ERIN WRIGHT DOES NOT readily accept imperfections. Instead, she grabs ahold of them with two fists and plasters them up on the wall, the front of the house, the ceiling or anywhere else it makes sense to her. Then she celebrates them. Hers is what’s called a wabi-sabi world, and she delights in welcoming others into it.

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese concept that implies there is beauty in imperfections. This belief or practice is centered on acknowledging and accepting natural processes to artfully appreciate the patina and rust of metal, the bleaching and wear of wood, and the blemishes and cracks in other natural or man-made objects.

Wright is a 34-year-old homebuilder who constructed her first house at age 19. In the 15 years since, she’s completed 75 homes, and has nine more under contract. That first house was for herself. “After I got done with that house, I had three more to build,” she says. “I haven’t slowed down since.”

She’s also proud to say that two of those were for what you’d consider industry experts—an architect and a window manufacturing executive. She laughs when she says, “What were they thinking?” But she follows that up by saying these clients were invaluable to her, as they shared their knowledge, and she still incorporates those lessons in her projects.

Not that she was intentional about becoming a homebuilder, though. Wright’s profession transpired as a natural fit with her personality and talents. “Now that I think back on it, I’ve always had an interest.” She recalls roller-skating as a child on house pads at construction sites and says, “I still remember those floor plans from when I was little, so it might just have been programmed in me.”

With an associate’s degree in general studies from Tyler Junior College, at one time Wright considered continuing her education to obtain her bachelor’s degree. But she already had a thriving construction company, and incurring that debt didn’t make sense to her. So, instead, she joined the Tyler Area Builders Association and began earning professional certifications targeted to her profession. Thus far, she’s achieved status as a Graduate Master Builder, a Certified Graduate Builder, a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist and a Certified Green Professional.

She brings all of that training to bear on every project, but, she says, “My customers hire me because they are looking for something unique and different. I like to reuse, repurpose and recycle. In doing so, you get something unique and not so
cookie-cutter.” For example, she’s incorporated glass bottles to create a see-through exterior wall with a stained-glass effect. She’s used chicken feeders and lard buckets as light fixtures. She regularly uses pallets and salvaged barn wood to build cabinets and furniture or to use as paneling or surface tops.

“When I first started out, a lot of my contractors thought I was nuts,” she says. “Until I was done, they thought I was crazy.”

Actually, Wright is just crazy-good, and professional accolades support that: She’s won numerous awards. In 2014, she was given the inaugural Texas Association of Builders Excellence Under 45 Award. She’s also won TABA’s Best Special Project award for her live-aboard boat house, and the Best of Houzz badge in Design and Service for 2013 through 2017. She also has had parade homes five times now with TABA, through which she has served in various leadership positions and is the president. She serves on the state level with TABA, which includes her as a member of the state’s Young Professionals Council and on the membership and Sunbelt committees. She’s also on the Young Professionals Council of the National Association of Homebuilders.

Most of Wright’s projects start with a clean piece of paper, and then, she says, “I ask my customers lots of questions. Everybody is different. It’s about reading your client and what’s important to them. The initial work up front is the most important.” She says, “A home is a large investment. It must be built for their lifestyle. I’ll ask them if they are a hoarder or a holder. Depending on the answer, they may get more shelves or rods in their closets. The home must function with their lifestyle.”

Of her projects and pricing, Wright says she has taken on modest $1,000 retaining walls and million-dollar homes. Her only real criteria is that the property must be within an hour’s drive of her office in Hawkins.

Although Wright embraces a wabi-sabi approach, she has built homes for many tastes including traditional, Tuscan and now mid-century modern, which is the style of her newest parade home. Commonly, though, they are all “affordably green.”

“I incorporate the things you are going to get a return on your money with,” she explains. Then she lists a few: spray-in foam insulation, high-performance windows, whole-house LED lighting and new high-efficiency variable-refrigerant-flow HVAC systems. “We also install humidity-sensing exhaust fans because we build our homes so tight.”
Wright concentrates on building universally designed homes, where consideration is placed on easy access for all stages of life. She takes a look at corners to make sure turns aren’t so narrow as to impede a wheelchair and that main areas have wider doors. She ensures that thresholds in doorways have low clearance and there’s ground-level access to the house. She also looks at small details such as cabinet pulls, door handles versus knobs, and the placement of light switches and appliances for easy access. “At any age, you can break a leg. If you were to do so, can you get to your bedroom? Can you get to your bathroom?” she says. “No one wants to be stuck in their living room. And they certainly don’t want to have to leave home because it no longer functions for them.”

