

Is it possible to have children and an elegant home? This family does.

By **Jura Koncius** September 22

Ashley Gula, mother of a 1- and 3-year-old, doesn't get much time to relax in the elegant sitting room of her Alexandria home. But if she does decide to take a break in one of its French-style high-back chairs, she can do so secure in the knowledge that the serene space, with its pastoral wallpaper and blue-and-green trellis-pattern rug, is tough enough to withstand two young children clutching mushy Goldfish.

Designer Shazalynn Cavin-Winfrey worked with Ashley and her husband, Mike, a political consultant, to make sure the Gulas' custom-built house has the coveted thoughtful elements of a 21st-century family home. There's the all-important family zone on the first floor: a spacious kitchen with a counter and stools, large family room, and adjacent laundry room with gift wrapping and crafts stations. The bedrooms are cozy retreats, not cavernous spaces stuffed with furniture. A small private office, painted chocolate brown, can be a quiet spot to escape to.

From a practical standpoint, a side-entrance mudroom with a brick floor and wooden lockers deals efficiently with wet boots and damp parkas. A professional organizer developed systems for keeping order in the linen closet, food pantry, bathrooms and clothing closets. The family room walls have metallic woven grasscloth that doesn't show fingerprints. Upholstery and rugs throughout are treated with [GreenShield](#) to resist stains and repel spills.

And, finally, heirlooms, vintage children's books and a framed family tree add the warmth to make the house personal and nurturing.

"Mike and Ashley wanted the house to be comfortable and easy to live in with their children and friends," says Cavin-Winfrey, whose Alexandria firm is [SCW Interiors](#). "They wanted to incorporate color and have the spaces be timeless but quietly sophisticated. Basically, they wanted a happy house that is flexible and that they can grow with and not out of."

"Yes, we have small children and our house can be chaotic," Ashley says about 3-year-old son Bennett and 18-month-old daughter Collins. "We worked hard to make decisions about the house so that we feel comfortable here and that our kids are welcome in every room."

Mike, 36, and Ashley, 32, had been living in an Alexandria townhouse when they decided it was time to move to a bigger place with more green space. They hired Cavin-Winfrey, who helped them find property in the Belle Haven neighborhood in the Alexandria portion of Fairfax County, and select architect Christine A. Kelly of [Crafted Architecture](#).

"It's a traditional house with a modern feel that is open and has tall ceilings and lots of natural light," Kelly says. "They wanted indoor and outdoor space that was well connected, a kitchen with a large walk-in pantry that was open to a family room — things every young family wants."

Cavin-Winfrey collaborated with Kelly on room layout, cabinetry and bathroom and kitchen details. The Gulas "didn't just want spaces for looks," she says. "They wanted to use every inch of space for their lifestyle and for the long haul." Ashley had combed through Pinterest, Houzz and Instagram for inspiration, and Cavin-Winfrey talked with her about the trade-offs between ideas gleaned there and "the need to create a design for longevity." She also turned to furniture and family heirlooms the Gulas owned. "You are the conservator of your own family history. It's important to bring some of your past into your own home and honor it," she says.

An organization plan was key. "In our old house I grew to understand the

need of being organized, especially as a new mom,” says Ashley, who worked in public relations before becoming a stay-at-home mom after Bennett was born. She hired Rachel Rosenthal, a professional organizer whose Bethesda-based firm is [Rachel and Company](#), to create functional and stylish systems. Rosenthal asked the couple how they saw each space functioning and came up with creative solutions while complementing Cavin-Winfrey’s interiors.

From the front door, a gracious entry hall leads to the more intimate spaces: the sitting room, dining room and home office. The 12-by-12-foot sitting room has walls covered with woodland scenes by [Susan Harter](#), an artist whose custom canvas wallpaper is digitally printed with her original murals. This one is Cotswolds Sky, inspired by the British countryside that reminds Ashley of Virginia. The dining room is done in silver and champagne.

The hub of the house is the family room and kitchen area. “It’s a place we can all be comfortable and the kids can play,” Ashley says. “This is where all the action happens.” Toys are stored in canvas drum bins under a large upholstered ottoman from Wisteria. The aqua pebbled leather on the counter stools and banquette can be wiped clean.

The laundry room just off the kitchen is an inspiring space that would do Marie Kondo proud. The beautifully wallpapered room is much more than a place to wash clothes: Metallic woven bins on high shelves hold laundry detergents and vacuum bags, clear acrylic trays corral art supplies, and drawers are outfitted with containers for ribbon and gift bag storage. The nearby pantry compartmentalizes snacks and staples in clear plastic bins. “You don’t overbuy when you can see things,” Rosenthal says. “I designed everything not as a one-time event, but as a way of life.”

Upstairs, there are four bedrooms, one for guests. The master bedroom, a peaceful spot in a light-filled corner of the house, is decorated in champagne, pale blue and gold. Cavin-Winfrey painted the walls [Farrow & Ball Skylight](#), which she says matches the color of Ashley’s eyes.

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The kids' bedrooms were designed with a nod to the past and an eye to the future. The wallpapers can be cleaned with a damp sponge. Collins's room is pink, yellow and aqua and has Ashley's childhood rocker. A white lacquer chest will be used as a nightstand when Collins eventually gets two twin beds. There are books and needlework passed down from both sides of the family. Bennett's room has a large storage cabinet repurposed from the Gulas' old house. His bed is tucked into a niche, which, Cavin-Winfrey explains, makes a child feel safe. His dad's college baseball jersey, bat and balls are framed above his bed.

"My philosophy is that you don't need intermediate pieces for the kids," says Cavin-Winfrey. "You should reuse things you have or buy things that will grow with them. Kids have to learn to live around beautiful things and respect their own and other people's homes."

"Shazalynn made us think past the baby stage," Ashley says. "This home will grow and evolve with us."

Jura Koncius has covered style, home and design for The Washington Post for 40 years.

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