



DO-IT-YOURSELF RESOURCES FEATURE: Casey and Jena Skar

When Casey and Jena Skar first came across a Facebook post about Home Repair Services, they had no idea it would lead to one of the most transformative projects of their lives — or to being named the 2026 Resourceful Homeowner Celebration award recipients.

The couple, who met about ten years ago and have been married for five, purchased their Cedar Springs home in 2019. Both are mechanically inclined by trade — Casey works in industrial refrigeration design and sales, while Jena is a certified welder — but home remodeling was a different kind of challenge. They attended their first Fix-It School class and quickly became regulars, embracing the hands-on approach that HRS uses to teach home maintenance skills.

What followed was a full kitchen transformation that required equal parts vision, grit, and a willingness to solve problems on the fly.

A pivotal early decision was removing an interior partition wall to open the kitchen to

the adjacent living room. That wall, as they soon discovered, was load bearing. “Once we got the wall to the studs we knew we’d either figure the beam solution out or have to totally change our vision,” Casey recalled. They did their research, sourced an engineered beam over twenty feet in length, and recruited some muscle to wrestle it into place. The open concept they had dreamed of was now possible.

Central to the kitchen design was the influence of HRS Self Help Program Manager Mike Zamarron. Mike made the suggestion to relocate the refrigerator to a previously blank wall in the dinette space — a move that unlocked the possibility of a drop-in range and a massive island. “Sometimes fresh eyes on a space can open up possibilities that the homeowner doesn’t see because they’ve gotten used to seeing it the same way for many years,” Mike said. “I have found that looking for a new home for the refrigerator can often lead to other exciting design possibilities.”

Jena had a clear vision for an island from the start. Having grown up watching Chef Emeril Lagasse cook for guests directly from the stovetop, she wanted that same energy in her own home. Casey learned to trust that vision — sometimes with a nudge. “For me it was all about him just trusting my vision,” Jena laughed. “I was like, just shut up and do it!”

For Casey, the deeper lessons in the Remodeling Together Program centered on process. “I learned so much through this experience, but the thing that sticks out the most was how to sequence a project like this. I had to learn when to focus on electrical or plumbing and when to focus on drywall or flooring. Doing things in the right order matters.”

Like most remodels, the project had a few surprises, including a sewer vent pipe and some wiring discovered inside a bulkhead targeted for removal. They were able to reroute those items without much lost time. *continued on page 3*

2026 Resourceful Homeowner Celebration

Event Highlights

- Held at the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park with capacity crowd
- Honored Dan Bajema as the 2026 Abe DeVries Volunteer of the Year
- Celebrated the incredible home improvement work and resourcefulness of Mercedes Gant, Nathan & Dominique Adevai, Casey & Jena Skar, and Connie Ledesma

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Maddie Schaab – Living Stones Academy & HRS Board Member
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A New Name That Says What We Mean

Sometimes a name change is just a name change. This one is a little more than that.

HRS's Housing Counseling and Financial Education program has a new identity: the Financial Stability Program. The work remains exactly the same — expert foreclosure counseling, property tax filling assistance, and financial literacy education that helps people avoid crisis. What changed is how the program describes itself, and that shift turns out to matter.



Amber Jones & Alisa Flores

“We explored a number of names and none of them quite fit until we landed on this one,” says Alisa Flores, Financial Stability Program Manager. “We love how it describes the outcome of the work rather than the means to get there. If we do our work well, we know stability follows.”

That framing — outcome over process — is a meaningful distinction for a team whose work often happens in the most stressful chapters of a homeowner's life. Foreclosure counseling, property tax disputes, debt management: none of it is simple, and none of it fits neatly into a single category. Financial Stability captures the destination without having to list every road that leads there.

While exploring the new program name, the team also took the opportunity to rebrand their signature Saturday education event. Formerly known as Show Me the Money Day, the annual gathering is now **Financial Toolkit Day**.

The old name, Flores acknowledges, had run its course. “The phrase was tied to an aging movie script and had less relevance with each passing year. We also struggled with the fact that we don't show money or hand it out.” What HRS does instead is something more durable — and the new name reflects that. “What we love about the new name is that the education provided on that day becomes tools in a financial toolbox that can be used today and tomorrow — not only to repair things, but to improve them.”

The Toolkit framing also connects naturally to HRS's broader Fix-It School programming, reinforcing a consistent message across the organization: the right knowledge, in the right hands, changes outcomes — it fixes things for the better.

Since 2001, HRS has provided foreclosure prevention counseling to homeowners across Kent County and seven surrounding counties. The results speak to the quality of the work: over the past two years, 82 out of 86 foreclosure cases were successfully resolved with the client retaining their home — a 95 percent success rate.

Behind each of those numbers is a family that stayed housed through one of the most destabilizing experiences a homeowner can face. Foreclosure carries consequences that ripple outward — into credit, employment, health, and community. Helping someone navigate through it and come out the other side with their home intact is, as Flores might put it, stability in its most tangible form. The program's name may be new but the commitment is the same one HRS has kept for more than two decades.

Join us on Financial Toolkit Day!

