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When Kate and Aaron Anker purchased their home in Cape Elizabeth, it was a simple ranch, which fit their needs at the time. However, as their family grew, they discovered they needed a little more space and decided to undertake an expansion. **Opposite page:** Kate sits in her open and airy living room, where she's surrounded by art and natural light. The ceramic sculpture on the coffee table is by artist Christine Caswell, who also serves as the clay center manager at Kate's artist space, Running With Scissors.



Playful + Practical

INSIDE KATE AND AARON ANKER'S SPLIT-LEVEL RANCH IN CAPE ELIZABETH, YOU'LL FIND PAINTINGS BY LOCAL ARTISTS, RECLAIMED WOOD, ECO-FRIENDLY MATERIALS, AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF LEGOS.

The year was 1999, and Kate Mathison was walking along Portland's Eastern Promenade when she saw a vintage VW bus. She began nosing around the vehicle. "I was trying to figure out who owned it so I could get my angle on how to approach him," Kate says. At the time, Kate was a recent art school graduate who had just relocated from Minnesota to Portland. The van belonged to a man named Aaron Anker, who happened to be playing Frisbee on the nearby grass.

"When I got the bus in 1993, my grandmother told me I was crazy," Aaron remembers. "She owned one in the '60s and '70s, but I bought it because I wanted to always have a place to sleep. So I told [Kate] it wasn't for sale, because someday I wanted to have a family and take them camping." He asked for her phone number; she gave him her digits. Fast-forward 18 years. The couple is married (and she now goes by Kate Anker) with two kids, a Portuguese water dog named Luna, and an extensive art collection that hangs in their quirky, newly expanded house in Cape Elizabeth. (They still have that bus, too, and they have taken it camping many times.)

My first impression of this couple is one of easygoing warmth. The moment I enter their foyer, I'm greeted by a bouncing dog and Aaron's offer of tea, which he serves in

by KATY KELLEHER
Photography by ERIN LITTLE





“SUSTAINABILITY ISN'T A BUZZWORD FOR ME. AND IT ISN'T JUST ABOUT ENVIRONMENTALISM. IT'S ABOUT DOING THINGS IN A MEASURED WAY.”



Opposite page: In the time between the story interview and the visit from photographer Erin Little, Kate and Aaron hung this colorful and marine-inspired piece by Carter Shappy in their foyer, where it now greets visitors.
This page: Kate is an accomplished potter, and many of her works can be seen throughout the house. On the dining room table rests an original vase by Kate.



handmade ceramic cups. As we sit on their minimalist couches in the sunny living room, conversation winds from art to food to green energy until we're back to where we started, talking about their home life in Maine.

"As a couple, we have a lot of fun creating cool stuff together," Aaron says. He could be talking about their intricate Lego structures, which Kate and Aaron construct in their spare time and set on shelves and stools all around the house. Or he could be talking about either of their professional lives—Aaron is the co-owner of GrandyOats, an organic granola company based in Hiram, and Kate is the owner and director of a Portland artists' space, Running with Scissors. Or he could even be talking about their two young daughters, who arrive home from school while we're talking and bound upstairs with art projects in tow. But truly, he's talking about all of their accomplishments and ongoing projects, including the four walls that rise up around us.

"This house is an extension of our creations," he says. "When we decided to redo the house

"WE WANTED TO HAVE A PLACE WHERE WE COULD REALLY LIVE AND BE COMFORTABLE."

and to expand it, we knew we wanted to work with local builders and architects, and be as environmentally friendly as possible." In 2014, after a decade of living in their 1950s raised ranch, the couple decided to hire Portland-based architecture firm Briburn to update the structure, knocking down walls, adding windows, and creating an open and inviting floor plan that ushers guests from the foyer into the kitchen, dining, and living room areas. "Our immediate goal was to have more

family space, and to bring more light into the house," says Kate. They also hired Ron Spidle of Vindle Builders to facilitate construction. "We knew Ron because his wife was a teacher at my daughter's preschool," Aaron adds. "We like knowing who we're working with, right down to the prints we're going to hang on the wall," he says, gesturing towards a massive piece that Kate has unfurled on the floor. It's a print by Maine-based artist (and Running with Scissors print shop director) Carter Shappy, and as soon as they find a big enough Plexiglass frame, this ten-foot-by-four-foot abstract swirl (inspired by fishing nets and seaweed) will hang in their entryway near a piece Kate painted when she was 16 and a painting by fellow Running with Scissors artist Robert Nason.

