

as featured in

# Lake Minnetonka

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## The Giving Spirit

A life full of blessings inspires Lake Minnetonka's domestic diva, Teri Bennett, to give back to others

### WINTER WONDERLAND

The best ways to enjoy the season, indoors and out

plus Go for the Glam with **NEW YEAR'S EVE FASHIONS**

**I**N A LUXURIOUSLY COZY HOME ON A CURVY TONKA BAY STREET, THE HOLIDAYS ARE ABOUT TO BEGIN. “It’s the official kick-off to Christmas for us,” says local domestic maven Teri Bennett, referring to the day she’ll invite her mother and sisters over to make holiday hostess gifts. “We make a whole season worth of gifts in a day,” Bennett says. “Mostly it’s just an excuse to get together.”

Not that Teri Bennett needs an excuse. From the moment a guest steps through her

they work themselves to death. It’s always better to just keep it simple,” she says. She picks up a stack of napkins from her kitchen shelf and continues: “This isn’t a fancy napkin holder. It’s a door knocker. But if you recognize the possibility, it makes these napkins really memorable. That’s what my business is all about—simple, different ways to make life memorable.”

The business she refers to is Simply Different, and it is the umbrella under which Bennett indulges her finesse for art, design

They’re so warm and loving—it’s really easy to see why kids love them.”

Throughout the course of decades of caring for Minnesota’s children in need, the Sharps’ home had become severely worn and needed drastic repair. “These are people who’ve spent their entire lives caring for other people, to the point that they needed some help caring for their home. The floors were just plywood, and the sheetrock wasn’t taped. My friend Jim Brannon had been trying to help them fix the house, but it was tough. You couldn’t

just give them flooring because the foundation was cracked. You couldn’t fix a faucet because the pipes needed to be replaced,” Bennett says. “When Jim’s wife Marty explained that they wanted to fix up this house, I thought, ‘Hey, I’m in this industry! Let’s see what we can do!’ So we sat down with the Sharps, and to my surprise, they were on board.”

The outpouring of generosity that followed astounded everyone involved. “I made a phone call, and a friend agreed to donate a roof,” she says. “I thought, ‘Wow, that was easy.’ So I kept making phone calls. Everyone was like, ‘Sure! Great!’ The whole thing absolutely mushroomed.” Within two weeks, the stage was set to completely rebuild the residence that would come to be known as the “Velveteen Rabbit house,” a house that had been loved to its very threads.

Word spread about The Sharp Project, and a massive outpouring of volunteers and donors began work on the Sharps’ home last spring. For Bennett, the endeavor was an exercise in trust. “We stripped the house down to the studs, and it occurred to me

# AGIVING SPIRIT

Lake Minnetonka’s “domestic diva,” Teri Bennett,  
is always inspired to give back to others

front door, it’s apparent that her home—and her life—are virtually built on the foundation of entertaining. “I’ve always been a hostess, to some degree,” she says, referring to a childhood spent in her mother’s kitchen at Excelsior’s quaint and legendary Antiquity Rose. “My sisters and I all learned to cook there, and once you’ve learned to cook in a restaurant, you can entertain any number of people.”

It is an unexpectedly simple explanation for the genesis of a woman whose business includes everything from interior design to writing and illustrating children’s books, but it doesn’t take long to discover that simplicity is what it’s all about for Bennett. “People just freak themselves out about entertaining. They think it has to be overwhelming, and

and a host of other imaginative outlets. “I do a little bit of a lot of things. One year, I painted and sold a thousand pairs of tennis shoes. I did Baby Rose’s kid’s line. I wrote a children’s book, *Angel Dog Austin*,” she says with a chuckle. “I’m a painter. I’m the Home Specialist for Mall of America. My husband and kids just laugh at me. They’re like, ‘Oh, no ... what is she doing now?’ There’s always some new big thing.”

Nearby, another Tonka Bay family is settling in for their first Christmas in a newly rebuilt home courtesy of Bennett’s most recent “big thing.” “The Sharp Family is really just amazing,” she says. “They’ve taken in more than 30 foster children. They’ve adopted two children, and they’ve got three of their own.





< **FAMILY FIRST**  
Teri and Steve Bennett  
and their sons

that we had less than \$10,000 and there was no house. It would have been a disaster if anything had fallen through.” She credits her faith with sustaining the operation. “I really believed that it was God’s house that we were building for this incredible family, and so it wasn’t too hard to keep moving forward, even when I was worried about our budget. When you’re walking on water and it’s going along fine, you’ve got to just keep on walking!”

From a design standpoint, Bennett gave the Sharps’ home the distinctly cozy flair that defines her style. “I believe in making a home look like it should be really lived in, really loved. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a million-plus dollar home. No one wants to live in a model house or a showroom. It needs to be special, to reflect the people who live there. My favorite part of the project is that we were able to give each of the Sharps a really special place of their own. We put a lot of thought into that.”

In August, after three months of living in a donated apartment, the Sharps returned to their home to find more functional—and beautiful—than it had ever been. “I’m just so excited that we did it,” she says. “It’s great to be able to recognize what they’ve done for their kids in this way.”

Back at the her own house, preparations are underway for Bennett’s annual Toys for Tots coffee. “It started out as a few girlfriends getting together for coffee, and now there are like 200 people involved!” she says. “Last year we filled two pickup trucks with toys.”

When asked if the spirit of giving defines her holidays, Bennett reflects for a moment before answering: “I’d say it defines my life. It’s so fun! People just aren’t daring enough. They

“I do a little bit of a lot of things ... My husband and kids just laugh at me. They’re like, ‘Oh, no ... what is she doing now?’ There’s always some new big thing.” —**TERI BENNETT**

think that to make a difference, you have to go to a third-world country or you have to build a house. But everyone’s been in a restaurant and seen a lady with two kids who was obviously stressed out. Buy her lunch! Hand a gift card to the child of someone you know needs it. You never regret what you do for someone. It always comes back. Always, always, always.”

With a twinkle in her eye, the woman who is Simply Different says, “It doesn’t have to be so big or so elaborate to mean the world to someone. It’s just like anything else—just keep it simple.”

Kate Kunkel is a Minnetonka-based freelance writer.

**HELPING HANDS >**

Teri Bennett with volunteers who worked on the Sharps’ home.



< **THE FAMILY**

Steve and Jean Sharp with two of their children.



**BEGINNING THE WORK >**

A local minister came to bless the project as it got underway.



**BEFORE >** Brandon Williams, and Teri and Shelly Kruse work on the early stages of renovating the Sharp family’s home.

**AFTER >**

A beautiful new home for one of the area’s most generous families.

