

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## MANSION

### BALANCE SHEET

# The Long Road To a First Home

With this roughly \$1 million renovation, this couple finally owns a home—the first they’ve ever owned—that suits them and their family just fine

BY NANCY KEATES

**E**ric Wiesen first begged Marika Páez to marry him in eighth grade: He was Curly and she was Laurey in their class production of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!”

Since it was a middle-school play, the two just hugged at the wedding, though Mr. Wiesen says he advocated for a kiss. It took them 14 years to start dating — and four more before they tied the knot.

“His grandmother kept asking ‘What took you so long!’ ” says Ms. Páez Wiesen, 46, who is a literacy consultant and author. “It’s like a 1980s rom-com,” says Mr. Wiesen, who is also 46 and a general partner at Bullpen Capital.

Now, after stints of living around the country, always renting, the couple is settled with their two children, Elliot, 10 and Lyra, 8. The family is living back where the couple grew up, just a few miles from where their parents live, in San Rafael in California’s Marin County. It is the first house either has ever owned.



The design of the home by Ann Lowengart Interiors was inspired by a coffee table, above, that Mr. Wiesen inherited from his grandmother

## COSTS

Media Room  
\$50,000

Pool Room  
\$25,000

Bathrooms  
\$125,000

Window Coverings  
\$30,000

Furniture and Fixtures  
\$175,000

Walk-in Closet/  
Structural Work  
(main bedroom)  
\$40,000

**\$1  
MILLION**

Approximate cost of the renovation of the Wiesens' home

Purchase price: \$2.4 million

The immediate appeal of the four-bedroom, four-bathroom, 3,300-square-foot house they bought for \$2.4 million in 2016 was the backyard area. It had a swimming pool, a pool house and a guesthouse, all conducive to the large family gatherings and kid hangouts the couple wanted to host. There was also a lower-level recreation room that reminded Mr. Wiesen of the basement where he had hung out with his brothers growing up.

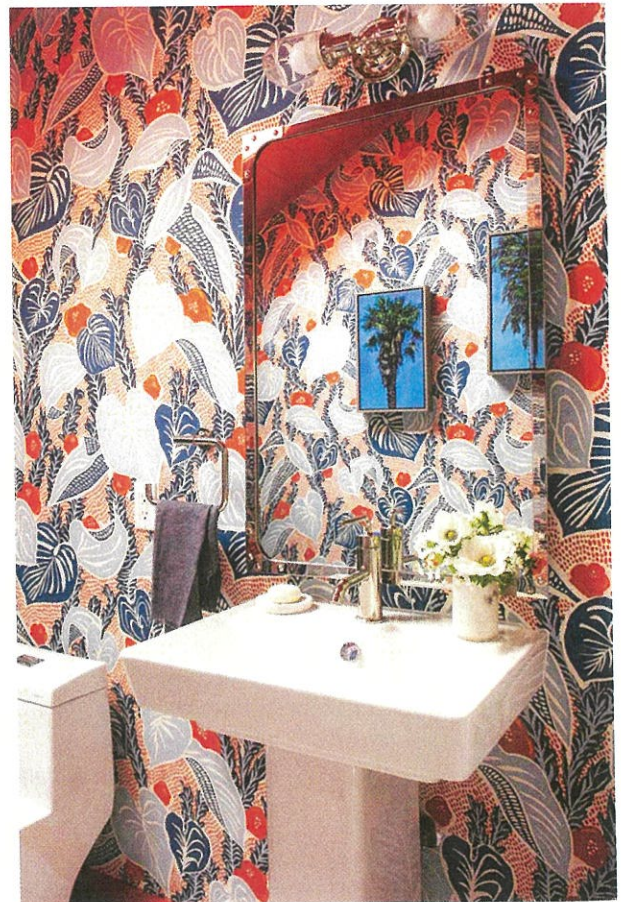
What they didn't like: the beer-stained carpets, broken window coverings and yellowish wood floors. After living with that for four years, the couple embarked on what ended up being a roughly \$1 million renovation, hiring Ann Lowengart Interiors, a design firm with offices in the Bay Area and Palm Beach, Fla.