Home Repair Services is excited to host Financial Toolkit Day—a special event highlighting our financial education programs. Join us for **FREE** breakout workshops on essential topics like budgeting, credit, identity theft, asset and wealth building, debt management, homebuying, and more!

Date: Saturday, May 16 Time: 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM Location: HRS Lobby

Guests will enjoy **coffee and pastries, a delicious lunch, a vendor fair, and exciting door prize raffles**. This event is **free and open to the public**. Don't miss this opportunity to gain valuable financial knowledge—we hope to see you there!

Skar - continued from page 1

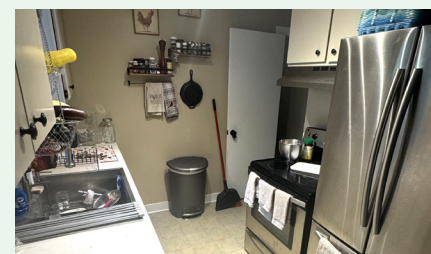
Their old kitchen had 12 cabinets; the new one boasts 27, plus a full-length pantry, a built-in microwave cavity, and a curtain skirt Jena sewed herself on her new Christmas gift sewing machine.

The two-tone cabinet palette — a bold blue on the island that lands very close to Honolulu blue, the signature shade of the Detroit Lions, paired with crisp white throughout — gives the space a personality all its own. They removed linoleum from the old kitchen and hardwood planks on the living room side so a uniform installation of vinyl plank flooring could cover both areas, ideal for the couple's three dogs and their sometimes-muddy paws.

The project was truly a village effort. Jena's parents made multiple trips from Detroit to help. A coworker friend, with a week free while her kids were at camp, pitched in on drywall finishing. And another friend spent time at HRS helping paint the cabinets.

In accepting the award, Casey summed it up simply: “We could never have done this without HRS.”

For the Skars — who spend their free time riding motorcycles, enjoying the outdoors, and cooking everything from Casey's Lebanese family recipes to Jena's stovetop dinner parties — their kitchen is now exactly what they envisioned: a place to gather, to cook, and to show what's possible when you're willing to learn.



Before



After

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Water Finds a Way – So Does HRS

When water started showing up inside her home, Kathleen, a 71-year-old Creston neighborhood resident, feared the worst — a failing roof and a bill she couldn't afford. She'd owned her Grand Rapids home since 2007 and first registered with Home Repair Services shortly thereafter. What she got instead was a lesson in the difference between a roof that needs replacing and how a roof's lifespan can be extended.

When her work order came in, HRS roofing specialist Zach was dispatched to investigate. What he found was telling: the shingles were aging — pushing 30 years — but the actual source of water infiltration was a failed seal around a sewer vent pipe and a nearby pot vent. A slow, hidden failure that had likely been worsening for years while quietly doing damage inside.

Zach replaced the failing boots with modern pipe boot seals, repaired the affected decking and shingle section with new material, and closed a vulnerability the rest of the roof didn't share.

"Roof leaks can be tricky because the source of the water is rarely where it shows up inside," says Michael Guis, HRS Repair Program Manager. "It takes some detective work, and Zach is gifted at finding the source. He also does a very comprehensive job solving sections of roofs rather than just putting caulk on a bad spot."

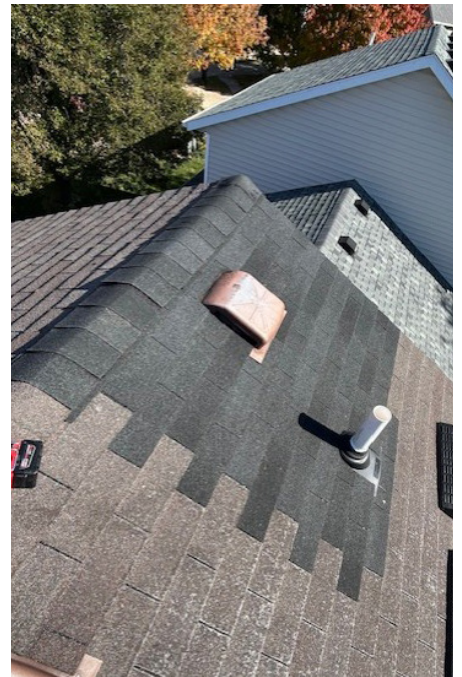
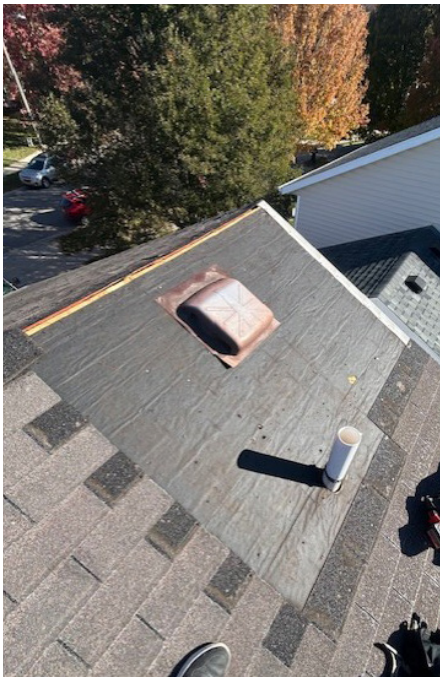
That distinction matters enormously. A full roof replacement runs \$8,500 to \$15,000 or more. A targeted, skilled repair costs a fraction of that — and when the underlying structure is sound, it's not a compromise, it's the right call. And it's why HRS completes nearly 150 roof repairs each year.

