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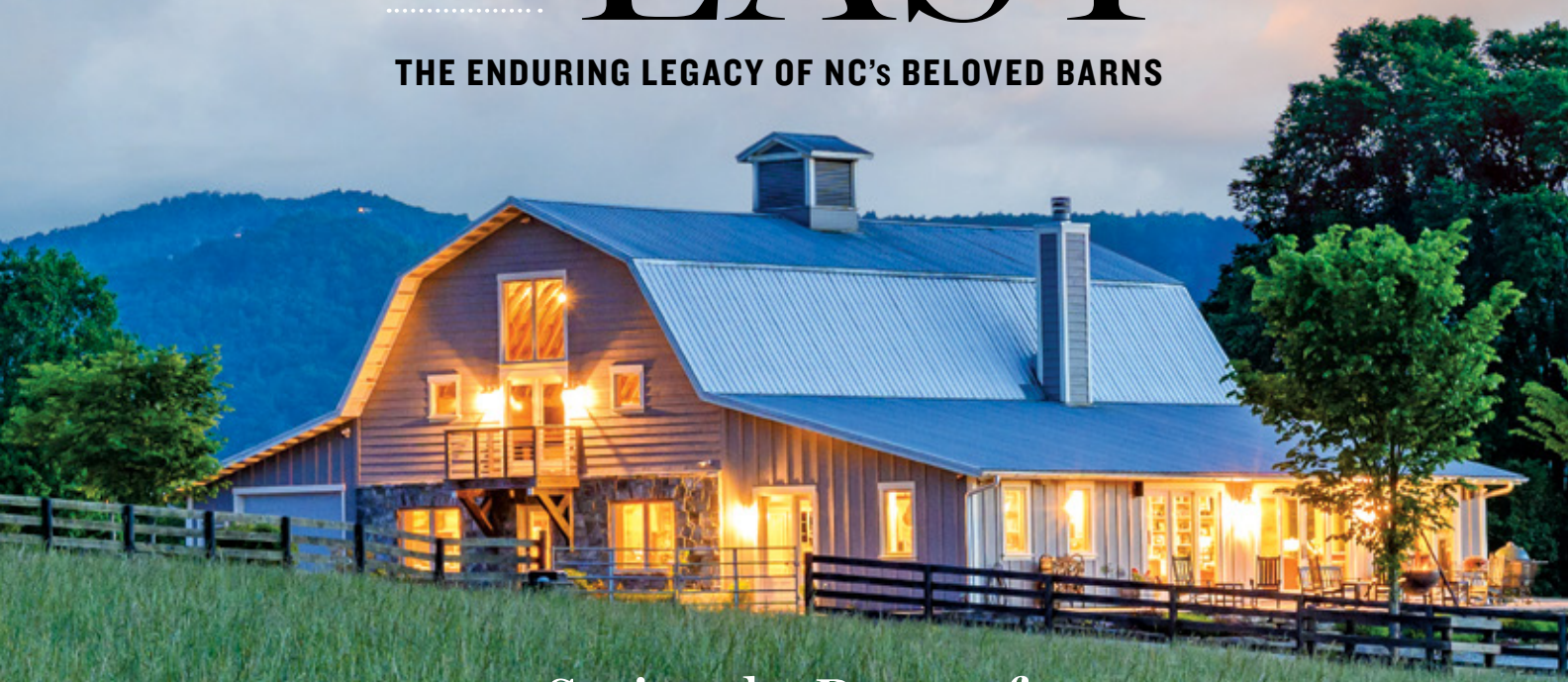