One of the reasons Wright has been so successful, she says, is that she has surrounded herself with some of the best local professionals in the business. She says she’s a loyal partner to her contractors, and she’s been with most of them for 10–12 years. She credits a lot of her knowledge to them and says they are always learning together.

Wright also credits her family as a driving force. Both of her parents, Dollene Williams Brownlee and Scott Wright, come from entrepreneurial stock. “They were in timber, sand and trucking. Most all of the people I’ve been around had their own businesses and were extremely hardworking, so I guess that’s where I got it from.” She also gives a nod to Mr. Behnke, her technology/shop teacher at Hawkins ISD, for giving her an introduction to computer-aided drafting and design, calculating square footage and other practical skills she uses today.

A philosophy for her business that Wright holds dear is “treating people the way you want to be treated.” Wright says if she builds a house for someone, they become part of her extended family.

Sydney Maerz, a homeowner, agrees. “She builds a great house. As my husband would say, she built it on line, on time, and on budget.” She adds, “A great thing about Erin is, she is...”
always there for you if you decide you need help with landscaping or painting or whatever. She is always willing to share her knowledge and contacts.”

Mary Pruett, another homeowner, echoes those sentiments, “Erin is service after the sale. I could call her right now and tell her I have a problem, and she’d get right after it, even after a year and a half of my being in my house.”

Of her style, Wright says that when she first started building houses, she was going for the “wow” factor with her found and repurposed objects, but confesses, “I was also doing that actually to save money. In the beginning, I was needing to make money go a long way. I was doing it before it was cool. But then, all these shows came out and it got popular, and all my junk got expensive.” She laughs. “So, now it’s not as cost-effective—now it’s just more for cool.”

Late last year, HGTV heard of Wright and sent a film crew from Los Angeles to make a pilot program, with hopes of making it into a series. Wright says it was a fun experience, but she’s half-glad the series didn’t get picked up. She and her husband, Brandon Baker, are pretty busy without the distraction. Brandon just kicked off a new restaurant and music venue, The Red Rooster Ice House, in Hawkins, which Wright designed and built. In the midst of busy professional lives, the couple is kept hopping with their 1-year-old daughter, Henley.

Asking Wright what’s next gets a giggle. “For the longest, when I was in my mid-20s, I wanted to be the president of the Tyler Area Builders Association and I wanted a parade house before I was 30. Now I’m the president of the association and I’m five parade houses in, and I haven’t really set a next goal.”

But after some thought, she does say there are some projects she’d like to tackle. “I keep looking at containers. The monolithic homes. I’ve looked at silos. I like the pod concept.”

Her wheels are constantly turning as she thinks about possible builds. And, if it has her signature style, you can count on it to be imperfectly beautiful.
A PANEL OF THREE INDEPENDENT JUDGES recently awarded $20,000 in scholarships as part of Wood County Electric Cooperative’s Power My World program. Ten local high school students, residing within WCEC’s nine-county service area, each will receive a $2,000 scholarship toward continuing education. The program is funded entirely by unclaimed capital credits payments returned to WCEC by the state and does not come from WCEC’s operating budget.

The independent judges were three WCEC members: Carol Hollen of Mineola, Chuck Roy of Yantis and Terry Milligan of Ben Wheeler. These judges used various criteria to select the winners from among more than 40 qualified applicants. Each judge was tasked with reviewing the students’ submissions, accompanying academic records, and lists of civic and community achievements. Additionally, each student was required to submit an essay.

Based on their outstanding work and achievements, the 2017 Power My World scholarship recipients are:


“There are so many exceptional students from our region, and I never envy the judges tasked with making the selections,” said Debbie Robinson, WCEC CEO/general manager. “Each of the candidates showed remarkable traits in various areas to include academics and service to the community. Each year, we are amazed by the talent and ambitions of the young men and women of our membership. I’m so glad that the cooperative is able to help them pursue their goals with these scholarships.”
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Happy and safe digging!