The stakes of an unaddressed leak extend well beyond the roof. Water travels through attic insulation, into wall cavities, and along ceiling joists — often appearing far from its source. Mold can begin growing within 24 to 48 hours of moisture exposure, weakening structural wood, destroying insulation, and spreading through HVAC systems into living spaces.

Nationally, mold is linked to 4.6 million asthma cases annually, and addressing indoor mold can reduce asthma symptoms by 25 to 45 percent. For many low-income families — often with no health insurance and limited ability to take on remediation — chronic asthma attacks mean repeated trips to the emergency room. "The cost for us to stop the leaks is a fraction of the cost of an ER visit," Guis noted.

There's also a stewardship argument that extends beyond any single home. Every dollar directed toward a targeted, effective repair is a dollar that can help the next family waiting for assistance. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies found that the lowest-income homeowners spent an average of just \$3,100 on all home repairs in 2023 — less than a third of what higher-income homeowners spent. The gap between need and what many can afford is significant, and it's the basis for why HRS exists.

For Kathleen, her call to HRS means staying dry this spring — protecting not only her biggest asset, but her own health as well.



PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: DAN BAJEMA

At its recent Resourceful Homeowner event, Home Repair Services (HRS) honored Dan Bajema as its volunteer of the year. A regular volunteer in the HRS cabinet shop since 2021, he was selected as the 2026 Abe DeVries Volunteer of the Year not only for the hours he has logged, but for how he stepped into several special projects this past year.

The award honors Abe DeVries, who gave two decades to HRS after retirement — changing light fixtures in client homes, serving six years on the board of directors, and becoming its first and only board emeritus. Abe loved the mission and offered whatever was needed. In Dan Bajema, that same spirit lives on.

Dan's connection to HRS spans more than three decades — and he and his wife Jo have long supported its mission in multiple ways. Before becoming a volunteer, he and then-HRS Executive Director Dave Jacobs built a customized database that still serves as the backbone of HRS client records, work orders, and accounting functions today. That same precision now shows up in the cabinet shop, where Dan has logged nearly 1,000 hours — 43 percent of them in the last 12 months alone.

Those special projects showcased Dan's many gifts. He researched and procured a commercial-grade pocket drill that has significantly improved cabinet production, then set it up and calibrated it for the full range of HRS cabinet sizes and styles. He oversaw the rehanging of HRS's entire lobby history panel collection after the display was doubled in size. And when shown a Pinterest photo of a wooden cupcake tower and asked to make something similar for the Fall Impact Celebration's famous Bundtinis, he built a matching pair from the photo alone — designed to break down for easy storage, with every piece labeled for reinstallation. No blueprint required.

During the event, HRS Executive Director Joel Ruiter remarked that he couldn't find a single photo of Dan from five years of volunteering — and quipped that avoiding cameras is yet another talent. But the deeper point, he noted, is what it says about Dan's character. "He always defers to the team effort and insists others are more worthy of the recognition. When Dan Bajema shows up, you know he's there to serve, not to be seen." When told he'd been selected, Dan's response was immediate: "So many others here do more than me." Fittingly, this is exactly the kind of thing the award's namesake would have said. Thanks, Dan, for making a difference!



HRS Welcomes Two New Board Members



Brian Walls — Senior Vice President, Head of Retail
Macatawa Bank



Kiran Patel — Regional Community Relations Specialist
LMCU - Lake Michigan Credit Union

Have you considered financially supporting HRS?

Simply scan the QR code below with your smartphone camera to make a secure donation in just a few seconds. Every contribution — big or small — goes directly toward strengthening vulnerable homeowners.



If you would like to learn more about **supporting the work of HRS**, contact Director of Development, Steven Nicolet, at (616) 241-2601 ext. 223 or snicolet@homerepairservices.org

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Kent County homeowners
because strong homeowners
build strong communities.

Join Us For a Lunch & Learn Tour

Home Repair Services continues to host monthly Lunch & Learn events in our building located at 1100 S. Division in Grand Rapids. We invite you to join us for a behind the scenes look at how HRS touches the lives of thousands of Kent County neighbors each year. We look forward to inviting you into our home, sharing with you how we strengthen housing structures and strengthen the people living in them, and answering your questions about HRS. The event is from 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm with a tasty box lunch provided. If you have a few extra minutes, feel free to stay for a tour of our converted 1940's era auto dealership. Whether you are new to HRS or have been a longtime friend, please be our guest.

To reserve your seat at a future Lunch & Learn, use the QR code or go to: homerepairservices.org/lunch-and-learn-tour/



Upcoming 2026 Lunch & Learn Dates

- Friday, May 15
- Friday, June 19
- Friday, July 17
- Friday, August 21
- Friday, September 18
- Friday, October 16
- Friday, November 20
- Friday, December 18



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