

EVANSTON

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Magazine

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THEIR OLD HOUSE

Jodi Morton breathes new life into a local gem

EASY READER

Jay Bonansinga, Aimee Cohen, Christine Sneed, Veronica Roth

*"If you obey all the rules,
you miss all the fun."*

— KATHERINE HEPBURN

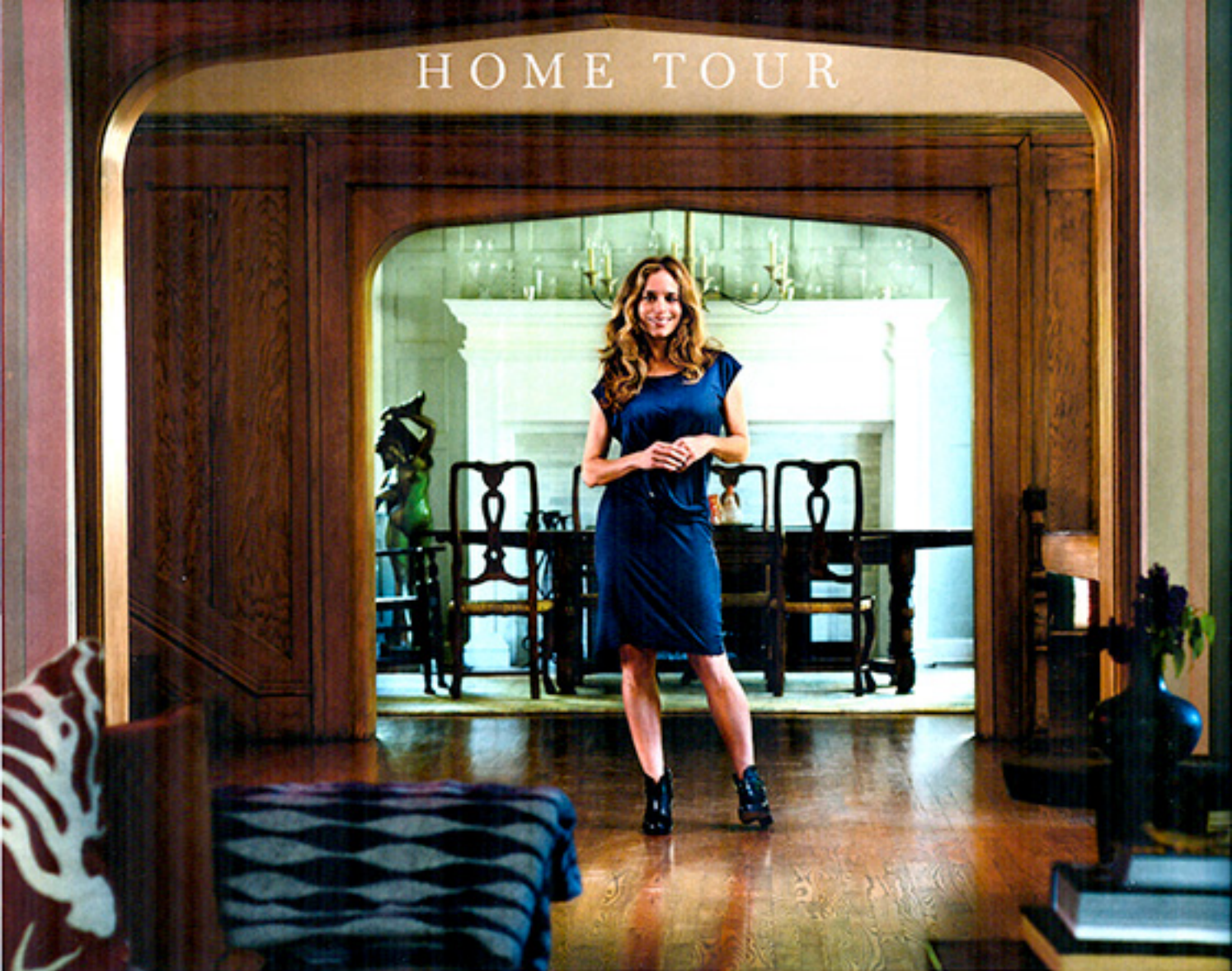


COLONEL
JENNIFER PRITZKER

BILLIONAIRE, PHILANTHROPIST, AND LOCAL PRESERVATIONIST
ANSWERS WHY SHE IS CAPTIVATED BY EVANSTON

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THEIR OLD HOUSE

When designer Jodi Morton and her restaurant scion husband David Morton took on a 1901 Ernest Mayo Tudor Revival in the Evanston Lakeshore Historic District 10 years ago, it was filled with pea-green shag carpeting, extensive water damage, and wild animals. Today, the historic mansion has been restored to its gilded age glory and whimsically reinvented for a busy family of five.

WORDS BY SHERRY THOMAS / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS BRADLEY AND WERNER STAUBE



**THIS GRAND OLD HOUSE IS FILLED
WITH VERY PRECIOUS THINGS.**

A one-of-a-kind piece of art, for example, fills the restored 1901 sunroom—an avant garde sort of work on a canvas of black, with smudges of chalk that say “Mazel Tov” and other cryptic messages only the most elite insider would understand. Similarly precious is the Ms. Pac Man “cocktail-style” game console, flanked by a pair of stylish wooden stools and positioned opposite a soaring Tudor fireplace, around the oak-paneled corner from another rare item—an original painting signed by Hungarian artist Fried Pal, with a delicate, smoky patina aged among the likes of Frank Sinatra.