In addition to supporting local artists and companies, it was also important to the Ankers that their home reflect their commitment to environmentally sustainable practices. "Cutting down trees pained us," says Kate, although it was necessary to remove a few trees in the yard to make space for the expansion. "But we looked really

Opposite page, from left: Kate and Aaron designed and built this quirky loft space for their kids in a single weekend. This vintage Asian cabinet sits in their open living room/dining room area. The owl painting shown above is by Flynn Costello. The liquid ceramic vessel that sits next to the painting is by artist Sequoia Miller. **This page:** The family dog, Luna, hangs out on the couch underneath paintings and prints that Kate and Aaron purchased during their travels around Maine and abroad.



The family gathers in the kitchen for breakfast and conversation. Ceramics by Kelly Donohoe and Mitsuo Kakutani, granola by GrandyOats.



closely at the products we brought in.” The couple decided to use Cambia, a product made from sustainably harvested wood from North American forests, for the exterior siding. Cambia is a durable, non-toxic, and warp-resistant alternative to exotic wood, made by exposing ash and poplar lumber to high heat in a controlled environment at the Northland Forest Products facility in New Hampshire. On the deck, they opted for a product called Kebony, which uses a process developed in Norway to create durable hard wood from sustainable softwoods by soaking boards in a non-toxic biomass solution before curing and drying them. The end result is rot-resistant and has a 25-year warranty. “We had a lot of fun learning about these cool green building products,” Aaron says.

For Aaron, being sustainable is about more than just buying products with an organic sticker or an eco-friendly tagline. It’s about understanding the process behind each item he brings into his house, knowing how it came to exist and what resources were required for its creation. “Sustainability isn’t a buzzword for me,” he says. “And it isn’t just about environmentalism. It’s about doing things in a measured way. It means building things slow and steady, with a balanced approach.”

The couple likes to set their sights on a goal and work methodically and slowly to reach it, a practice that has benefited their creative businesses and their home life. At GrandyOats, Aaron (alongside co-owner and business partner, Nat Peirce) oversees the production of small-batch organic granolas, cereals, and trail mixes, which are made in an old school building entirely powered by solar energy and feature locally grown ingredients whenever possible. The company prides itself on employing a bunch of “real granolas” (their winking euphemism for “hippie”). Running with Scissors has a similarly community-oriented mission, welcoming artists from various disciplines and supporting the greater Portland art scene by offering shared workspace and access to otherwise cost-prohibitive equipment. As director, it’s Kate’s job to help promote the work of the painters, printmakers, ceramicists, woodworkers, and jewelers who use the studio space. Aaron jokingly refers to her as the “Mother of Artists” before praising her for her values-based leadership style. “It’s been wonderful to watch Kate go through the process of working as an artist to becoming an advocate, coach, and helper for everyone else,” he says.

The desire to bring people together translates

into their living space in the form of a light-filled, open living area, designed specifically for entertaining guests. The Ankers chose furniture for their living room that was low to the ground (so it would be easier to hold conversations over and around it) and easy to move (so they could drag the sofas out of the way and create a dance floor). On one wall, they built in a system of shelves to house their collection of sculptures and their many board games. “We’re big board game people,” Aaron says. They love playing Ticket to Ride and Settlers of Catan with their daughters, and when friends come over, they often pull out a deck of cards or a pair of dice.

“We knew we didn’t want a formal dining room,” Kate adds. Kate and Aaron would rather build with Legos or host a dance party than have an elaborate sit-down dinner party. “We wanted to have a place where we could really live and be comfortable,” she says. It’s a bit bigger than a VW bus, but in this creative and clever Cape Elizabeth home, Kate and Aaron have built a congruous space for all their projects and passions. ✚



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