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Dallas woman has big dreams of creating a tiny-house community

By [CLAIRE Z. CARDONA](#), Staff Writer

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Beth Ann Norrgard spends her days working an office job she loves but plans to give it up to live in a house that's slightly larger than a cubicle.

For the last year, Norrgard, a paralegal for a downtown Dallas law firm, has been living a double life. Most nights she sheds her work clothes for bib overalls and boots and heads to a friend's 5-acre Garland property, where she's building a 112-square-foot house on wheels.

The tiny-house movement has spread nationally, with small communities such as Boneyard Studios in Washington, D.C., and a future village of tiny dwellings for Austin's homeless. Norrgard, 47, plans to leave her job eventually and hit the road with her tiny house, teaching others how to downsize and build their own. She also hopes to create a tiny-house community in Dallas.

In September 2012, Norrgard began a career-transition workshop. She wondered why she had stopped doing the things that made her happy as a kid — following her father around his workshop and building things with her hands.

"Society expects you to do adult things, so I went to college, got married, bought a house and got the 9-to-5 job downtown, and I just kept going to work and buying things and going to work," said Norrgard, who goes by B.A. "And one day it was like, 'This is not working for me at all. This is not what I want to do.'"

Norrgard, who is divorced, felt trapped in her life. The tiny-house idea was a way to break free. Change is scary, she said. But regret is worse.

"Mostly I just want to get down to the nut of what makes me happy, and I know that it's not a 30-year mortgage and an office at a law firm downtown, although I've loved that," she said. "But I need windows that open, I need to be outside, need to be moving, using my hands."

Moving quickly

Since that realization, and with a strong web of support, things have moved quickly.

In November 2012, Norrgard sold her two-bedroom Tudor house in Old East Dallas and almost everything in it. She gave herself a year to start her new life and moved into an apartment. Her lease was up on Thursday. She's moved into a friend's house and hopes to be living in her tiny house by Christmas.

The house is still empty. Eventually it will have a small kitchen and bath but no air conditioning. Her bed will be in a loft with a skylight and a custom stained-glass window. There will also be a wine rack, a small space for clothes, and an aerial yoga sling and chandelier that will hang from the gabled ceiling.

She justified letting go of most of her books but said she cried like a baby when getting rid of her tool bench and garden tiller. She kept her bicycle, tools and special gifts from friends and family.

The inner shell of the house is decorated with notes from the high school students who helped her build it in June at a girls' construction camp in California. The windows are low enough for her Weimaraner, Greta, to see out.

In February 2012 I signed up for a career transition workshop with [Helen Harkness, Ph.D.](#)



B.A. Norrgard

I embarked upon the hard work of months of peeling off those layers to get down to what really makes me tick, and identifying my natural talents. I dived in with a voracious appetite.

Two questions I had to answer were, "What did you do as a child that made you happy?" And, "Why did you quit doing those things?" The result? *Validation. Empowerment. Confidence.*

I have unique talents, skills and passions. I am bold enough to step out and follow my heart to overhaul and rebuild my life—not from a fail, but with a new focus: *What will make me happy in the second half of my life?*

—B.A. Norrgard

Norrgard is chronicling her progress on her blog, abedovermyhead.com. There's still a long list of projects to complete, some of which she can tackle with her experience volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. Others will be left to experts.

When complete, the house will have cost \$25,000, she estimates.

Downsizing

Norrgard bought the plans for her house from Jay Shafer, owner of Four Lights Tiny House Company in California. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Shafer said, it was hard to find a new house smaller than 2,000 square feet. Things changed with the housing bust of 2008.

"Some folks downsize to escape the mortgage, maintenance and burden that can accompany a bigger place, and some probably do it because they like the feeling of a space that doesn't exceed their needs," said Shafer, who lives in his own small house with his wife and two boys. "In any case, it seems most who live this way do it because, for them, it would make no sense to do anything else."

Sarah Susanka, architect and author of *The Not So Big House*, said the small-house concept appeals to people who want to spend money "on the things you really care about instead of trying to impress the neighbors."

A lot of homes have rooms that sit empty, "waiting for a kind of guest who never shows up," Susanka said. The outdoors become a part of the space with houses as small as Norrgard's. But inside, it's important to design the dwelling so that everything has a place.

Even though Norrgard will be heading off the grid, she doesn't want to completely let go of the sense of community she had in her old neighborhood. She hopes to establish a tiny-house community, perhaps at a former trailer park in West Dallas or Bishop Arts.

"The parts of Dallas that the city is trying to revitalize are the parts that would be open to that," she said.

David Cossum, interim director of sustainable development and construction for Dallas, said that there are a lot of variables to take into account but that if the buildings comply with code and other zoning requirements, they could work in multifamily districts.

"We are always interested in exploring options for housing within the city," said Cossum, who added that there have been no formal proposals for tiny-house communities in the city.

Norrgard isn't quitting her job anytime soon, but she's excited to eventually get on the road. She has a long list of people she's thankful for and no regrets.

"Every time I turn around I'm getting validation that I'm on the right path," she said. "It's been crazy, but I'm so happy. I've never been this happy."

—by *Claire Z. Cardona*



B.A. Norrgard's tiny house

BY THE NUMBERS: \$25,000 house

B.A. Norrgard estimates that her 112-square-foot tiny house will cost \$25,000 — less than the price of some cars. Here is a look at the majority of the expenses:

- Custom trailer: **\$3,300**
- General framing materials: **\$6,500**
- Standing seam metal roof: **\$2,600**
- Custom windows: **\$6,000**
- Skylight: **\$900**
- Insulation for walls & ceiling: **\$725**
- Convection heater and thermostat: **\$190**
- Kitchen and bathroom plumbing and fixtures: **\$710**
- Refrigerator: **\$350***
- Flooring: **\$680***
- Interior paneling and trim: **\$850***
- Exterior trim: **\$650**

** Price estimates*

**SOURCE: B.A. Norrgard,
ABedOverMyHead.com**



Helen Harkness, Ph.D. is the founder of Garland-based Career Design Associates, Inc.

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Follow **B.A. Norrgard** and her ongoing tiny house project at ABedOverMyHead.com and on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Twitter](#).