

CHANGING SPACES

These inspiring makeovers had a meaningful objective: offering safety, comfort, and joy to people who really needed them.

by Nicole Pajer



The Oasis Alliance works on spaces beyond the home too: Recently they codesigned a food hub where food-insecure families could shop with dignity.

Her nonprofit empowers trauma survivors.

Danielle Woodhouse Johnson, WOODBRIDGE, VA

Six years ago Danielle, a former mental health caseworker with a passion for home staging, volunteered with her church to help a mother and daughter, both domestic abuse survivors, furnish their first apartment. The experience so moved Danielle that she was inspired to launch The Oasis Alliance (theoasisalliance.org), a nonprofit that codesigns healing spaces to support trauma survivors. Danielle and her team of volunteers have collaborated on more than 90 spaces, including an apartment for a young family escaping domestic violence who had been sleeping on the floor. The organization's design director, Cathy Guerra, designed the son's bedroom (above) in his favorite colors, gave him a drum pad for exploring his passion for music, and created a cozy sleep space so he'd feel less afraid of the dark. After laying eyes on his new room, "the son looked up at his mom and said, 'See, Mom, that's why you need to ask for help.' And everybody started crying," says Danielle. "It's our mission to show people that what they want matters. A lot of people we help have been given things, but no one asks what they want, so that power of choice and agency is a huge deal. We want to get them back to a place where they feel confident."



"Our vision was for the playground to be a safe space where children and individuals of all abilities could gather to play," says Jackie.

OASIS ALLIANCE, BEFORE AND AFTER, COURTESY OF MARCUS WILBORN (2); WOODHOUSE JOHNSON; COURTESY OF TALIA HAWLEY-MUSEUM PLAYGROUND, BEFORE, COURTESY OF EMILY BROOME; MUSEUM PLAYGROUND, AFTER, COURTESY OF WHITNEY MORALES PHOTOGRAPHY



She helped create an inclusive playground.

Jackie Erdman, SHEBOYGAN, WI

Playground fun is an experience no child should miss out on, and yet many, such as kids who use wheelchairs or have vision impairment, often do. Jackie is the executive director of Above & Beyond Children's Museum (abkids.org), and she and her team are helping change that with a project that came to fruition in 2022: the Purple Octopus Playground, a free playground outside the museum for children of all abilities. There's a transfer platform where children in wheelchairs can line up to enter the octopus's head and enjoy a slide; ground-level accessible equipment; and bright colors and soft rubber floors to help visually impaired and neurodivergent children feel safe exploring the space. Jackie is thrilled and honored by the feedback on the playground from the community: "The family of a teenage girl in a wheelchair came into the museum to say, 'You don't know how much it means for all of us to be able to be together, as a family, out here.'"



Her transformation has lifted teachers' spirits.

Dara Segbefia, LOS ANGELES

Spaces where educators can decompress during a hectic day are not just a luxury but a necessity, says Dara, an interior designer with The Zen Experience (thezenexperience.us) who does design work for area schools. Last year, she received a call from the principal at KIPP Compton Community School, who asked if she could donate her services to transform a room with cracked floors and a broken ceiling into a teachers' lounge. It was the most "extreme" project Dara had taken on—she had only 30 days to come up with a vision, wrangle

volunteers and vendors, and build out the space from scratch. Dara used vibrant colors and eclectic art to bring out the educators' bubbly personalities, built a coffee bar with an inspirational comic strip design, and brought in comfy furniture. The project, she says, has given the teachers, who used to eat lunch in their own classrooms or cars, a sense of community. "The space is inviting. It's comforting," says Dara. "They get to sit down and talk about what's going on with one another and recharge before going back to the classroom. They're excited to go to work."



"The space makes the teachers feel seen and appreciated," says Dara.

SCHOOL: AFTER: COURTESY OF JOSH BUSTOS PHOTOGRAPHY; SCHOOL: BEFORE: COURTESY OF DARA SEGBEFIA / THE ZEN EXPERIENCE; HOSPITAL ROOM: BEFORE AND AFTER: COURTESY OF MEREDITH WILSON PARFET (2)

LAUNDRY ROOM: BEFORE AND AFTER: COURTESY OF GLEDISEIGN (2); CONTRACTOR: MADE BY SLADE LLC; WALLPAPER DESIGN: SARA FITZ STUDIO; DSS OFFICE: BEFORE AND AFTER: COURTESY OF CARA GRUBB/LILY PAD (2); THE TICES: COURTESY OF JENNIFER TICE



Meredith and son Morrison.

