

Sip On This:  
Summer Cocktails

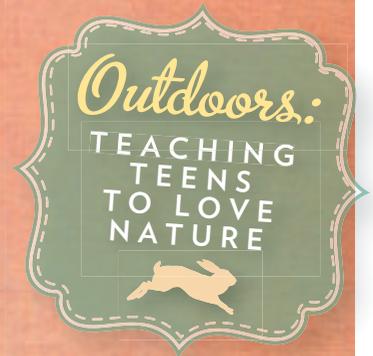
How to Have  
Happy Feet

FoCo's Crazy  
Wolfpack Ninjas

# FORT COLLINS

CELEBRATING LIFE *in* NORTHERN COLORADO

## DOG DAYS *of* SUMMER!



### SECRET LIVES OF NOCO'S WORKING DOGS

Plus pooch-friendly  
patios, hikes,  
toys, gear, treats  
and more!



**HOME  
RE-IMAGINED:**  
A Rist Canyon  
Earthship-  
inspired  
dwelling

# Contents

**FEATURES**



**36** †

## WELCOME TO THE SQUIBBSHIP

When wildfires razed their dream home, a Noco family decided to dream bigger—to rebuild with an eco-friendly, outside-the-box Earthship-inspired dwelling. BY NATALYA SAVKA

**44**

## WORKING LIKE A DOG

From helping kids learn to busting bad guys, it's just another day on the job for some of NoCo's mightiest mutts. Plus: All work and no play? No way! Our list of dog-friendly finds and fun for your four-legged pal.

BY ANDRA COBERLY AND ANDREW KENSLEY

**52**

## WOLFPACK UNLEASHED

These über-competitors rejected team sports for the solitude of the mountains—until they figured out how to not only co-exist peacefully, but to use their mutual drive to make each other even better. BY COREY RADMAN

# WELCOME



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIA VANDENOEVER

# *to* THE SQUIBBSHIP



When wildfires razed their dream home, a NoCo family decided



to dream bigger—  
to rebuild with  
an eco-friendly,  
outside-the-box  
Earthship—  
inspired dwelling.

BY NATALYA SAVKA

COURTESY MARK SQUIBB (RIGHT)

Head west out of Fort Collins through Rist Canyon. Pass an abandoned ice cream truck that announces in can-do red paint across its front, “Take challenges and eat them for breakfast!” Pass stands of blackened ponderosa pines. Pass a plaque memorializing the High Park Fire. In 2012, a lightning bolt sparked a wildfire that destroyed 259 nearby homes.

Make a few left turns, eventually arriving at the appropriately named Dirt Road, where the houses are so far apart, you can “go outside and take a piss without your neighbor knowing it,” as Mark Squibb puts it. Continue to the road’s end, where you’ll find a new glass, cement, and metal house built into a hill. It’s so fireproof, “you can walk up to this house any place with a blowtorch and nothing will burn,” Mark says. The Squibb family lives here.

**YOU CAN'T MISS** the greenhouse; its 4,000 square feet of windowpanes are the front face of the Squibb home. Once you step inside, take off your coat. Even when the temperature dropped to -2 Fahrenheit this winter, this house’s temperature never dipped below 60, without the help of fossil fuels. Its big windows invite sunshine and heat.

Mark Squibb might greet you with a bowl of cereal in one hand. He is clean cut, but with unruly hair. He’s been taking business calls all morning



and is just now getting down to breakfast. Mark is not a builder or architect by profession—he runs a biotech company from home—but for the last three and a half years, he’s made designing and overseeing the build of this house his second job. Even though he’s never built a house before, he never questioned whether he could do it. “I grew up on a farm in the sticks, where there was always something that needed to be fixed,” Mark says. “You either called a fix-it guy all the time or you did it yourself, and eventually you decided, whatever it was, you would do it yourself.”

