

Dinner at 400 Center Street – August 17, 2019

A few weeks ago, Mom got permission to include Elsie and I on her invitation to dine with the new owners of 400 Center Street at their home. We thought long and hard about whether we wanted to go – for about half a nanosecond. It was the invitation of the year!

Along with the three of us were neighbors John and Betsy Klinger. We arrived and there was a space open in the familiar gravel driveway at the end of Center St. We pulled in. It was still 400 Center Street; but it was not. Above us stood a veritable McMansion, a stunning, over-the-top, state-of-the-art masterpiece of architecture that was breathtaking up close. I thought, I hope there's enough of the old house to recognize when we enter because I'm not seeing it from the outside!

We approached the house. I told Mom: "You have to knock this time!" But truthfully given the grandeur and majesty of these new digs, I don't think there was any mistaking that this was no longer her home.

Welcoming us in were new owners, a couple, Robert Johnson and Virginia Quesada. A little background: Robert is an electrical engineer who owns a small company in Columbia, Maryland. He hails from Alabama and Tennessee but has lived in the DC area most of his life. He has two grown children from a previous relationship. He's a cheery, talkative fellow whose face is mostly hidden behind beard/mustache/eyebrows that flow into each other. It was his honor to give us the in-depth tour of the house.

Virginia's roots go back to Galicia, Spain (famous end of the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela) but she grew up in New York City. She is a video editor who works on music videos and documentaries and has done work for the likes of National Geographic. She is dark-complected with short, golden brown hair. She was our chef for dinner.

From the get-go, it was apparent that Robert and Virginia had gone all out to honor their predecessors. A meal, a tour, and the introduction of lives to each other were all begging to be comparted - there was so much to share and they were just as at a loss as we were with regard to where to begin. In the end, we sort of did all at the same time.

Before even getting into the house, we stepped through a broad porch that had been added on to the front of the house. Once inside the original front door, the arrangement of the old living room was still intact: fireplace remained with same brick, same stone plates in front of it, and same general parameters: sofa, easy chair (right where my dad's recliner was!), and hallway off to the left toward the bedrooms. The main difference: the classiest décor you can imagine – the sort of stuff you see in magazines. I'll let the photos do the work here: I don't have the vocabulary for the interior!

The familiarity sort of vanished, though, when you pass through the living room to the old dinette, a 'room' which no longer existed. But to make sense of this I must start with the kitchen. The current kitchen is by my best estimation six times the size of Mom's old kitchen. Basically, it's enormous (Mom: "That's the size I always dreamed about!"). There's

an 'island' in the middle of it which I effectively called a 'continent,' roughly 9' x 6'. Obviously, a wall or two, or three, had to be bumped out to make this happen. More or less the entire back of the house was moved a good 8 – 10 feet back to make way for a very open and flowing common area made up of the old dinette, kitchen, and den, and then some. However, I will quickly add that, while the den opens up spaciouly to this common area, it still retains some of its original configuration (wall backing up to fireplace and two of the outer walls still more or less in place). Gigantic picture window in place of big picture window looking out onto park sits between two side windows. One of the sides opens up to an added on screened-in room that adjoins the front of the house. If the spatial relations side of your brain is now feeling bent and twisted, well, that's what will happen when you try to place the blueprint you had of the old house onto this modern, open floor plan. The truth is, houses were just boxier back in the day and today there's a lot more open space. This home takes the trend and knocks it out of the ballpark. And again, the décor: immaculate. Not opulent, just really well done. And just to make sure the guest isn't lost in some sort of DC museum, there on the wall hung a beautiful Craig English print, the first of many we saw later on during the tour.

To give us an idea of the feast awaiting, the hors d'oeuvres consisted of at least eight separate offerings: olives, cheeses, bread, fruit, smoked trout. It was practically a meal unto itself. I wanted to indulge but Robert, who wasn't needed in the kitchen at that moment, couldn't help getting the tour started as we waited. Hors d'oeuvres versus tour of the house? Another nanosecond.

Beyond this sextuple-sized kitchen lay a porch. Same porch as we used to have? Uh, no. Whole new porch extending out to about halfway into the backyard. By this time, I had just about rolled up my old blueprint for good until we stood at the edge of the porch and looked right down onto the border with the Yachups! Hey, when you don't have kids around – who needs a backyard!

The tour continued. Like I said, Robert was a talker which fit the occasion perfectly. As he talked, we realized that they had spent month after month planning, designing, and re-designing with the architect. One of our first questions was: "with the sheer quantity of renovations, why not raze the house and start over?" "We get that a lot," he said. "Here's why: we had heard about this amazing family who lived in this house before and we wanted to honor the legacy; this seemed like a house that had been well lived in and we wanted to build a home that made sense to them were they ever to return to see it." I assured him, representing you all, that we were very impressed!

Robert didn't really have a tour plan so he just launched onto the next section in front of him which was the stairs to the basement. Why not? Down we went. The location, length, and # of stairs – all familiar. The gorgeous wood steps, railing, ceiling – basically all the materials that made up the stairs – completely new and very modern. That sort of epitomized the whole house.

