

THE SIMPLER LIFE

Three Dallas families escape the rigors of city life in search of clarity, connection, and reprieve.

RETURN TO HER ROOTS

DENISE MCGAHA WAKES UP WITH THE SUN.

There's work to be done—animals to feed and pastures to fertilize. She and her husband, Scott, hop in their Polaris Ranger and traverse the 20 acres of Decatur land they've owned since July 2021, on the lookout for goats that might've gotten their horns caught in a fence or a cow that's escaped its enclosure. They notice a fallen limb that needs to go in the burn pile and a particularly dry patch of grass that could use more water.

It all goes on the to-do list for later today. »

photography by ELIZABETH LAVIN



Greener Pastures:

Scott and Denise McGaha effort from sunup to sundown to maintain their Decatur property and care for their stable of animals, which includes 10 cattle, 11 goats, untold chickens, herd dogs, and barn cats. "Last night we were doing rock, paper, scissors to see who was going to go put the hay bale out," Denise laughs of the never-ending chores. But their ranch, which they've named Flintlock, has become a refuge the family didn't know they needed—and a source of inspiration. "It sits on a hill. There's beautiful views, and the sunsets are incredible," she says.



Spirit of the South: (this page, clockwise from top) Denise preps an effortless and unfussy dining table for guests—a frequent occurrence, as the couple entertains often here at Flintlock. Behind Mr. Beckley, the McGahas’ long-haired dachshund, stands a coat rack that’s a catchall for utilitarian accessories. The sense of community is strong among neighbors, with the McGahas hosting and attending many an informal gathering, both planned and spontaneous. “We have some neighbors whose barn you can see from our bedroom window. In the winter, if you see the light on and the firepit going, everyone just walks over,” she says. They feel a duty to share this special place with people, which has prompted the conversion of an old dairy barn into a guesthouse, which they will make available for renting.



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Pure Country:

(this page, clockwise from top) Scott holds court while preparing dinner. On the menu tonight: pizza, cooked in a pizza oven Scott fashioned from pavestones and added to the existing outdoor grill. Jeans and boots are part of the dress code; here, Denise shows a friend’s son around the property before introducing him to the animals. The vast night sky is enjoyed briefly by the McGahas before they fall into bed exhausted each night from a long day’s work. Both Scott and Denise cook more often at Flintlock; Denise does a lot of baking here, while Scott’s specialties are “anything in a cast-iron skillet.” Sunday mornings usually begin with him whipping up a batch of his mom’s biscuits.



>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 74

Welcome to Denise’s version of slow living: intentional and purpose giving, yet anything but leisurely.

Yes, ranch life is a far cry from the world of luxury interiors and headline-grabbing home-collection launches to which the Dallas designer has grown accustomed—but it’s perhaps not as far from her core as you might think. Denise grew up on a ranch in Central Texas and was granted a full scholarship from the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo to attend Texas A&M, where she earned an agricultural economics degree. But, she concedes, “I’ve been out of that world since I left home.”

So it was no small surprise when her city-born-and-raised daughter, Jori, found her footing in her high school’s Future Farmers of America organization. Looking for a place to keep Jori’s show cattle, Denise and Scott decamped an hour northwest from Dallas and purchased the 1974 ranch house, which bears a striking similarity—in layout and feel if not exact aesthetics—to the house Denise grew up in. “When I first brought my brother here, he said, ‘You know you’ve just recreated our childhood,’” Denise recalls. “I realized then that he was right.”

Though the house was in disrepair when they purchased it, Denise, unafraid of a challenge, decided to restore it rather than raze it—a choice she admits they might’ve rethought with the benefit of hindsight. Two years later, she says, they are “80 percent done with what we had envisioned we were going to do, and 180 percent into the cash that we thought we would spend.”

But the reward is a home with depth and character ingrained into every board and stone. “Anyone who walks in there, it just kind of—I don’t know how to explain it. It has a soul,” Denise says. “It has this feeling when you get there. I worked so hard to keep it. I wish I could describe it. And I have always thought it was

because it reminds me of my childhood, but other people that visit are like, ‘Oh my gosh, this place is so special. I know why you love it now.’”