When this greenhouse is completely finished it’ll be a multilayered forest with a waterfall. But for now, it’s a collection of trees—guava, mango, and orange among them—sitting in their store-issued plastic containers. Ten-year-old Tanner, the youngest and smiliest of the three Squibb boys, can often be found here, patrolling the plants with a water squirter. He waters a suffering basil and

COURTESY MARK SQUIBB (BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT)



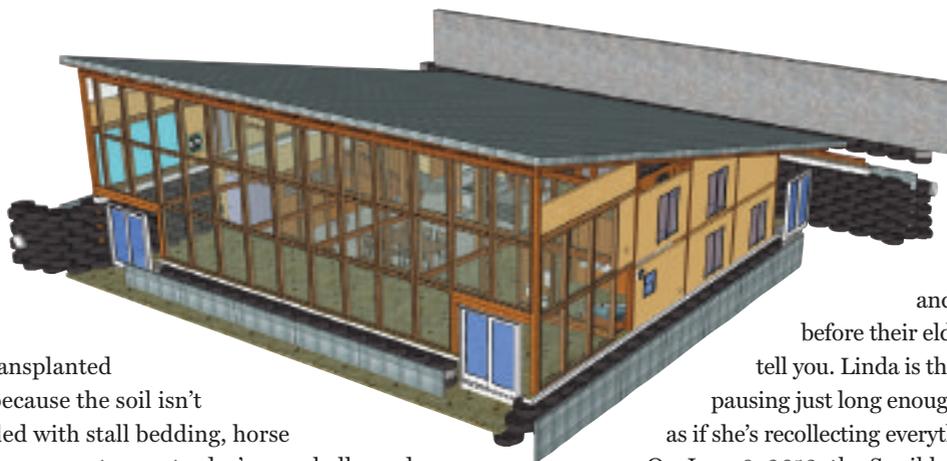
Previous pages: Dakota, Hunter, Linda, Tanner and Mark Squibb in front of their finished home. This page: A year after the fire that destroyed their home, the Squibbs began rebuilding with the help of hundreds of volunteers. “I would see them working so hard, maxing themselves for this cause, and that just melted my heart,” Linda remembers.

\*





Before construction, Mark created a digital model of his home. The finished house is accurate to four inches of the model's specifications. Download the model for free at [esquibb.com](http://esquibb.com).



also the cat who insists on peeing on the basil.

The trees haven't been transplanted out of their containers yet because the soil isn't ready. The garden bed is filled with stall bedding, horse poop, cardboard, mango pits, greywater, yesterday's egg-shells, and happy worms—all the ingredients for a rich soil, except time. The worms still need more time to break everything down.

The Squibbs, too, still need more time to settle into their new home. Their solar panels, rainwater cisterns, and barn aren't set up yet. The sauna is still filled with bags of clothes. The bedrooms still smell like fresh-cut pine. Sometimes, as Linda Squibb is sleepily heading to bed, she suddenly stops, looks around, and says to herself in perfect surprise, "Woah, this isn't the house I thought I was in."

**ENTER THE NEW** Squibb house, and you enter the site of their old house, too. The remnants of that old home's foundation still exist underground.

The old Squibb home wasn't actual-

ly old. It was a log house that Mark

and Linda bought in 2000, a month

before their eldest son, Dakota, was born, Linda will

tell you. Linda is this family's storyteller. She has a way of

pausing just long enough between thoughts to make you feel

as if she's recollecting everything for the first time.

On June 9, 2012, the Squibbs planned a fishing trip and river-

front picnic in early celebration of father's day, Linda remembers. On

the way to the river, they stopped at Vern's in Laporte for worms. That was

when Linda glanced back at the mountains and noticed a column of smoke

that looked close enough to make her nervous. Worms in hand, the Squibbs

reluctantly turned back home.

Back on Dirt Road, Mark and Linda didn't know what to do with them-

selves. Mark gardened. Linda began packing. Smoke rolled over the ridge.

"You grab strange things, in a time like that," Linda says now. She grabbed

the boys' quilts but not their bedsheets. The rabbits but not the chickens. She grabbed the king crab legs and steak they had planned for dinner that night, and also all the fridge magnets. Later, Linda wished she had packed more of the boys' keepsakes and the laundry ("because, think about it, what's in your laundry? The stuff you wear most," Linda says).

