

# Falling Leaves



*Mid-life, a couple finds a new passion in remodeling and reselling unique homes*

by Andy Steiner  
Photographs by Michael Proebstle and Rock Gjermo

FOR ALL OF THEIR ADULT LIVES, CATHY AND ROCK GJERMO HAD BEEN doing the safe thing. “We had good jobs,” Cathy says, “we had three great kids. We had a nice house.” But a few years ago, *safe* started to feel *boring* for these two corporate engineers.

“We were getting tired of our jobs,” Rock admits. “It might’ve been hitting 40 and reaching that midlife-crisis time. Who knows? But we just wanted to strike out and make a change.” Cathy laughs, “We didn’t buy Harleys or have an affair. Instead we gave ourselves permission to do something we’d been dreaming of doing for a long time.”

The Gjermos’ dream was to start RockCat Home Redevelopment, an Afton-based remodeling company focused on taking existing residential properties and transforming

On the Afton house, the Gjermos salvaged as much of the original cedar siding as possible and added cedar shakes, cedar lap siding, and ledgerstone.





them into showcase homes. Ever since they'd designed and built their own family home, Cathy and Rock discovered just how much they enjoyed the challenge of creating a dwelling that marries both form and function.

"We really liked working on our own place," Cathy recalls, "and we'd visit other people's houses and leave with all sorts of ideas about how they could make them even better. We loved the idea of recreating existing homes."

A year and a half ago, Rock quit his job. Cathy got her real estate license and cut back her corporate gig to just two days a week. They purchased their first project, a 1974 split-level ranch home in Afton sorely in need of a face-lift, gutted it, and added two small additions. Devoting themselves nearly full-time to fixing up the home to resell, the pair lovingly re-named it Falling Leaves. They reconfigured and updated the kitchen, redirected the interior layout, added a new front entry, deck and laundry/mudroom, and installed all new HVAC and plumbing systems.

As passionate fans of architect Sarah Susanka, author of the popular book *The Not-So-Big House*, the Gjermos incorporated many of her design theories into the project, making the completed 2,100-square-foot structure feel both expansive and useful.

The kitchen was transformed from a dark, cramped space to a state-of-the-art showplace, with granite counters, knotty alder cabinets, and flextrac monorail lighting with art-glass pendants. Beautifully designed and installed tile (done by the Gjermos) adds to the home's handcrafted appeal.

PHOTO: Michael Probst/SeattleAllTimes.com





Carefully executed elements, like this built-in seating area in the ground-floor family room, maximize existing space.

## RESOURCES

RockCat Redevelopment  
PO Box 380  
Afton, MN 55001  
651-325-1704  
[funky littleshacks.com](http://funky littleshacks.com)

They also incorporated the house's name wherever possible, including images of leaves on drawer pulls and doorknobs, on a front staircase and even stamped on the entryway's poured concrete floor—extra touches that set Falling Leaves apart from typical remodeling projects and many homes on the market.

"We poured our hearts into this house," Cathy says, pointing out decorative tile the pair installed themselves in the kitchen. "We wanted this to feel like a house that we'd be happy moving into." ■

*Andy Steiner is a St. Paul-based freelance writer. Her book, Spilled Milk: Breastfeeding Adventures and Advice from Less-Than-Perfect Moms, was published this August by Rodale*