Intended as a weekend retreat (though the McGahas find themselves there far more frequently), the property, which they’ve dubbed Flintlock, has given them more than they could have anticipated. During the pandemic, Denise found herself unable to travel and, thus, professionally uninspired. Flintlock has filled that void and then some. “So much of what I’ve designed in the past two years has come from inspiration that I’ve had at Flintlock,” Denise says. She also marvels at how this place has sharpened her perceptive nature, which she credits with making her a skilled designer. “It really heightens your senses even more to live in a world like that,” she notes. “I’m so aware of when the wind blows, what the temperature is, when the rain is going to come, what animal’s acting strange or off.”

But the larger return on investment has been outside of work. Flintlock has given the McGaha family—which includes kids Jaxon, 22, and Jori, 20—a sense of balance. Whereas in Dallas, Denise and Scott’s professional lives keep them busy round the clock—with her eponymous design firm and the orthodontic laboratory he owns—here, they don’t check their watches, and they make a point to leave their day jobs at the door. Whereas in Dallas, Denise is a fixture at glamorous industry events and openings, here, she may wear the same clothes two days in a row without thinking twice.

Flintlock has also given them a sense of belonging, a community. Their neighbors have become close friends, lending a hand by day when a well freezes or loaning a piece of equipment, then convening in evenings to enjoy dinner, spectacular sunsets, and conversation. “It’s a tight-knit group,” Denise says. “It’s like we were meant to be there.” 🐾 >>

text by JESSICA OTTE
styling by JIMMIE HENSLEE



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Frontier Fashion:

(clockwise from top) The Box kids—from left, Boyce (6), Bizzy (4), Boots (2), and Birdie (7)—are ready for a day on the ranch in their Western get-ups. The Boxes hosted an outdoor “pop-up party” in honor of Baxter’s 40th birthday, which Amber credits as one of her favorite memories. “The view goes on for miles and is absolutely breathtaking,” she says. Amber poses for a quick pic in her Instagram-famous mirror. But this time, instead of modeling haute couture, she’s showing off her well-loved Pomegranate “Cactus Flower” blue apron—a domestic staple for the newly learned chef.



HOME ON THE RANGE

Amber Venz Box and her cowboy crew settle into life out West (Texas, that is).

When Dallasite Amber Venz Box first started spending time in the Big Bend area 10 years ago, she quickly fell in love with the landscape and slow pace of life. Along with her husband, Baxter, Amber—the co-founder and president of affiliate marketing giant LTK—eventually developed a hospitality property, The Local Chapter, on the border of the national park in 2017. All that time spent out West had Amber and her family craving the serenity that came with wide-open spaces. “Every time we had to leave [the ranch], I had a sinking feeling,” she says. “I didn’t want to go back to the noisiness and speed of the life I created for myself at ‘home.’”

Over time, she and her family transitioned to living solely at the ranch, learning how to rework their days to fit their new quiet life-style. “Things take longer here, from procuring a meal to visiting a neighbor,” she says. The lack of nearby restaurants, for instance, has prompted the Box family not only to learn to cook but also to pay more attention to the food they’re eating. “We are much more conscious consumers and eaters today than ever before,” she says.

Amber has carried this newfound approach to meals over to her other favorite pastime: entertaining. For her, dressing a table, like dressing herself, is a creative outlet. “Tabletops are the outfits of the ranch,” she says. “I collect high-quality pieces that mix and match, and I try to create a new tabletop each night.” Her favorite event to date was Baxter’s 40th birthday party—a weekend-long affair filled with branded ranch swag, lots of home cooking, good friends, and great conversation. “I try to find ways to personalize events by surprising or delighting my guests,” she says. “And I am always intentional about conversation...finding the right social chemistry.”

All their gatherings have one thing in common: They’re set against the backdrop of the family’s cowboy-chic residence. Amber has worked to create a home that blends into the native landscape, utilizing deep colors,

hard-working materials, and framed prints of photos she has taken around the Big Bend area. The couple strove to create a perfect atmosphere for slow living—one that’s an intentional departure in design from their Dallas home. While Amber didn’t necessarily want to reject her own aesthetic, she says she wanted to embrace the local American-frontier style, employing materials that could stand up to the desert’s elements. “Everything is in its place and is visually stimulating,” she says. “The beauty of the indoors fills my cup and allows me to relax and rest.”

