

suburban life

SUPER-WOMEN
pg. 52



+
**Also
Inside:**
Top Realtors,
private
schools,
and more

A Bucks County homeowner enlists **Doylestown Builders** to transform an unfinished basement into an elegantly designed "escape" for his entire family.

page 88



'Everything I Was Hoping For'

A BUCKS COUNTY HOMEOWNER ENLISTS **DOYLESTOWN BUILDERS** TO TRANSFORM AN UNFINISHED BASEMENT INTO AN ELEGANTLY DESIGNED "ESCAPE" FOR HIS ENTIRE FAMILY.

BY BILL DONAHUE | PHOTOS BY JODY ROBINSON

A leaky window prompted the initial meeting between Rhett Austell and Jon Atkin. It resulted in a fully transformed, beautifully furnished basement that has become a sanctuary of sorts for Austell and his two young daughters.

"I contacted Jon about the window and he came over to check out the problem," says Austell, a single father who moved into his center hall Colonial in Doylestown approximately two years ago. "I quickly found Jon had a lot of credibility. He got on a ladder and fixed the window, and as we talked I told him I had a few other projects in mind, like putting a portico on the front of the house."

Atkin, the manager of Doylestown Builders, provided Austell with an estimate for the portico. Austell quickly pivoted to the idea of finishing the basement, which at the time had been a 900-square-foot "blank canvas."

"I figured the time and money would be much better spent to make the [basement] space more livable," Austell recalls. "I wanted an inclusive space—for me, for my two daughters, and for all of us together. I work from home, so it was important for me to have a place where I could go to put work behind me. I also wanted a space where my daughters could be active and use their creativity, to build LEGOs or do imaginative play with their Barbies."

Austell was happy to learn that Doylestown Builders specializes in finished basements. Atkin and his team had pretty much seen it all, but Austell had something truly unique in mind: an indoor rock wall, complete with monkey bars and a rope ladder, where his daughters could climb, play, and burn off excess energy.

"You have to consider every detail with something like that," Atkin says. "We had a discussion about the weight of the kids, and I even asked Rhett if he planned on using the rock wall, to make sure it would be structurally sound. Instead of putting up sheetrock, we put up three-quarter-inch plywood and did not scrimp on the size of screws. We tend to overbuild, because we don't want anyone to get hurt."

Although quite impressive, especially given its bold orange color, the rock wall

was just one aspect of a complete reimagining of the basement. Atkin and Austell worked closely on every aspect of the redesign, including the finished ceiling, new flooring, and updated lighting. Also, because Austell and his family planned to spend time in the renovated space all year long, Atkin equipped the formerly "utilitarian" space with an electric-baseboard heating system so the family would be comfortable no matter the season.

"Just as important as the build was the vibe and the aesthetics we wanted down there," Austell says. "We wanted a very comforting and chill place. I have a stressful job, and my girlfriend has a stressful job, so we talk a lot about the Danish concept of *hygge*. The English word derived from it is hug, and it refers to comfort or a warm atmosphere."

The renovation also includes aesthetic enhancements, such as vibrant paint colors, art from local artists, and cozy spaces that promote relaxation.

"The old basement had the most utilitarian staircase, and aesthetically I wanted it to look like the main staircase in the house," Austell adds. "The treads were all beat up, so in the brainstorming process we had the idea of painting the treads. The basement basically has four different colors, one of which is Penn State blue. We used the same paint in a different gloss for the treads, and it really pops."

Audrey Cervellero, an interior designer based in Bucks County, has worked with Atkin on a number of projects, including a finished basement in Buckingham that



included a professional-grade gym that blended “a masculine industrial design with reclaimed pieces.” She says nearly every basement tends to be darker than the rest of the house, but she says numerous design elements—color, lighting, focal points, and furnishings—can help compensate for the lack of natural light.

“Every basement is different,” says Cervellero, who worked in the fashion industry before founding her interior-design firm. “The goal is to make it not look like a basement, and cohesive with the rest of the house. People associate the basement with a storage space, part of the home that’s not really used, but they want to make it so it can be used as a living space.”

The key to turning an unfinished basement into a well-designed living space, she says, is communication—both with the homeowner and with the contractor who is performing the work.

“You have to figure out how to get the final result that combines the vision of the client with your vision that also navigates the space,” says Cervellero. “It’s a very fluid process, and you have to accept that it’s fluid, because things almost never go according to plan. When I’m working with Jon or another contractor, we have the

same goal: a beautiful product and a happy homeowner. To achieve that, you have to make sure you stay on top of every detail.”

The project at Austell’s home began in December 2021 and wrapped up approximately four months later, at a price tag of about \$50,000. Throughout the process, Austell says Atkin and his team were “clean, respectful, and fully cognizant of the fact that I was working and living in the house.” If not for a few minor supply-chain snags and some adjustments to the plan along the way, the renovation likely would have wrapped up sooner. For example, Austell decided well into the project that he wanted to replace the “ugly basement windows” and also mount a high-definition big-screen television on one of the walls, the latter of which required additional electrical work.

“We want you to be happy with our work when we’re long gone,” Atkin says. “Our work has to be of the highest possible quality, but it should also incorporate everything you’re looking to accomplish. If we’re there a little longer because of it, that’s OK.”

Leaving Something Behind

Doylestown Builders used to do work as far away as Philadelphia, New York, and the Jersey Shore. These days, Atkin’s com-

pany works only within 10 miles of Doylestown. Besides finished basements, the company handles every facet of home construction, from a kitchen or bathroom renovation to the creation of a new barn.

Interestingly, construction is something of a second act for Atkin. Born in Sheffield, England, Atkin is a chef by education and training, and established himself as a culinary talent with an international pedigree. He moved to the Philadelphia area in the mid-1980s, and purchased restaurants in Bucks County. He discovered his knack for construction by renovating the restaurants himself. Ultimately, Atkin became so successful in construction that he left his culinary career behind.

“Both careers have a few things in common, in that they’re both hands on, and both require tremendous attention to detail,” he says. “You can make a nice wedding cake and within an hour or two there’s nothing left. If you build a bathroom or a basement in someone’s home, you have left behind something that’s part of you.”

Austell can vouch for the meticulous and artisanal nature of Atkin’s work. He spends time downstairs almost every day, whether he’s running on the treadmill or riding his Peloton bike, playing *Halo* or *Mario Tennis*, or relaxing with his daughters, now ages six and eight. Austell is thrilled with the finished product. In fact, he has already discussed hiring Doylestown Builders for future projects.

“I realized everything I was hoping for with the basement,” Austell says. “I have my kids part-time, so they spend 50 percent of their time here. As soon as they get here, they run down to the basement and pick up whatever they were doing before. For me, it’s a little retreat where I can work out or play video games with my friends. It has become an escape for me and my kids, and we absolutely love it.” ■



➔ For more information about Doylestown Builders, call (215) 297-8600 or visit doylestownbuilders.com.