The Squibbs evacuated later that day and didn't return until the fire was officially declared contained weeks later. "I figured there would be something left when we came back," Linda says, "but that fire took a three-story home and made it rubble. When I saw it, I believed it, but also I didn't."

That summer, the Squibbs lived in a hotel and a KOA. They felt untethered. "A lot of people get up very early and leave all day and run around doing more things after work and school, and when they get home, it's already dark. But we're not like that," Linda says. Linda homeschools the three boys, and Mark works from home. "We live in our home."



**THE INSURANCE COMPANY** gave the Squibbs six months to decide if they would rebuild. To understand why they chose to stay on the site of the third most destructive fire in Colorado history, look back out the greenhouse windows for a moment. See green pines, hawks, maybe even an eagle. Linda grew up in rural Maine, and Mark in rural Missouri. "Being in our own space with nothing but birds and trees is how we've always wanted to live," Mark says. After the fire, the Squibbs were happy to discover that their view wasn't destroyed. "I do still see some dead sticks in the distance, but it's not all crispy," Mark says.

With Mark as its mastermind, this house never had any chance of being anything but nontraditional. Mark gave up TV in 1992. He believes in "not looking at how everybody else is doing something and assuming that's correct." When hiring a site manager for his build, he advertised for a "construction guy or gal" who "understands how basic household systems work—but generally thinks they're stupid."

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Much of the boys' homeschooling, which includes impromptu chess games, happens in the loft's family room. When we visit, Mark interrupts Dakota's math work for a lesson on "talking to the media."





The biggest change Mark made during the design process was moving the kitchen from the side of the house to its center. "I wanted this to be our happy gathering space," Linda says.

Mark and his rotating cadre of volunteers began construction by stacking 1,000 used car tires on top of what remained of the old foundation. They filled each tire with 300 pounds of dirt that would help regulate the temperature of their new home with the earth's. Using tires as building materials is common to Earthships, a type of sustainable house designed by renegade architect Michael Reynolds in the 1970s. Instead of running on fossil fuels, Earthships glean energy from the sun with roof-top solar arrays and big south-facing windows. They also collect rainwater and produce tropical foods indoors. Many consider them the cutting edge of sustainable single-family homes.

Mark studied Earthship building practices for four weeks in 2013 at the Earthship Biotechnology Academy in Taos, New Mexico, and the experience clearly influenced this house's design. But the Squibb house isn't really an Earthship, he says. Unlike most Earthships, this house is connected to public utilities that supplement its renewable-energy systems when needed—like when the Squibbs want to

run a dishwasher on an overcast day. It also has many bonus features that an Earthship typically wouldn't, including a meat locker, sauna, and jetted tub. Plus, the Squibbship (as some visitors like to call it) is ginormous.

At 4,000 thousand square feet, it's almost twice the size of an Earthship—and of the average U.S. home.



**PAST THE GREENHOUSE** is the kitchen, the center of the Squibb home. Even if you plan on heading somewhere else first, the kitchen's striking blue cabinets will probably draw you towards them instead. The appliances are big and shiny. "We're a family of five. When you cook 450 meals per month, you want something like a real kitchen," Mark says.

When Mark began planning this house in the months after the fire, he made his family's comfort his primary objective, "not greenness," he emphasizes. To Mark, comfort means cooking dinner on commercial-grade appliances, drinking martinis with Linda in a jetted tub, and giving each of the three boys their own room and enough space to practice their many

hobbies (which include archery, bunny husbandry, mead making).

But this house turned out environmentally conscious anyway thanks to Mark's secondary objective: affordability. "Look at all the things you have to pay for in a traditional house: utilities, food, mortgage. We've reduced all of these here," he says.

Throughout the design and build process, Mark challenged himself to leverage what nature already delivers for free. "If nature delivers sun on the south side, why not grow food with it? If it beams \$186,000 of electricity to the roof, why don't I grab that energy and use it for whatever I want? If it delivers cold air, how about I suck that air in and use it to preserve my food?" he says. The meat locker attached to the kitchen is cooled with a simple, innovative system designed by Mark: When it's cold outside, a fan kicks on that pumps cold air in. During winter, the circulating air freezes a gigantic brick of ice that keeps the locker cool through summer. The two refrigerators and freezer inside the locker use 90% less energy than they would inside a warm kitchen.