When asked what slow living means to her, Amber points to the purposeful use of her time each and every day—be that flipping through a coffee-table book on the porch while the sun goes down, making each night’s dinner an affair, or, most importantly, spending as much quality time with her four kids as possible. “Moving to the ranch and ejecting from the demands of—and conveniences of—life in the city has empowered us to own our discretionary time and spend more time together as a family,” she says.

From watching her children learn how to ride their bikes to seeing them develop their own cowboy accents—“There’s no way to avoid it!”—Amber is relishing the reframed perspective she’s gotten from remote living. “Our four children are ages 2 to 7, and we were yearning for more time with them,” she says. “Now we get time to love on them, teach them, and live life alongside them.”

by LYDIA BROOKS



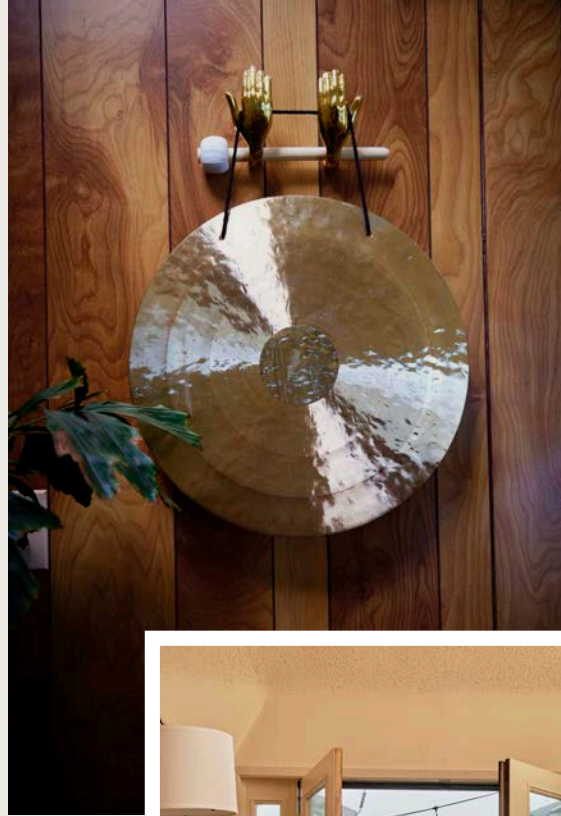
To Big Bend and Back: (clockwise from top) Styled with indigo mud cloth, remote-control tapers, McGee and Co. candlesticks, and ranch-branded dinnerware, this tablescape shows off Amber’s love for dressing the table. “At the ranch, dinner is a big part of our entertainment, so I am sure to set the table every night to match the meal,” she says. One of Amber’s newfound ways to make homemade meals extra special is finding opportunities to incorporate small yet impactful details—like her crowd-pleasing, bun-branded grilled chicken sandwiches. “It’s a cheap thrill, and guests love the detail,” she says. Amber and Boots pose in their matching hats as they prepare to head out for a ride through the mountains on their Can-Ams. Packing a picnic, driving to one of many lookout spots, and enjoying a meal while taking in their property’s spectacular views is a Box family tradition. The Box kids take in the festivities at a neighbor’s rodeo arena. “We walked over after the Fourth of July parade in town and watched the cowboys and cowgirls compete,” says Amber. The couple’s children—including Bizzy, seen here at the window—were Amber and Baxter’s “why” for venturing West. Having spent the last 12 years building her global company, Amber found her personal life too often taking a backseat. “Saying yes to one thing means saying no to something else. I found that my days were filled with ‘nos’ for my family, and I wanted to change that,” she says. When LTK transitioned to a remote-first company during the pandemic, it gave the Boxes the freedom to make the move. Says Amber: “I started dreaming about this scenario back in 2016, and now, in 2023, it is finally a reality—and I am so grateful. The patience required made it even sweeter.”



