



# The Comforts of Home

Growing up poor, Sheila Grubb knew what a difference a beautiful home could make. Now she's redecorating rooms—and lifting spirits—for children and families in need. **By Susan Contreras**

**Sheila Grubb** has never forgotten the hardships of her childhood in Brunswick, Georgia. Her father, an insurance salesman, struggled to make ends meet, and the family was forced to move to a poorer neighborhood across town when Sheila was 7. The following year he died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack. Her mother, Sherolyn, who had stayed home to raise Sheila and her older brother, managed to find full-time work as a bookkeeper, but money was still scarce. Not that Sherolyn ever complained. “She used what little we had, and a lot of elbow grease, to transform our drab little house into a cheerful place, which she had learned from her mother,” says Sheila, 38. “She planted flowers everywhere, painted my room a beautiful sky blue, bought me a new comforter and made three pillows—each with one of my initials—to match. With all that my mom had to deal with,

she still managed to do something really special for me.”

And it made all the difference. Sheila thrived, at home and beyond. After graduating from high school, she moved to Atlanta to study art and art history at Georgia State University, paying her way with student loans and government grants. Eventually she landed a job as a sales associate with the Atlanta Decorative Arts Center at one of their showrooms, which displayed furniture, fabric, lighting and other home accessories for architects, builders and designers. In 1998 a friend asked Sheila to help make over her young daughter's room. “She was so happy with how it turned out I ended up redoing her entire house,” says Sheila. “That experience gave me the confidence to become a freelance interior designer. I didn't realize it at the time, but in a way I was following in my mother's footsteps.”

Sheila had been working as a decorator for several years

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when she learned that a friend at church, Robin Caswell, 20, had been diagnosed with a brain tumor and given only months to live. Sheila helped put together a group of friends to collect furniture, paintings, plants and other items for the small apartment that Robin, a newlywed, was about to move into with her husband, Jovan. Knowing that Robin would soon be confined to her room, Sheila focused on making the space as beautiful as possible. She created a bed canopy by attaching a scarf curtain to the ceiling and walls, and placed the bed so that Robin could look out the window to the yard, where Sheila and other church members would gather and sing to her. When Robin died six months later, “It sparked something in me,” says

Sheila. “Robin and Jovan spent some happy days in the home because it was decorated with love. I wanted to do more of these projects, to lift the spirits of people in need.”

She spread the word among friends, family and colleagues that she was organizing a nonprofit group to continue the work that had started with Robin and Jovan. At a meeting in her living room, toting a well-thumbed copy of *Nonprofit Kit for Dummies*, Sheila recruited a volunteer board of directors. An attorney she knew filed the legal papers—in exchange for Sheila redesigning his office—and the Ruby Slipper Project was born in 2004. It was named in part for her grandmother Ruby Carter, who knew something about miraculous

makeovers on a budget. “She made everything pretty by placing things just so, whether it was a chair, lamp or painting,” says Sheila. “And like Dorothy said in *The Wizard of Oz*, ‘There’s no place like home.’ It’s where we make memories.”

Ruby Slipper has helped a wide range of struggling families and children. The first was Anna Woodard, a hearing-impaired eighth-grader whose father suffers from cerebral palsy. “I learned about her from a friend who was a teacher at Anna’s middle school,” says Sheila. “I went to her home with a bag full of ribbons and fabric swatches and we sat on the floor in her room, where there was just a mattress on the floor, and talked about what she would like. It took a half hour to learn her favorite color was blue. She didn’t have much practice thinking about what she wanted. Her life was all about necessity.” Sheila solicited donations of paint, gently used furniture and more. She then found 10 volunteers who worked for 13 hours straight, transforming the space into a

teen's dream room just in time for Christmas. But they didn't stop there. Ruby Slipper got building supply stores to donate kitchen cabinets, granite countertops and floor tile—as well as workers to install it all—and built a new kitchen for Anna's family.

These days Sheila's wide network of contacts in and around Atlanta let her know when they come across someone who might be a good Ruby Slipper client. She visits the home and talks with the family. If she recommends them and the board approves, Sheila returns with glue, scissors and a notebook with a ruby red cover and asks the client to fill the "wish book" with magazine clippings of rooms they like. "We want people to be part of the process so they have a feeling of ownership and pride in their new space," she says. "We want to spur them to dream." A volunteer interior designer leads each project, and Sheila helps them coordinate donations of material and manpower. Sheila's own family—husband Chris, 40, a structural engineer,



daughter Jordan, 13, and son Brice, 10—is sometimes part of the crew. The kids are all too happy to pick up a paintbrush or act as gofers for grown-ups on the makeover teams. "My mom inspires me," says Jordan. "It's fun to help out, plus I feel like I make a difference in someone's life."

Sheila is proud of everything that Ruby Slipper has accomplished so far. It's brightened up the rooms of teens battling cancer, redone the homes of families who fled to Atlanta after Hurricane

Katrina, and furnished and redecorated a new apartment for a single mom of two whose place was vandalized in a hate crime. The most recent and ambitious project was renovating bedrooms for 12 men between 17 and 22 who had aged out of foster care and were moving into a transitional neighborhood residence.

But like many nonprofits, the project has been hit hard by the economic downturn. Contributions of furniture and other items, as well as cash donations, have fallen significantly. Sheila is now looking for a volunteer with business and management skills to boost fundraising and help bring Ruby Slipper to a new level. "I'd like to see this organization become a model for others to replicate in their communities," she says. "The work we're doing—which is what my mom did for me, and what my grandmother did for her—makes me feel like my life has come full circle. I want to keep paying it forward." ●

**WANT TO HELP?**

Contact Sheila at [sheila@rsproject.org](mailto:sheila@rsproject.org).