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Photo by Mary Gajda

SEA CHANGE

UNDERWOOD CELEBRATES LIFE, LOVE IN HER HOME AND GARDEN

BY CHRISTOPHER NAGY

It can be said that Cheryl Underwood is living her true and best self.

From the numerous mermaid statues, glass-top tables with golden seahorse legs and beach décor, Underwood's Haslett home reflects her whimsical, oversized and free-spirited personality; and the ever-evolving and elaborately expanding garden out back is a testament to her bold vision and outlook.

However, for the financial adviser for Oppenheimer & Co. in East Lansing to arrive where she is now could be considered somewhat of a baptism by fire.

An early morning fire during Christmas week just over a decade ago took away everything Underwood and her family had.

"It was 4 a.m., Dec. 20, 2009," she said. "It was something electrical in the basement. We lost it all for the most part. We literally got out with just our pajamas."

The family temporarily moved into a hotel before making a condo their home for the next year while the home was rebuilt; however, in the immediate days after the blaze, they found out how far a little kindness and support can stretch in a small community.

"I graduated from Haslett High School and my children attend Haslett schools," Underwood said. "The entire community really rallied around us. People brought food and clothing. ... It was just awesome. The Haslett community is just awesome. I can't say enough about that."

The tragedy and the response had a significant and transformative impact on Underwood: "You know how people say you have a paradigm shift after a life-changing event? I really began to stop and smell the roses and really appreciate things and the people in my life. I feel very blessed."

It was during this time of transition that Underwood came across what would become an overarching theme in her life. On business in Florida, she stopped into a small shop and was drawn to a print of two mermaids by artist Christina Wyatt.

"I love it. There was something magical about it," she said of the piece that now hangs in her home. "It gave me a spiritual feeling of peace and beauty and love."

That mermaid theme and those feelings the creature of folklore stirred were things Underwood transplanted into the design and décor of her new home, which she moved into exactly one year to the day after the fire.

"I had the Christmas tree up before the painters had even finished. That's how excited I was to move back in," she said.

"If I can't be in the tropics, I just figured I'd bring the tropics here."

With its open and light-filled spaces framed by pillars, columns and arches, Underwood's home features a wide-ranging and eclectic mix of sea- and sand-related items and artifacts she has picked up on her travels – with a heavy dose of the magical majesty of mermaids thrown in for good measure.

"If I had a chance, I'd be living on the water and I'd be living in Florida. But I can't do that because I work here," she said. "If I can't be in the tropics, I just figured I'd bring the tropics here."

That tropical feel isn't just contained indoors. A poolside tiki hut Underwood built with her children stands among lighted palm trees outside; and in the warmer months, Underwood's yard transitions into a peaceful

garden oasis with thousands – if not tens of thousands – of bright splashes from the bulbs and blooms meticulously arranged in an always-evolving design.

The garden just something that sparked in Underwood when the family moved back into the new home.

"Gardening is something I've never done," she said. "This is something that started for me as an adult after the fire. It's something I'm always tweaking and moving and adding onto. I can visualize what I want something to be, and I just do it."

From the retaining walls that provide upward-moving planting space and the wooden pergolas weighted with wisteria to the waterfalls, brick-laden paths and rock-lined dry riverbed, Underwood's garden is a passionate pursuit more than a hobby. It's a project that she starts work on each spring and that doesn't stop until the end of the season forces her hand.

The home and garden serve as unique backdrops to annual and ornamented parties Underwood hosts each year in the summer and at Christmas. The themed, women-only



Underwood's garden oasis.

events can feature up to 70 guests and are meant to provide a platform for camaraderie, encouragement and support, Underwood said.

“I ask my friends to come and ask them to bring their friends and those friends can bring their friends. It’s kind of corny, but

it’s like a celebration of women,” she said. “I feel blessed to help create memories and bring joy to people. I don’t do it for any other reason than purely to have fun.”

Her approach to her parties is a reflection of how Underwood approaches life in general.

“I sincerely have God in my heart, and I think that exudes from the inside out. I like to inspire other people. I’m a caretaker, a nurturer,” she said.

That also extends to her career as a financial adviser. She views her work as a way of helping people, protecting her clients, so they can live a good life and be emotionally, as well as financially, content. It’s a philosophy of uniting the mind, body and spirit in a holistic approach to happiness, she said.

“That’s what I strive for in myself and that’s what I strive to reflect for my friends and my clients,” Underwood said.

Whether it’s her home, her garden or her personality, Underwood’s guiding principle is to take on a larger-than-life perspective.

“I’m not afraid. That’s the one thing about me,” Underwood said. “I’m not afraid to do something artsy and radical.

“If it’s something worth doing, it’s something worth overdoing,” she added with a laugh. ■



The master bedroom stands out with plenty of natural light and a beachy vibe.



Christopher Nagy is a graduate of Eastern Michigan University and has more than 20 years of experience in journalism. He rarely misses a Motor City Comic Con or Michigan Renaissance Festival.



Underwood is well known for the gardens she has cultivated behind her home.



Underwood's living room boasts sea horses and plenty of textures.



The master bathroom in Underwood's home.