IMAGES: COURTESY OF AMBER VENZ BOX



Moments of Zen: (above, from left) Helping to set the '70s mood are an abundance of incense, candles, and my ever-present caftans. The gong gives us a symbolic way to start or end the day. It's always fun to summon overnight guests to breakfast that way.



Dome Sweet Dome: While lakefront properties tend to sell quickly, our geodesic dome sat on the market for some time before we snatched it up. I'm sure people found it odd or intimidating to decorate. But we've welcomed the challenge—and reaped the benefits of the energy-efficient and wind-resistant design. Now we can't imagine life without this special place.



FULL CIRCLE

Editorial director Jamie Laubhan-Oliver

and husband Larry relish lake life.



I grew up in a town of 300 people in the Texas Panhandle, where my only sources of entertainment were checking on cattle and rearranging my bedroom. I was restless and wanted nothing more than to escape that town, that way of life. I left the moment I could. When I moved to Dallas in 2003, I marveled at the convenience of urban living. I devoured every inch of the city, with home being merely a quick pit stop for sleep before I ventured out again.

As I got older, I began to enjoy those excursions less and less, preferring weekends spent making upgrades to my Oak Cliff home. Eventually, I ran out of things to do there and needed a new project. Enter: our 1980s geodesic dome at Cedar Creek Lake.

The dome came with a vibe. It *is* a vibe. I felt it the moment we walked in the door. It wasn't an aesthetic I was searching for or even particularly cared for—I never thought my mood board would include carpet, popcorn ceilings, and wood paneling—but we embraced the throwback charm. That's part of what makes it magical: It's a time capsule of nostalgia. With the help of some textured fabrics, terra-cotta tones, and a lot of incense, we made the dome a home. As opposed to our Dallas house, which is photoshoot ready at any given moment, the dome is a place where mistakes can happen and nothing is precious. What started out of necessity to fill an entirely

new space with an entirely new style became a thrilling hunt for thrift store scores, fleamarket finds, and Facebook Marketplace discards.

Each week, we'd wait impatiently for Friday, when we could escape to the lake. The thought of leaving on Sundays dampened our Zen like a snuffed stick of incense. When a career change landed my husband in Tyler, Texas, the dome became the middle ground between our jobs. It seemed natural to make it our main residence and flip Dallas to our second.

I was afraid making our retreat our primary residence would kill the allure, but that hasn't been the case. Instead of an escape from the week, it's now an escape from the day. I stay connected to Dallas, spend my days scouring showrooms, then get a vacation every evening. It's the best of both worlds. And now, weekends in Dallas are a treat—we once again enjoy playing tourists in our own city.

Thanks to this place, I'm seeing the beauty in a simpler way of life. We have a tiny grocery store and three restaurants, which is plenty. We don't have traffic, which is lovely. I don't wear makeup, which has done wonders for my skin. And I'm finding time to be creative again, experimenting with art and taking up cooking. My husband, meanwhile, has discovered a love for singing bowls. We've traded nightly movies on the couch for sound baths under the stars. (With a little help from a projector, the dome makes a great planetarium.)

When we embarked on this project, I didn't realize that the subject would actually be me. Through exploration, I've come into my own and learned what makes me truly happy. Turns out maybe I am a small-town girl at heart—and that's not a bad thing after all. **ID**

by JAMIE LAUBHAN-OLIVER



New Perspectives:

(above) Our two dogs love our days at the lake and have come to expect a sunset golf-cart ride every evening. My small-town roots are never far, thanks to the tumbleweed I brought home from a visit there, which rests atop an armoire gifted from a friend who couldn't fit it in her space. (High ceilings for the win!) (right) In the kitchen, we retained the natural wood and bottle-bottom glass cabinet fronts in keeping with the dome's retro charm. We make good use of the geodesic dome's high, rounded ceilings with our star projector.



Water and Sky:

(above) All my efforts to set a mood through design fall short to the effects that looking out onto the lake have. Nothing lowers your blood pressure after a stressful day like the movement of the water or the moon reflecting big and bright on the surface. (right) We spend many evenings taking in the sunset from the pier.