

GREENFIELD HILL NEIGHBORS

September
2021



The Oretas:
Finding Joy in the Journey



The Oretas:

Finding Joy in the Journey

By Jennifer K. Covino • Photographs by Luanne Kelly Sliva

Kelsie Oreta is an artist, a writer, a mother and a wife. A fierce defender of family. An avid reader. A passionate environmental advocate. A fireball of competitiveness and creativity. So much of this is apparent within minutes of stepping into the foyer of the Oreta's neat, white-shingled home located paces from the Greenfield Hill Shopping Center. It's traditional on the outside, and anything but on the inside.

To the right of the front door, a series of free-spirited Keith Haring-inspired canvases march up the staircase. Kelsie painted and mounted them during quarantine to capture activities the family (husband, Mark, and sons, Tobias, 13, and Elvis, 3)

love, whether it's hanging at home or snowboarding at Powder Ridge. At the top of the steps hangs a circular woven design, its swirling strings of cream and black symbolizing the yin-yang union between the spontaneous Kelsie and the analytical Mark.

In the living room to the left, the fireplace is flanked by DIY wallpapered shelves. Dozens of books are arranged by color, mostly non-fiction ones on topics ranging from the Black experience in America to gender identity to sustainable gardening. They represent Kelsie's constant quest for knowledge and understanding of the world around her, and how it is experienced by others from different walks of life. Many have highlighted



Photo by Kelsie Oreta



passages and dog-eared pages that Kelsie refers back to from time to time.

On the opposite wall, a gallery of gold-framed photos highlights the family's passion for travel and adventure. Here are the Oretas, bouldering in Colorado, exploring the bottom of the Grand Canyon, spotting llamas in Peru and swimming with whale sharks in the Philippines, where Mark's family is from. The furnishings represent Kelsie's commitment to sustainability and her own unique design aesthetic. Nearly every item is second-hand: A trio of mismatched armchairs scored on Craig's List, a drink table with brass legs that resemble chicken feet, a pair of mid-century modern floor lamps. A 1970s-era Magnavox TV, emptied of its inner workings and filled with rainbow-hued hardbound books stacked like firewood, creates an unexpected sculptural work of art.

While the décor reads more Kelsie than Mark, he sits comfortably in the room, the two looking to one another to complete stories, a bit of verbal sparring going on as they recount how they first met. In 2010, Kelsie was working at a local bar and grill while completing her degree in public relations at the University of Houston. One particularly slow evening, she trounced Mark during several rounds of cards. Mark was intrigued. He liked this girl who wanted to win. Months later, the Texas natives ran into one another at the gym. Mark had lost 50 pounds and was barely recognizable. He was training for the Houston marathon. Kelsie started training for a marathon as well. After six months and a string of weekend 5K races as friends, Mark asked Kelsie out on their first date. The couple married in 2014 at Joshua Tree National Park in California.

Today, fitness is still a big part of their routines, each trying to best the other at who gets the earliest exercise slot. Mark likes to run to "clear his mind," Kelsie attends 5:30 am daily workout classes, and the whole family is often spotted jogging or cycling in a convoy along Bronson Road and neighboring streets. When he's not wearing out the treads on his sneakers, Mark is pacing the kitchen, throwing around terms like "immersion" and "emulsify" as he puts his Food Network-trained skills to the test. True to his data-driven personality, he made daily meal plans and careful shopping lists during quarantine, with the goal of visiting grocery stores only once every two weeks. Among his repertoire are sweet potato hash and andouille sausage breakfast burritos, mixed fruit cobbler, white chocolate malpua, blackened fish tacos, and, of course, sourdough bread.

Mark, is happiest, however, in front of a computer screen. As a child, he was nationally ranked in software development. "I even skipped my senior prom to attend a three-hour coding competition," says Mark, who is currently chief technology officer at JobTarget in Stamford. A corporate move brought the Oretas to the East Coast in 2015. They explored areas of New Jersey, Brooklyn and Westchester County in search of a town with a good commute to the city, excellent schools and open space for Laser Beams, their black Labrador/terrier rescue mix. Fairfield was number one on their list.



Photo by by Kelsie Oreta

The family settled in a small Cape in Southport, but a few years later, with Elvis on the way, they moved further north in search of more space. They ended up at the tippy-top of Southport. "Our house was listed as 'Southport meets Greenfield Hill,' and it's really delivered on the best of both neighborhoods," says Kelsie. "I love that we're just a bike ride away from Pequot Library, Southport Harbor and Southport Beach, while still feeling like we live in the woods, with several nearby farms. I can peek out my window and see a horse grazing in my neighbor's yard."

Tobias can walk over to Testo's Greenfield Hill Market when Mark's missing an ingredient for dinner. On Saturdays, they grab fresh produce from the Greenfield Hill Farmer's Market, and they are excited about the recent re-location of the landscape nursery, NATIVE. "I can wagon Elvis over on a whim and come home with a new leafy friend without even hopping in the car," says Kelsie. Even Laser likes to visit the Commons. On several occasions, he's wriggled his way under or around a fence in the backyard, waded across a stream, and emerged, tail wagging, on the doorstep of Lexington Home & Garden or Coreen's Bridge Floral. "When I'm not panicking about his temporary disappearance, I joke that he's on the neighborhood welcoming committee," Kelsie says.

Speaking of welcoming, Kelsie admits she had a hard time finding her place in Fairfield County when the family first arrived. It seemed harder to meet people than it had in Texas. When Elvis was five months old, the Oretas took a trip to Hong Kong and to the Philippines, where Mark's family is from. Surrounded by Mark's aunts and cousins, "I could see Elvis turning around to look at different people," says Kelsie. "I saw how alive and alert he was." Back in Connecticut, Kelsie started attending story times at the library, joined playgroups and baby gyms and found a gym for herself with childcare. Today, the social Elvis enjoys preschool, Sandcastle Playground, soccer and ShopRite, where the friendly staff knows him by name. He also loves robots, sea creatures and boats and the color yellow. Like his dad, he's shown an early interest in coding and "enjeering."

Tobias has inherited his mom's artistic talent and spends hours drawing characters and developing storylines about them. He's also learning to play the guitar, enjoys theater and is a natural at snowboarding, leveling up his tricks at the terrain park each year. Kelsie says she's inspired by his discipline, and in addition to DIY projects around the house, she's recommitted herself to painting. She works on impressionist landscapes in a sunny four-season room overlooking the backyard. The space does double duty as the family's mudroom. "I call it the shoe-dio, because it's for painting, but also where the shoes go," she jokes.

Kelsie's latest paintings reflect her passion for native plants and the role they play in biodiversity and the prevention of climate change. Native plants create deep root systems that help in the processing of greenhouse gases, she explains, and they attract insects that birds in our unique ecosystem feed off of. Shallow-rooted invasive plants may be popular in ornamental landscaping, but have none of the same environmental benefits. Kelsie has been letting native plants and grasses take over the swath of land by the stream in her backyard. "My garden doesn't look the prettiest now, but it's a process," she says. "It takes patience and perseverance for progress, and ecology beats aesthetics when it comes to the outdoors."

"Patience and perseverance for progress." That's actually an apt motto for this family, who wake each day with goals in mind. Both Mark and Kelsie have undergone transformative changes, driven by the desire to be better and do better as they journey through life. Among the items Kelsie can check off her bucket list: Learning how to blow glass, visiting an active volcano and completing an Olympic-distance triathlon. She'd also like to build a shed from the ground up and publish her own memoir, with the hopes that her unique story of tribulation and triumph will resonate with someone else, the way literature has for her. "You're not the same after you read a book," she says. "You're always changed ... even if just a little."