Precious, of course, is all relative. But to designer Jodi Morton, who purchased this decaying Evanston mansion with restaurant entrepreneur husband David Morton 10 years ago, nothing is more precious and inspiring as seeing the messages left on a blackboard wall from their children’s bat mitzvah and bar mitzvah celebrations, or the beloved video game received from him for her 40th birthday, or the painting that hung behind the bar at her late father-in-law Arnie Morton’s iconic Morton’s Steak House in Hyde Park, all those years ago.

“This is not a show house,” says Jodi modestly, taking a visitor on a tour of two floors (third floor still in progress) of the eclectically elegant 8,000 square-foot home in the Evanston Lakeshore Historic District. “This is my laboratory—a place for me to experiment with ideas and color. I love it that way. And I feel grateful to have such a great canvas to do that with.”



HOME TOUR

INDEED. HARD TO BELIEVE THIS GREAT CANVAS WAS ONCE CRUMBLING.

Jodi, whose daughter, Tyler, did research on the home with the Evanston History Center as part of a school project, says the 1901 Tudor Revival was commissioned as a summer house for a C&NW Railroad executive and his family to escape the city heat and frolic on Evanston's pristine lakeshore. With front-facing gables and a hipped roof with slate shingles, the house was designed by a hotshot young downtown architect named Ernest Mayo—an Evanston resident who hailed from Birmingham, England and would later (with a little help from his son, Peter) build a reputation under the Mayo & Mayo shingle for designing some of the most stately French and English revival mansions on the North Shore.

And stately, this home was—with Elizabethan-inspired fireplaces that soared to beamed ceilings, exquisite lead glass windows, and all the finest finishes of the day, including electricity and Evanston's "modern" telephone service.

But a century later, when the Mortons stumbled across the property in a quest to move their young family out into Evanston, the finery had long faded.

"It was a disaster," says Jodi, almost lovingly, as she sits in her now restored living room, the setting for aforementioned bat mitzvah/bar mitzvah parties (she cleared out all the furniture to make room for the DJ) and countless other equally precious family moments. "This room was covered in pea-green shag carpeting, there was water and fire damage, the fireplaces were all sunken in, and we fixed this all up with three little kids."

Fortunately, the couple was hardly new to the renovation game. High school sweethearts (they met when Jodi moved to Highland Park in 7th grade and have been dating since junior year), the Mortons had also restored a historic grey stone in Lincoln Park and a farm house in Northfield they left to relocate their young family to Evanston.

"We chose Evanston because we wanted a diverse community that offered a wide range of services for our kids and that was in close proximity to Chicago," she says. "We also loved the large and accessible lakefront and still walk together at least three days a week along the path in the morning."

So Jodi and David moved the family into Evanston's Hotel Orrington for six months (at that time, their three children ranged in age from 9 months to 5 years) until the property could be at least partially habitable, and dove headfirst into creating the home of their dreams—a storied mix of old and new, honoring Evanston history and their own family history while opening a new chapter for the next generation.

Electricity came first. Six months to fix the old knob and tube wiring.

"There was one outlet. Nothing was to code," says Jodi, explaining how these and other projects with David led to the creation of her 2to5 design firm, a brand name that also pays homage to their family of five. "The kitchen was broken up into three different spaces. They're fun, these old houses, but they're bears."

Today, the restored home is truly a labor of love.



HOME TOUR



A generous "great hall" that divides a sprawling living from an equally spacious dining hall has often been used for photo shoots (*Land of Nod*, for example), commercials, and even a recent NBC pilot.

The kids are getting older (currently one is at Evanston Township High School, one at Nichols Middle School, and another at Dewey Elementary) and they bring with them three sets of friends—dragging skateboards and all up a grand staircase that looks more like it was designed for a Duchess and her progeny than a ragtag group of Evanstonians.

"There is no family room or basement in these old houses. When kids have millions of friends over, this is where we're hanging out," says Jodi of the living room, where her *Ms. Pac Man* game sits adjacent to the *Space Invaders* game David had from his childhood in Highland Park, and the drum set she gave him for this 30th birthday, and the kids' art class paintings, a plush sectional sofa for sinking into, a few vintage antiques purchased in Paris, and a portrait of Arnie Morton in his World War II uniform, on a fireplace mantel that is taller than Jodi herself. "Nothing can be too precious or sacred," she adds, laughing. "This is a family house."

Even so, Jodi's designer touch manages to make even the

"Keep Out" sign on her teen-aged daughter's bedroom (stolen from a photo shoot) look intentionally hip and stylish.

The renovated kitchen (reclaimed from those three smaller spaces) is a modern fusion of elegant, yet period-appropriate white cabinetry, warm, marble countertops and a long, sleek restaurant-quality (of course) counters with a Viking stove and Subzero double refrigerator. The dining room blends Jodi's affection for European antiques and modern chateau glamour. And the room where the family eats most of their meals—the designated "breakfast room" off the kitchen—is a cocktail of casual *Cote d'Azur* chic (limestone floors, luscious Michael S. Smith Jasper drapes) and vintage fun (including a popcorn machine and a framed menu from the original Morton's, when *filet mignon* cost \$4.50).

But as Jodi says, this is not a show house. And it's no longer a genteel, turn-of-last-century "summer house" either. Instead, it's evolved into something all its own—something even more precious than an arcane architectural reference in a North Shore coffee table book, or a design tableau suitable for Pinterest. For Jodi and David Morton and their children, this is their old house, their family dream home, and it will be for many years to come.