying out for attention. That's largely because this baby is a rambling country home in Shavertown, complete with large backyard, a "little man room" (more on that later) and at least one highly desirable stained-glass window, but it also has or had cracked ceilings and plaster, a dilapidated kitchen, a sagging porch with rotted steps and a whole host of other issues.

For Vargo and her boyfriend, Jason Miller, though, the place, which they bought for \$84,000, was perfect. The nearly 80-year-old structure, for one thing, is close enough to Vargo's hometown of West Pittston but still rural enough to satisfy her country-loving beau, with whom she is now working side by side to restore the original luster of eight bygone decades.

Miller must be especially interesting to have around, considering he's never owned a home more than 20 years old and is accustomed to central heat, air conditioning and PVC pipes.

At least that's what the couple say on a Web site they developed – www.projecthillside.com – that documents their renovation journey in room-by-room detail. The site comes complete with photos, a blog and a spot for volunteer opportunities if friends and family choose to sign up for the daunting task of helping in this top-to-bottom, inside-and-out overhaul. Visitors also can cast votes for which room should get attention next.

Now, about the house itself ...

"I actually surprised a lot of my friends. They thought I'd want something modern, but it's nice to be unique," Vargo says of the seven-room dwelling, which is a stone's throw from the testament to restoration and preservation that is the Lands at Hillside Farms in Trucksville.

She's the "brains of the operation" and its creative director, overseeing colors, creating floor plans and managing

the budget, while Miller keeps busy fixing cracks, painting walls and calling contractor after contractor, not all of whom call back.

The pros were and still are needed to do major or skilled jobs, such as plumbing and electrical and drywall-hanging, and the couple took on the tasks with which they felt more comfortable: restraining the original woodwork, fixing ceiling and wall cracks, painting and some basic landscaping. They still need someone to knock down a small kitchen wall to create more usable living space.

But the first order of business was getting some sort of quarters ready so they could actually live while chaos reigns around them.

“We wanted to have two rooms that were done,” says Miller, a self-proclaimed handyman as well as a businessman who has attended many a meeting lately with paint on his hands.

Carving out a livable area didn’t take too long, about 16 hours or so, the couple says, considering all that needed to be done in a small sunroom and spacious living room was plastering some ceiling cracks and applying a few coats of paint. The living room became buttercup yellow, while the sunroom took on a hue called “Homestead Resort Green.” Amber’s adventures in paint sampling are well-documented on the Web site, where she also reveals she’s more like her parents than she previously thought, having grown up with green walls.

Many a night spent poring over color cards and clicking around sherwinwilliams.com taught her that “you have to have flow.”

Light yellow and light green won’t fight each other from one room to the next, basically.

You also have to have “a really good canvas,” adds Miller, who works in Internet consulting. That’s why he bought extra primer to get his painting tasks done.

Piling on the primer to save on more expensive extra coats of paint is one of many tricks he’s used as he tackled a whole punch list of dirty work.

“The hardest part is ripping all the stuff out,” he says.

One thing that won’t get ripped out is a large farmhouse-style sink, a feature many owners of more modern homes covet. In the ancient, a.k.a. outdated, kitchen that holds the treasured sink, everything else has to go. New cabinetry and appliances will come from Lowe’s Home Improvement Center. The couple will try to refinish the linoleum kitchen flooring before scouring more home-improvement stores for tiles.

As for where everything will go once the flooring is settled, Vargo says, “We created a floor plan on graph paper,” another time- and sanity-saving technique.

“I marked where the outlets were and got the measurements around the room,” she says.

It paid off.

The paper layout made it easier for the staff at Lowe’s to help the couple when they checked out various cabinets and appliances, many of which will be stainless steel, she’s decided.

Stainless steel “isn’t that pricey anymore, so you might as well (buy it) unless you absolutely can’t stand it,” Vargo offers.

Her parents donated much of the furniture, while the couple picked up other pieces at estate sales -- Miller calls these “Northeastern Pennsylvania’s most competitive sport” -- or on eBay. They paid \$100 for an antique desk in pretty good condition that now sits in their upstairs office. Miller estimated it would have cost about \$400

elsewhere.

They're also on the hunt for old lamps, an old mirror and puzzles to keep around the house.

"We consider it looking for treasures," Vargo says.

Children especially might enjoy the treasures sure to find their way to one of the house's more interesting interior offerings. Across the hall, off a spare bedroom, is a tiny room with an oval-shaped entry hidden behind two wooden doors. The couple call it the "little man room" and think it can be used as a walk-in closet or a playroom.

Vargo has a 6-year-old brother and 6-year-old niece living nearby, so she's choosing the latter.

So far the couple have spent in the neighborhood of \$13,000 on renovations, and they have miles to go.

A master plan is to have the bulk of the work done by Thanksgiving, a perfect time to welcome family and friends as the pair try their hands at entertaining. And maybe, for a change, a little relaxing.



[click image to enlarge](#)

After the ceiling was fixed, the couple primed and painted it.



[click image to enlarge](#)

A large piece of the living-room ceiling needed replacing.



[click image to enlarge](#)

Power-washed, polished and now sporting a pumpkin on a post, Amber Vargo's Shavertown home is a before-and-after marvel.



[click image to enlarge](#)

A tiny room off the guest bedroom – the 'little man room' – most likely will serve as a play area for Amber Vargo's little brother and young niece when remodeling is complete in her new home.

FRED ADAMS/FOR THE TIMES LEADER



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Amber Vargo's appearance masks the hands-on efforts she put into the remodeling process at her Shavertown home. Here, she's all business in her front sunroom, the first room declared finished.

FRED ADAMS/FOR THE TIMES LEADER



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Jason Miller, above, and Amber Vargo are doing many of their own home improvements.

courtesy photo



click image to enlarge

After tearing up the floors, removing molding and securing electrical outlets, Jason Miller set about tearing down unwanted kitchen walls.

courtesy photos



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Everything but the kitchen sink, which is a pleasing farmhouse-style model, had to go in this heart of the home, Miller and Vargo decided.

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