



Martha's Metaphor

Antiques dealer also tends a diverse mixture of life in community

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Martha Rollins (left) uses her kitchen for business meetings and gatherings with friends, including (from left) Becky Holbrook, VP of Martha's Mixture, and Rosa Jiggetts, Ruth Cosby and Cynthia Brown of Boaz and Ruth. CINDY BLANCHARD / TIMES-DISPATCH

Fans of "Country Home" on HGTV were treated recently to a feature on a Richmond antiques dealer who reversed tradition and subdivided her spacious kitchen into four rooms.

The new spaces - a TV nook, lounging niche with daybed, dining spot and smaller cooking area - were designed by Martha Rollins, owner of Martha's Mixture and, with husband Randy, owner of House of Lighting in Carytown.

Common threads among the little rooms are rich red and green paint and fabrics, antiques and hand-finished touches such as a watermelon-painted tabletop and tin cabinet fronts pierced with memorable family dates and images.

The cameras captured the unusual layout that Rollins, a business-savvy wife, mother and entrepreneur, frequently uses for entertaining in her stately Rugby Road home next to the Carillon in Byrd Park.

Unfortunately, HGTV missed the real story.

Rollins' kitchen is a metaphor for her life.

One recent afternoon, Rollins welcomed a reporter and photographer doing a story about the compartmentalized kitchen.

After they arrived, a diverse handful of women from all over Richmond - "little Marthas," they called themselves - began trickling through the front door.

Rollins was apologetic but firm about the women and their role in her life being part of the story. She didn't want to be a society gadfly posing inside her House Beautiful. "That's not who I am," she said.

How to help with project

- * Donate furniture and accessories.
- * Volunteer.
- * Shop at Boaz and Ruth.
- * Make a tax-deductible donation.
- * For information, call (804) 329-4900, e-mail info@boazandruth.com or visit www.boazandruth.com.

Rollins works 80 hours a week, but the bulk of her time is not spent scoping estate sales or talking up pricey antiques in her shop. She has evolved into a woman who is at least as multidimensional as her kitchen.

The antiques business took root in 1969, the year the Rollinses bought the home on Rugby. Her husband told her furniture would have to wait a few years, and Martha's Mixture was born.

"I went into it to furnish this house," she said. "I borrowed the money to open the shop, bought a lot of furniture, took half of it home and sold the rest."

Martha's Mixture started out on East Main Street. Rollins hired Virginia Commonwealth University students to help with the store's refinishing operation. "Many of them were troubled," she said. "But as they restored furniture, they were being restored themselves."

The shop was a success, but somewhat unfulfilling for Rollins. "I wanted to go to seminary," she said. "I prayed about it. I talked to my minister. Then I realized I could actually reach more people through the antique business than in a church.

"I've loved the business," she quickly added. "We sell antiques that are fun to live with, that provide color and beauty, with a whole range of prices and looks."

But Rollins's real dream was to kindle that same theme of diversity outside the walls of Martha's Mixture.

She wanted to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Her vision, spelled out in a 17-page private treatise, was to establish a corporation dedicated to reducing poverty and overcoming divisions - black, white, rich, poor, educated, uneducated - that plague Richmond. Faith is a driving force, but not a requirement of participation.

"It's not about, 'Oh, this is me, the great savior,'" Rollins said. "It's just taking my gifts and being a seed."

Rollins decided to plant herself and a sizable chunk of her money in Highland Park.

The project is called "Boaz and Ruth," named for the biblical story of a farmer who willingly shared his field of gleanings with a poor woman, his future wife, and established a cross-cultural relationship that changed the world.

Boaz and Ruth opened at 3030 Meadowbridge Road in 2002. It includes a training center that teaches a variety of job and life skills. (Its first four trainees graduated in February.)

It also is a household thrift store that provides business experience for trainees and economic stimulation for the neighborhood, and a community center that stages talent shows, holiday caroling and other events.

Most important, Rollins said, the program provides an opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds to unite across cultural, economic and geographic lines. Each side, she emphasized, benefits from connecting with the other.

Rollins recently purchased a 100-year-old condemned house next to Boaz and Ruth that she's restoring for undetermined use.

"That house is a physical symbol of how people come to us, locked up, boarded up, decrepit - nobody wants them," she said. "As we restore it, it's going to be a living parable. We just have to change our mindsets and see the beauty in people."

The impact of Boaz and Ruth already has been dramatic.

The center has become a place of hope for ex-prisoners and others who can't find jobs. It has restored self-esteem and introduced broken-spirited people to the power of prayer and positive thinking.

Ruth Cosby arrived at the door of Boaz and Ruth last fall, suicidal, poor, uneducated, unemployed. Six months later, she was sitting at Rollins's watermelon table explaining how Boaz and Ruth saved her life.

Beaming, confident and smartly dressed, she spoke excitedly about her computer training and her rise to a senior apprentice in the thrift operation.

"She passed her gifts on," Cosby said of Rollins. "That's why I'm here today."

Martha's Mixture provides the means for Rollins to keep her real passion viable. It also provides her with a ready crew when she needs crossover between the shop and Boaz and Ruth. Martha's Mixture vice president Becky Holbrook, for example, is a volunteer trainer at the thrift.

Rollins recently spearheaded the opening of a Boaz and Ruth in Martinsville, her hometown. Her Richmond plans include a Highland Park weekend market of 50 to 100 vendors.

Employees and volunteers at Boaz and Ruth frequently are invited to the Rollinses' weekend retreat in Martinsville. "We had a big barn built about four years ago by the Amish," Rollins said. "It's one big room with lots of little rooms. It's important to connect and stay connected, yet you have your own space and individuality."

Which leads us back to the slightly famous kitchen. "I designed it so I could be with people but have my own little protected spaces," she said, as her Highland Park friends mingled with black Lab Sarah and Pockets, a Jack Russell terrier ("the only breed that has as much energy as I do").

The lounging niche's daybed is another irresistible bit of symbolism. Rollins rescued it from her shop, found that it fit perfectly in the room and "couldn't bear to part with it."

"When my daughter was planning her wedding, she would get on one end and I would get on the other and we would work feet to feet," Rollins said.

Comparisons to the other, now notorious Martha also are hard to resist, although their philosophies are worlds apart. "Richness is different than just money," Rollins said.

Rollins suddenly bolts from the kitchen table to retrieve a large antique patchwork quilt, which she unfurls for her guests, leaving only her head peeking up behind it.

"If you mix up enough varieties, you get this quilt. Look at all the beautiful colors. That's my theory of decor and my theory of relationships."

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