To further lower costs, Mark scrimped on building materials. The stove is a \$10,000 model bought for \$1,000 on Craigslist. The kitchen's ceiling is



insulated with reused polyiso from a torn-down Las Vegas casino. The kitchen's walls are finished with burned and beetle-chewed ponderosa pine, most of which Mark gathered for free off his property. This building is a paragon of reducing and reusing.

Many of the volunteers who helped build this house were, unlike Mark, "really into the sustainability thing," Mark says. Not that their differing priorities seemed to matter. The volunteers kept showing up with tents, work gloves, and handkerchiefs, and Mark kept enthusiastically reaching out to them through his Facebook page (Earthship-CO), website (esquibb.com), and Craigslist ads. In the first year, the Squibbs hosted more than 200 volunteers.

"And all these hard-working volunteers had to eat!" Linda points out. During the build, Linda made herself their self-appointed cook—a decision she sometimes regretted. "I made them three meals a day, and I didn't even have a kitchen. I did it all in a tent!"

Linda remembers. "Now that I think about it, I don't know how on earth I did it. I lost ten pounds that first summer because there was never any food left for me." After all that, this big, modern kitchen is hands-down Linda's favorite part of the house. If you see a cutting board with a half-cut herb, assume that Linda is near.

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The Squibbs are a musical family. As the fire approached, they managed to grab many of their instruments, including a guitar, keyboard, and banjo. The piano was too big to carry.

"My childhood was amazing," Linda says. "...We were always exploring the woods and fields and streams. That's what I try to re-create for my boys."



**BEFORE ENTERING THE MASTER BEDROOM**, check your shoes for mud. This is "The Sanctuary," as Linda calls it. It's the only part of the house that the kids need permission to enter and, not coincidentally, also the only part that is mud-free.

Mark and Linda are tired of the mud, a symptom of their chronic construction. For three and a half years, the Squibbs have been dragging mud home on their boots. Their front yard is still a mud pit. "When we started, I had in my mind two years, because the insurance company paid us living expenses for two years," Linda says, "but of course a house like this doesn't get done in two years."

Even Mark, who gets giddy when explaining this house's many innovations, is tired of construction. His first house design is an undeniable success; it'll soon even get national attention when PBS features it on its Urban Conversion series this summer. But that doesn't mean Mark has completely overcome the trauma of the fire and its aftermath.

"This build was three and a half years of having to work two jobs really hard and not being engaged with my kids," he says, "Tanner was six when we started and now he's 10. Think about that! Sure, I still saw the boys every day, but at the end of every day, I was trashed." Mark delayed having kids until his 40s, when he had built up his career and didn't need to work more than 30 hours per week anymore. "Then the fire came along and I ended up having to

work 70-hour weeks, and I can't get that time back," he says.

Linda, too, still mourns all that they've lost. She can't help but miss the old house's deck. "We had a fire ring, because that's what I love, sitting around a fire," she says. "When it snowed, I would shovel the patio right away, and as soon as the deck dried in the sun, we would go out there in our bare feet. I remember sunbathing out there on January first. I used to love that," she says. Pauses. "It's a silly thing to remember."

**UPSTAIRS IN THE FAMILY ROOM**, behold an even more spectacular version of the mountain view that convinced the Squibbs to stay and rebuild. Up here, you can see south for miles. "If I were to walk 75 feet out of these windows, I'd fall off a cliff," Mark says proudly.

This view is the same view that the old house looked out on. Every time the Squibbs pass by it, it forces them to confront both what they've lost and what they've gained since the fire.

"The old house was beautiful," Mark says, "But this new house is beautiful too."

"I still feel robbed," Linda says. But then she adds, "I feel blessed."

"We lost a lot of Legos," Tanner says.

"But do you have any Legos now?" Linda says.

"Yeah, I have a lot of Legos."

"So it's not so bad." 