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'Extreme Makeover' star hopes to see show go global

'Makeover' star Paul DiMeo learned early that relationships are what matter most *By T.J. Banes*
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He shot hoops with the Indiana Pacers, gave a weather forecast on a local TV station and visited cancer patients at Riley Hospital for Children.

Paul DiMeo, a carpenter and designer with ABC TV's "Extreme Makeover Home Edition," is no stranger to Indiana. After two Hoosier home builds in the past year, he returns to Indiana on Feb. 6 for an appearance at the Indianapolis Home Show at the Indiana State Fairgrounds.

"We've had two wonderful stories in Indiana and made some wonderful friends with builders, families and volunteers. The weather was tough on the last one, but we made the most of it," said DiMeo, who is starting his seventh season with the two-time Emmy-winning show.

Last spring, viewers saw some of DiMeo's work when the Extreme team joined local builder Paul Estridge to construct a home for the Indianapolis family of Bernard McFarland.

"Of all the people we worked with on 'Extreme Makeover,' Paul is my personal favorite because he was very real and authentic, not to mention an absolute riot to be around," said Estridge. "He even stayed a day extra to play golf at our golf club, Woodwind, with us . . . in the rain no less!"



Ron Nearon (left) from Boulder Design and other volunteers install a personalized rock during this month's makeover of the Cowan home. - Tim Bath / Kokomo Tribune



This month, viewers watched as Hallmark Homes joined the "Extreme Makeover" crew in Bunker Hill, near Kokomo, to build a home for Andy and Heather Cowan, whose daughter, Korinna "Kori" Brown, 12, battles a congenital blood disease.

"The funny thing about Paul (DiMeo) is the day the bus came it was insanely crazy . . . And I didn't know where my kids were," said Heather Cowan. "When I saw them, they were playing football with Pauli. Every time I turned around after that, the kids were with Pauli -- eating lunch, throwing walnuts, you name it. When we finally left that night, all the kids talked about was Paul."

For Cowan's home, DiMeo designed her 13-year-old son Trevor Brown's bedroom with features such as Erector Sets, Legos and a closet of Plexiglas that resembles a construction site.

It was also on the Cowan project that DiMeo befriended a young Noblesville girl and her family.

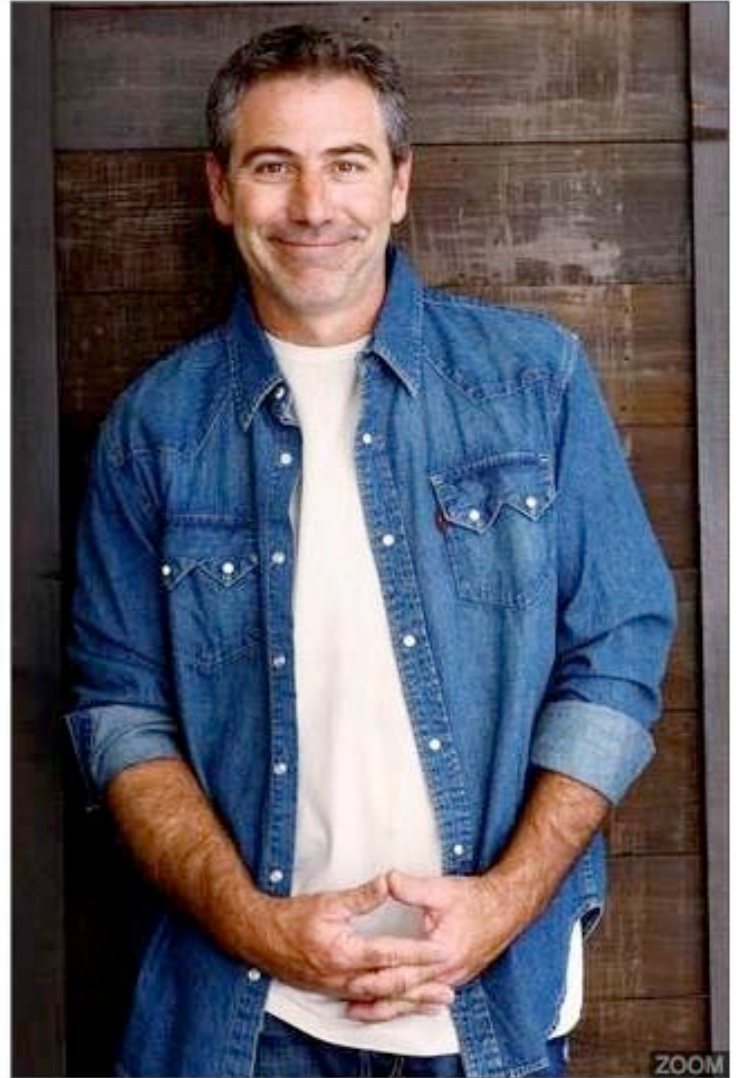
Alyssa Lewandowski, a leukemia survivor who shared a room at Riley with Kori, joined volunteer builders along with 2008 American Idol winner David Cook.

