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RESTORATION

Homeowner **DEBBIE MENDES** shares her story and how her “Happy Healing Place” provides the quiet strength she needs for the fight of her life.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREVOR POVAH







It took Debbie Mendes more than a year of dedicated effort—lots of time and money—to finally obtain the permit to demolish her old oceanfront bungalow in Pismo Beach. Then, she decided not to do it.

Following what was to be a final meeting with her architect, she met her three daughters, and a friend out for lunch. It was to be a

celebration of sorts, as the demolition crew was scheduled to roll up on Cypress Street the next day. “They were all talking,” Mendes recalls, “and then something just hit me. I told them, ‘I’m not going to knock it down.’ They all asked me, ‘Why?’ and I said, ‘I don’t know. I really don’t know why.’”

It could be that Mendes saw something in



that home that she also sees in herself. Both have been knocked around, but keep getting back up. For better or worse, they are kindred spirits. A year after buying the home that she had fallen in love with long ago, Mendes began experiencing strange symptoms. She thought she was having a series of strokes. One doctor referred her to another, then another until she found herself at the

Stanford Medical Clinic where an AVM (arteriovenous malformation) was found in her brain. She was presented with three options, one being a very aggressive six-hour nip-it-in-the-bud surgical option. Mendes, displaying her characteristic decisiveness, said, "Let's do it. I don't need to think about it. Take it out. It's yours. I don't want it." The operation was a success, and Mendes spent

many hours recuperating as she watched the tide roll in and back out again from her living room window atop the cliff north of the pier. It was during those early years when Mendes christened her house, "Deb's Happy Healing Place."

Over time, the home came to represent family, and togetherness, as it served as a headquarters >>



for Mendes' seven grandkids who loved to visit grandma and spend precious time getting to know one another on the sun-drenched sand below. Despite its outward appearance, the little 1,660-square foot bungalow-by-the-sea was wearing a brave face as it was taking a pounding from the heavy, salt-laden ocean air day after day. It was falling apart. Mendes knew it. And she had to do something.

Tearing it down and building something new was the obvious choice. In the weeks leading up to demo day, one of her daughters brought over some markers. She thought it would be fun if everyone could say, "Goodbye," to the old house by writing messages on one section of the hallway wall. Before long, everyone in the family took turns sharing their feelings for the house with every color the set of

Crayolas provided. The commemoration grew to the dimensions of one of those oversized checks presented to lottery winners, and it sat quietly tucked away as it awaited its fate. Mendes stopped to read the notes each time she walked down the hallway. And the tribute opened a floodgate of emotions.

Again, Mendes and her little house found >>



themselves in similar predicaments, as the diagnosis for both of them left little room for optimism. While the bungalow awaited its date with a bulldozer, Mendes was deep into a fight with cancer. She had recently learned that the lump in her breast had spread to her liver, and that twelve tumors were in her brain. Now, having endured twenty rounds of radiation,

Mendes declares matter-of-factly, yet defiantly, "I've never felt sick. Never felt a thing. Felt great the whole time." In her next breath, she heaps credit for her medical progress so far on her happy healing place. Mendes pauses to reflect for a moment. "When I'm here things are different," she shares while taking in a sweeping ocean view. "I know I'm going to be okay."

When she called San Luis Obispo-based home builder Robbins|Reed Inc. to tell them about her lunchtime epiphany, explaining that she had opted for a remodel over new construction, it was a major blow. Months of planning, scheduling, estimating, ordering, and coordinating vaporized into the ether. Although the company specializes in custom home >>



HAPPY HEALING PLACE

Wearing “Team Deb” t-shirts, Mendes is treated to the unveiling of her newly remodeled home by family, friends, and an assortment of people who had worked on the project.

construction and shies away from remodeling projects, there was something about Mendes and her pluckiness that won them over. The team, after digesting the news, agreed to pivot along with their client and bring the happy healing place roaring back to vibrancy. If Mendes wanted a remodel—or more accurately a



TREVOR POVAH is an architectural photographer here on the Central Coast.

restoration—that is exactly what she would get. Since everyone was already geared up to build a home, the process was lightning-fast. Mendes spent her time in a rental property across town scanning the internet for ideas. Every time she found something she liked, a particular type of kitchen flooring for example, she would email a photo to the builder. Her ideas were added daily, on the fly. Because she was not able to drive, Mendes put a lot of trust in her team and her daughters, who became involved in the project along the way. Aside from an occasional Uber ride across town to check progress, Mendes was mostly kept in the dark as she waited in

anticipation. When the completion date arrived, her family decided that a surprise, reality show-style “reveal” was in order. The day Mendes walked up to the house for the first time since its makeover, she was overcome. Her family, friends, and the people who had worked on the project were all there, and the energy from the happy healing place was beaming anew. While she was being led through the remodeled 3-bedroom, 2-bath house for the first time, she gasped with surprise as she stopped in the hallway; there, sandwiched between the family photos, was a framed piece of the wall from the original home—complete with the handwritten notes that said it all. **SLO LIFE**