As for the basement, I'll start in the laundry room. Same basic walls. Old oil furnace replaced by new electric one (to be expected: the oil furnace is what caused the 1973 fire!).

Likewise, the tiny end room a.k.a. Father's study – coldest room in house with door to outside – was similarly configured but made into an exercise room. They hadn't really worked on the whole 'mini-apartment for someone else' concept. Because . . .

About where my mom had the washer and dryer was, you guessed it, an opening to yet another addition. They had wondered whether to build a foundation underneath their new porch deck adjoining the 1st floor. Then they thought, we plan to live the rest of our lives here – why not make a caretaker's room for the final days? So off the laundry room, under the old porch, well into the backyard, is a small apartment with bath.

Going back to the bottom of the stairs, they took out the old bathroom, and the walls, and basically made a wide open space encompassing the old TV and rec rooms. This part they have not filled out yet but plan to later. Which brings up the drainage issue. Building on Father's French drain installed circa 2012, Robert has added even more protection: yet another sump pump to add to the collection as well as a drainage ditch along the border with the Yachup's. Oh, there'll be no rain water coming in that home!!

We ascended the stairs back up to the kitchen. Robert asked if he was needed in the kitchen. Virginia said 'no' but that dinner would be ready soon. Nothing to do but tour the final section: upstairs. As we passed the 1st floor bedrooms, we noticed minor changes. Only major change: taking out wall between room where my parents last slept and Father's last study (Carol's old room); this is now Virginia's editing studio.

As we went up the steps to the 2nd floor, we noticed the large 18"-in-depth inset just to the left. They liked that and wanted to be sure to keep it. But they still haven't figured out what to put there. We had ideas – memories of knick-knacks there before – but kept our mouths shut.

So when you get to the top of the stairs – all re-done of course, no more bookshelves over stairs – you can turn left and the configuration remains roughly the same. Again, only major change was taking out wall between master bedroom and the little room to the side. And again, all the décor was strikingly up-to-date, tasteful, and gorgeous.

But now, that's only HALF of the upstairs! Come to the top of the stairs now and, lo and behold, you can turn right and enter the brand new master bedroom suite which looks out over both the park and Center Street. Which brings up another priority of this couple: windows. They told the architect they wanted windows. Lots of them. Why not? That's why they bought the house: the scenery, of course. So every wall that opens to the outside has big broad windows, many more than we had back in the day.

As for the upper deck that my parents had built circa 1990s, no interest. They took that down. I suppose because they had such a good view from the master bedroom.

Feeling like home buyers who had just finished the grand tour, I turned to Robert, tongue in cheek, and declared: "I'll buy it." He howled with laughter.

Our appetite for great architecture now fully satiated, we returned to the 1st floor where dinner was waiting. And what a meal: delicious vegetarian lasagna, big fried shrimp, a wonderful salad, French bread, and more. With any drink we asked for.

Dinner was quite leisurely – no one seemed in any hurry to get through it, so much sharing lives to do. We were able to catch up as well with the Klingers, long-time neighbors of Mother and Father; Mom had gotten quite close to Betsy. Robert and Virginia have apparently gotten quite involved with the Town Council and other town activities. I felt it was important to tell them a little of how my Father related to Washington Grove: he had grown up on the mission field, been steeped in church tradition, sang in choirs, served on boards, etc. But, as he told me on several occasions, in this the home where they would stay for good, he was determined not to forsake involvement in the community by getting over-used inside the church community. To be sure, he served on the Witness Committee at GPC and taught several adult education classes. But trust me, he could have spent much more time and served in many other capacities (elder, for example) but decided to prioritize putting his faith to work outside the church. And that's why he and Mother were very involved in Washington Grove in so many ways.

The icing on the cake was neither frost nor batter: we had ice cream with all the fixings but one of the fixings had a special origin. It was disclosed to us that somewhere along the way, among the many Gordon visits to the house under construction, Alan and Faby had dropped by and met this couple and Faby had given Virginia some chocolate from Ecuador. So wouldn't you know it: the chocolate syrup we had on top of our ice cream was that very chocolate, saved for this event.

Our fellowship continued back at the table. I told them that while there were seven of us that grew up in this house, so many others called this their home. I told them that this house was the one geographical constant for so many of my cousins who got moved around so much growing up on the mission field. Indeed, it was home to many.

It was dark. Elsie reminded me that the next day was Sunday and I had, uh, a few things to prepare for. No one really wanted to leave but the evening couldn't go on forever. Robert and Virginia had truly killed the fatted calf for us in every way and we expressed our thanks, on behalf of the whole family, over and over. And having no further excuse to linger, we departed.

It was an honor to grow up on 400 Center Street. And Robert and Virginia have honored the legacy by taking the property to a new level. I decided that at some Gordon gathering in our home in the not too distant future, we'll have to return the favor and invite them to meet all of you. Good idea?

Norm Gordon