The ethos of the redesign centered on a vintage coffee table with shades of blue inlaid enamel that Mr. Wiesen inherited from his grandmother. Ms. Lowengart spotted the table immediately because it embodied the couple's

sensibility. "They're hip, cool, different, a little irreverent and full of character," she says.

The coffee table dictated blue hues in the walls, tiles and decor throughout the house. It also set the stage for the infusion of other bright colors, including green tiles in the main bathroom and coral red furniture and pillows.

The couple turned what was a television room, open to the kitchen, into an area for eating and schoolwork. Spending \$12,000 for a new, long wooden table took some convincing, because their old table had cost \$400 at Pier 1, but Ms. Lowengart took them to several stores, showing them what they could get at each price point. They say they realized it was worth it to buy a piece that





Eric Wiesen and Marika Páez Wiesen moved out of their home during the six months that the renovations took place.

The kitchen's floor was sanded and refinished.



would last a long time and that they really loved, since it was the center of their family time.

Ms. Lowengart also helped the couple modernize the all-white kitchen by painting the cabinets black; she led the sanding and refinishing of the wood floors to get rid of the yellow hue. The main bedroom had a tiny closet, so they bumped out a wall and made a walk-in space. All the bathrooms got complete renovations, with new fixtures and tiles; the children's rooms got wallpapered ceilings.

When the couple moved into the house, the only change they could afford was to add a digital projector and speakers to the media room downstairs. Their recent renovation has turned that space into a full theater, with big, plush movie seats, a riser to create two levels and window coverings.

Outside, there is an open, airy pool house, with walls of windows, a fireplace, a television and seating and eating areas. They use the separate guesthouse, which has a bathroom with a shower, as their joint office. The former attached garage is now a gym space.

Neither thought they would ever move back to San Rafael. "I saw myself as a kid there, not a grown-up. I wasn't sure who I'd be if I moved



back home,” says Ms. Páez Wiesen.

After high school, Mr. Wiesen attended University of California, Berkeley, graduated from law school at the University of Michigan in 2001 and went to work at a law firm in Silicon Valley, a job he says he hated. Ms. Páez Wiesen had graduated from Willamette University in Salem, Ore., in 1998 and moved to New York City to work for Teach for America.

The two were good friends, and Ms. Páez Wiesen would spend Thanksgivings with Mr. Wiesen at his grandparents’ house in Scarsdale, N.Y., instead of flying all the way back to California. In 2003, they started dating. Mr. Wiesen moved to New York in 2005, where he went to business school at Columbia University and landed a job at a venture-capital firm. Ms. Páez Wiesen was working at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. The couple lived in a series of small rental apartments on the Upper West Side.

In 2014, they quit their jobs and moved to San Francisco, where Mr. Wiesen joined Bullpen Capital and Ms. Páez Wiesen started her own literacy consulting firm. They decided to relocate to Marin County when they realized that they were spending a lot of time making the 20-mile trip from their rental in Noe Valley



to San Rafael to see family.

The renovation of their new house was scheduled to start in March 2020. They had made all the design decisions and had planned to move into Mr. Wiesen’s mother’s home, which has five bedrooms and a pool. But after the pandemic hit, one of Mr. Wiesen’s brothers had moved there with his family from Los Angeles. The couple pivoted and rented a house in Oahu for their family, Mr. Wiesen’s mother and his brother and his family.

They stayed in Hawaii for six

months. Since they had made all the decisions for the renovation before Covid hit, trucking through six months of long meetings, they felt comfortable leaving the management of the process to Ms. Lowengart. Ms. Páez Wiesen’s mother, whose work involves hanging wallpaper, including for this job, kept an eye on things for the couple. When they returned in April 2021, it was to a fully redesigned home. “It was beyond what we expected. Everything looked beautiful but it still felt like home,” says Ms. Páez Wiesen.