She saw a void and filled it with care.

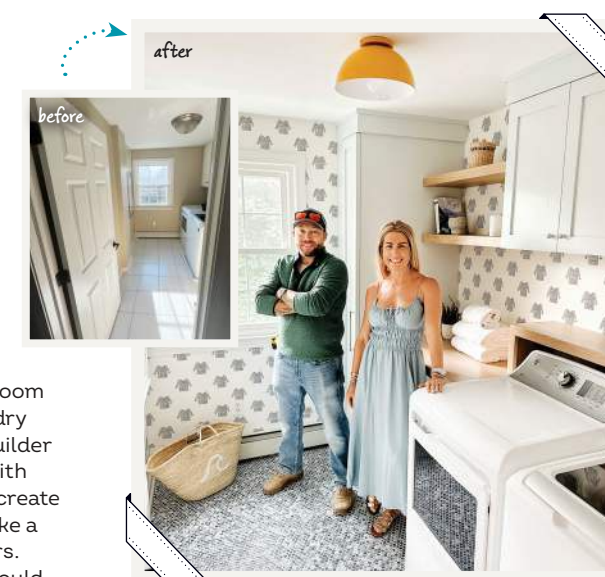
Meredith Wilson Parfet, BOULDER, CO

During the pandemic, Meredith, a part-time hospice chaplain, witnessed the toll the stress, fear, and uncertainty took on the staff at her local hospice unit. "Hospice workers help people pass on, and that's vital yet heavy work," says Meredith. That's why she—along with her then 10-year-old son, Morrison—made over an unused hospital room into "a peaceful place for reflection that's just for them." They covered up medical components of the room and added yoga mats, meditation cushions, and warm and cozy decor. "People come to decompress after intense patient situations or just to get a little sunshine," says Meredith. She's grateful to have found a small way to support her colleagues. "The space gives them room to feel their emotions, because they're so often carrying the emotions of others," she says.

She upgraded a deserving family's laundry room.

Gaëlle Dudley, FAIRFIELD, CT

In 2022, Gaëlle, an interior designer and the owner of GLEDISEIGN (gledesignhome.com), announced a holiday giveaway in which community members could nominate a friend, family member, or neighbor to receive a room makeover. The winning recipient: a father of two who suffered an accident and now uses a wheelchair. As a way to express his gratitude for all that his wife had done, the father asked her to pick the room to be made over, says Gaëlle, and she chose the laundry room, which was a drab space. Gaëlle brought in builder Rich Slade of Made by Slade LLC and partnered with wallpaper artist Sara Fitz as well as local vendors to create a practical, multifunctional room that would feel like a happy sanctuary. The big reveal was filled with tears. "The homeowner said it came out better than she could have imagined," says Gaëlle. The vendors, she adds, didn't hesitate when asked to donate resources to the project: "It's a beautiful story of a community coming together to help a family in need."



Gaëlle (right) and Rich outfitted the space with top-tier cabinetry, stylish wallpaper, tile flooring, and a desk where the homeowner can work or fold laundry.



They're looking out for kids in foster care.

Benjamin and Jennifer Tice, GREER, SC



Lily Pad has spaces in 16 Department of Social Services locations throughout South Carolina.

Since 2013, Jennifer and her husband, Benjamin, have fostered more than 40 children. One day they heard a teen in foster care recall sleeping in the cubicle of her Department of Social Services manager, and the couple thought, *We can do better*. In 2022, they teamed up with interior designer Cara Grubb and founded Lily Pad: A Soft Place to Land (lilypadinc.org), a nonprofit that creates comforting spaces in DSS offices for children, many of whom are dealing with family trauma, to rest, relax, or meet with people such as case managers while waiting for foster home placement. Designed to feel like "a home away from home," Lily Pad spaces have beds, weighted blankets, sensory toys, and rocking chairs. This has let the Tices help many of the children in the foster system they aren't able to welcome into their own home. "We don't get to meet all the children who come to a Lily Pad space," says Jennifer, "but hopefully they'll feel somebody cared about them and loved them enough to do this."