"This year the show is about people getting on the bus and helping out," said DiMeo.

"When Alyssa got on the bus, it could have been intimidating, but she held her own. We talked music, and she taught me a Taylor Swift song. I played the guitar during the week, and we practiced the song. It just brought on a great friendship with Alyssa and her family."

A fifth-grader at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Alyssa said the whole experience was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"It was really cool and really fun, like something out of the ordinary," she said. "Paul is just a really nice guy. I don't want to say it was easy to become friends with him, but he was very kind at showing me around, and meeting David Cook was amazing. My friends at school thought it was cool."



Last season, "Extreme Makeover" aired 26 episodes from around the country. When the cast and crew move into town for a one-week build, they turn to basketball and music to relax.

After the first build in Indianapolis, the cast and crew named their cover band after Fishers-based Butch Nuckols Builders Concrete & Supply, with whom they had worked on the McFarland home and neighborhood.

When they returned to Indiana to work on the Cowan home, keyboardist DiMeo joined the band, named "The Wandering Butch Nuckols." It played at local clubs and was joined onstage by Hoosiers for Bob Dylan and Rolling Stones tunes.

When he is not traveling for speaking engagements or on an "Extreme Makeover" project, DiMeo, 51, lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Kelly, and their three dogs. He plans to have dinner with Alyssa's family and reconnect with their shared interest in music when he returns to Indianapolis next week for the Indiana Home Show.

"When we end a build, we keep track of families and friends by giving them our phone numbers and telling them to call or visit," he said. "It's hard to move on, but you know that you are leaving them in the hands of their own community. It's like we've nurtured a child, and then everyone from City Hall to school teachers will watch over them to make sure they are OK."

DiMeo learned first-hand about the importance of community when, at the age of 5, his Pennsylvania family home burned.

"Here we were, five children, and the contractor went on strike, so we helped my dad finish it," he said. "The church and the community came together in force. I learned then that possessions mean very little. What are important are things with a heartbeat."

Through the years, DiMeo has combined his personal experiences with training in theater

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- **Focus on energy consumption:** Change from incandescent to fluorescent light bulbs; install window and door weather stripping to help save energy.
- **Create your own art:** Use computer programs to enhance home photos or art projects by your children or grandchildren. Frame them and hang them to create original works that involve the whole family.
- **Plant a fruit tree:** Share your harvest with your neighbor, and your neighbor might return the favor with some vine-ripe tomatoes or other produce.
- **Add color:** When you don't have the money to build an addition to your home, add color to your life. Make it a family project to paint a room, collect a few furnishings at thrift stores and give them a new look just in time for spring.

Indianapolis Home Show

- **When:** Today through Feb. 7.
- **Where:** Indiana State Fairgrounds, West Pavilion, Exposition Hall, 1202 E. 38th St.
- **Admission:** Age 13 and older, \$12; children 6-12, \$5; kids 5 and younger, free. Coupons for \$3 off Monday-Thursday available at Marsh; online discounts available at www.IndianapolisHomeShow.com.
- **Special guests:** Paul DiMeo of ABC's "Extreme Makeover Home Edition," Feb. 6; HGTV's Shari and Matt from "Room by Room," Friday; and Sarah the Thrifty Decor Chic, Monday through Wednesday.
- **Attractions:** Davis-built centerpiece home; Green Zone, Habitat for Humanity ReStore; and American Society of Interior Designers Q&A for design dilemmas.
- **Information:** Go to www.IndianapolisHomeShow.com.

arts, building and design. His imaginative work has been seen in children's bedrooms across the country, and he's also had a hand in renovating some big-name Hollywood homes. His clients include the Beverly Hills Ralph Lauren Polo store, Glenn Close, Anne Archer and George Hamilton.

"I think with everyone, if you are truthful and look them in the eye and engage them in something they are passionate about, then they have no (choice) but to engage back," said DiMeo.

"I try not to treat them any differently because I don't want to be treated any differently. I just finished a shoot with Jessica Alba (star of the soon-to-be released romantic comedy "Valentine's Day"). A lot of people were nervous, but she's just a gal who wants to help."

As he looks toward the future of "Extreme Makeover," DiMeo said he wants to take the show to another level.

"I want to build schools in New Orleans, dig wells in Africa, and yes, help rebuild Haiti," he said. "But for now, I want to continue to bring people together because we don't just touch the lives of one family; we touch the lives of 2,000 volunteers."