

heart swell

A young Midwestern family trades urban digs for a laid-back spot at the beach—bright colors and big porches included

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Washed-pine trim, woven armchairs, linen-slipcovered furniture, and sky blue glass tiles reflect the Zarczynski family's easygoing sand-and-sea lifestyle.



Knee-high and glassy or waist-high and choppy, no matter: Kris Zarczynski takes waves however they come. “I never miss a chance to surf—if there are waves, then I’m in the water,” he says. The Chicago native and his wife, Kate,

moved from Illinois to this low-key northern Florida community in Ponte Vedra Beach roughly five years ago to chase waves and a more laid-back, outdoors-centric lifestyle. And now, from his second-floor porch across the street from the beach, Kris has an ideal perch for work (he swapped his post as a floor trader at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange to work from home), ensuring he doesn’t miss out on the wave action.

With three young children—Penny, age 9, Luka, 6, and Jaxie, now 4—the Zarczynskis have plenty of action around the house, too. “We wanted a house that was vibrant and colorful and full of life in every room, which is pretty much how we like to live,” says Kate. The two commissioned Jacksonville-based designer Andrew Howard to help create a modern aesthetic energized by graphic punch and vivid hues, a welcome departure from their Chicago condo and its darker colors, Kate says. Howard also understood the family’s practical priorities: indestructible fabrics, durable surfaces, flexible spaces. “Andrew has young children, too. He totally got our chaos,” she says with a laugh.

The lively upstairs playroom opens to a broad porch and a view of the Atlantic. The hanging wicker chair is from Restoration Hardware, and the No. 8 throw pillow is made from a recycled sail. The area rug is by Merida.



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But there was a bit more chaos during the building and design process than the Zarczynskis, Howard, and residential designer Kevin Gray anticipated. The same day the couple closed on the lot, Kate found out she was expecting their third child. Then, at a routine check-up to monitor her pre-existing heart murmur, she learned she'd need major surgery in the next two years to replace a cardiac valve. It was a lot to juggle—both emotionally and logistically—with a home going up at the same time.

The project, they decided, would be divided into two phases—pre- and post-surgery. In addition to completing the construction of the house, phase one would include finishing the main downstairs living area, the master bedroom, the office, the entryway, and the upstairs kids' playroom so Kate would have a comfortable place to convalesce during her recovery

(yes, with a toddler!). “There was a lot going on during the whole process,” she admits.

But the family's resilience was steadfast, and the resulting home is as bright and optimistic in spirit as it is deeply personal. Architectural elements like deep porches and a widow's walk were inspired by summer homes the pair had rented in the past, in surfing hot spots like Southern California and South Carolina. “We wanted to bring the elements that really stood out to us as part of life at the beach to our new house,” says Kris. Inside, they opted for a central living hub, where broad pass-throughs between rooms keep the living room, kitchen, and breakfast nook visually connected. Rustic washed-pine trim frames the spaces and sets a laid-back vibe in line with their beachy locale (and creates a fun contrast to a glossy tile backsplash in the kitchen). Sliding glass doors along the

Clockwise from above, left: Designer Andrew Howard crafted a heart-shaped collage of family photos for the kids' playroom. The rear of the house faces a lagoon, where the family heads out to fish and canoe. Personal collections like vintage surfing books reflect the owners' passion for life at the beach.



Clockwise from above: Cabinetry painted Covington Blue by Benjamin Moore frames a Jim Thompson patterned headboard in the guest room. An abstract painting by Florida artist Casey Matthews hangs above a hand-painted credenza in Kate's office. Surfboard wallpaper and blue cushion fabric make this mudroom right at home at the beach.

rear wall overlook a lagoon where the family canoes and fishes. "Over the years, we'd gotten a good sense of what worked for us and what didn't, and just put it all in one house," says Kris.

And there's artistic harmony at work, too. Brightening the entry is a round mosaic-style painting (inspired by an antique tabletop) that mimics the ocean's electric shades of blue; in Kate's mod office, a hand-painted credenza doubles as funky art. "It started out as a plain Jane white cabinet, but I had seen this piece of modern art on a recent trip to New York and just really loved its geometric design," says Howard. He had a decorative painter adapt a similar pattern to the built-in, and then hung an abstract print by a local Fernandina Beach artist above it.

Perhaps the most personal piece, though, is a heart-shaped collage Howard crafted for Kate using family

photos—a nod to her journey back to health, "and the heart that it took to get through it," Howard says. The collage hangs in the upstairs playroom, where groovy Jonathan Adler draperies frame the entrance to the upstairs porch. "We're always out there at night—it's our favorite spot for reading to the kids before bed," says Kate.

Daylight hours, of course, are for the beach. Penny often heads out with her dad to surf, and they all comb the sand for sharks' teeth and shells. (They've amassed sizable collections of both.) "We love the outdoor lifestyle here," says Kris. "It's why we came to Florida—to be able to be on the beach all year long." ■

Stephanie Hunt writes home stories, features, essays, and travel pieces from her home near the beach in Charleston, South Carolina.

In the breakfast room off the kitchen, a citrus still-life photo by Lucas Allen and a wavy pendant light from Made Goods keep things informal and fresh.