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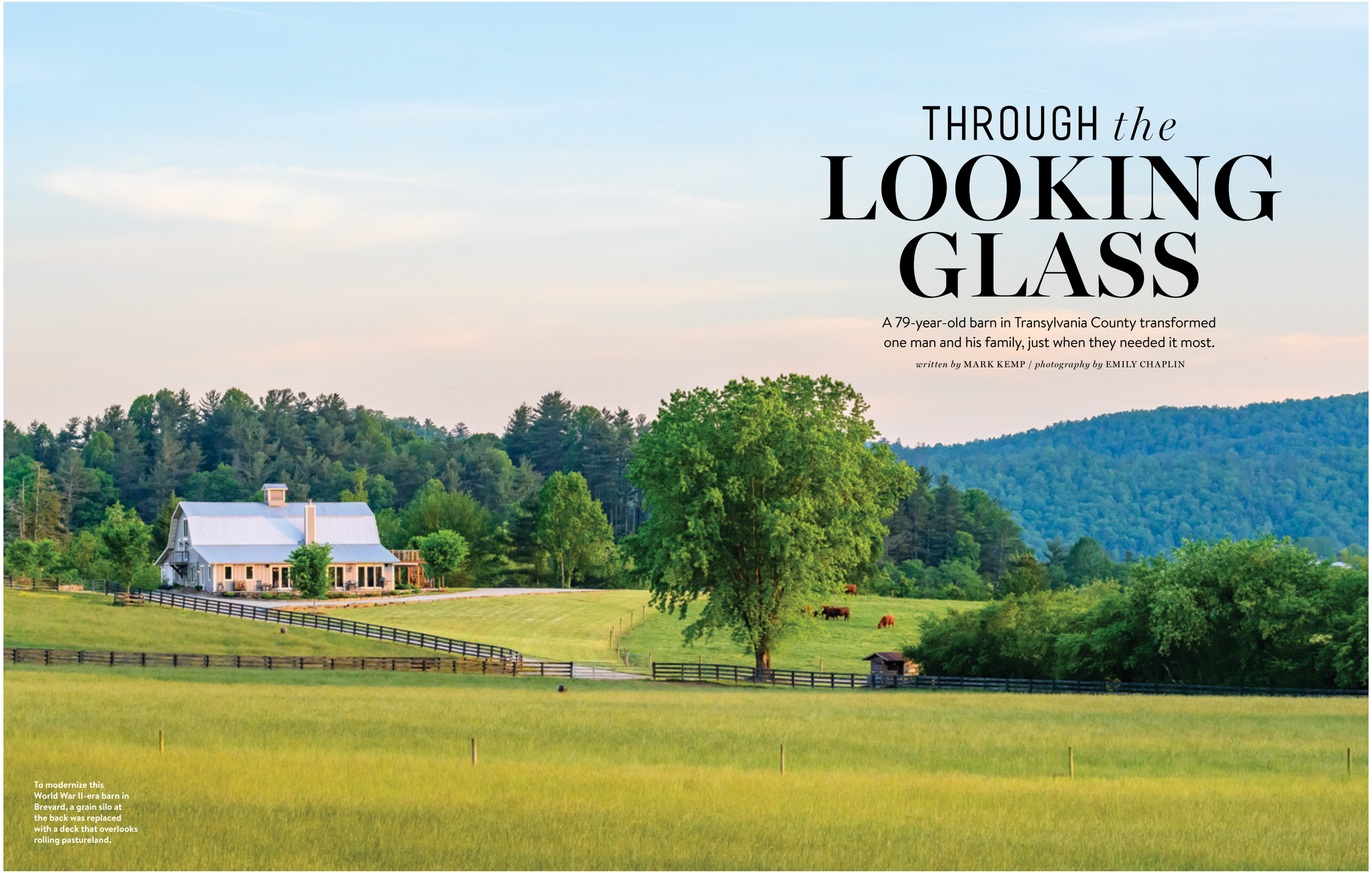
THROUGH *the* LOOKING GLASS

A 79-year-old barn in Transylvania County transformed one man and his family, just when they needed it most.

written by MARK KEMP / *photography by* EMILY CHAPLIN



To modernize this World War II-era barn in Brevard, a grain silo at the back was replaced with a deck that overlooks rolling pastureland.

THE AIR WAS QUIET AND STILL, and the sky sparkled like black quartz on the night that Clay Sykes lost his footing. Alone, rope-soloing the 550-foot granite face of Looking Glass Rock near Brevard, he was some 175 feet above the ground — at the crux of the route — when he had to negotiate a precarious move. It shouldn't have been a problem; after all, Clay is an experienced climber. But things didn't go as expected. He must have stepped on one of the ropes dangling below him, because within seconds, he was airborne. And scared. "I'm screaming a certain expletive over and over at the top of my lungs," he remembers, "and then I hit on the rope, and I'm hanging there — I've fallen probably eight or 10 feet." In all the commotion, the headlight on his helmet had knocked into something — a knot on one of the ropes, a carabiner, the rock itself — and was now pointing straight up. "So, to add insult to injury, I'm in total darkness."

His mind focused like a pinhole camera. In this moment, nothing short of complete victory over this challenge mattered to him. He can laugh today at the absurdity of his desperation. "This is the kind of thing nightmares are made of," he says. "You're all by yourself, in the dark, on the side of a mountain, just hanging there." He has a strategy for situations like this. He does a little rhythmic breathing and repeats a mantra: *breathe, breathe, relax, relax; breathe, breathe, relax, relax.* After regaining his composure, he carefully reached up to his helmet to feel for the light. It was there. And then, very gingerly, he turned it back down. "All of a sudden," he says, "from the darkness, I'm back in the orb of light."

Exactly where he needed to be.

At the time — spring of 2007 — Clay was living in an Atlanta suburb with his wife and three kids, coming to terms with the long-term care of his autistic son, Jake, who was then 13 years old. When Clay finally reached the Looking Glass summit that night, having inched his way up the rock, following the light, he had an epiphany: He'd owned vacation property in the Brevard area since 2003 — what if he permanently moved here, where his family could be away from the noise and chaos of the city? They could have a farm, perhaps. With cows. Chickens. Maybe an old barn. "I've always had an affinity for farms and historic homeplaces. They give families roots," he says.

More than a decade later, he's standing on the deck of an old barn he's restored, looking out over the 80-acre farm he ended up buying in Penrose, nine miles east of Looking Glass. On a clear day, you can see the rock from here, beyond the rolling hills and the lush pasture where Clay's 23 Red Angus cows graze alongside their gangly calves. This farm, the cows, the spectacular barn — this is where Clay and his family have found some peace, some challenges, some acceptance, and, most of all, a tightly knit community of folks who support each other in ways he hadn't seen since he was a kid growing up in Jackson, Mississippi.

In 2011, the Sykeses bought Shuford Farm, which had been in one family since the mid-1800s, and made it their home.

JAKE SYKES IMAGE COURTESY OF LISA AND CLAY SYKES

Lisa and Clay Sykes wanted an environment where their autistic son could tend to livestock, free from the chaos of a large city.

> **"I've always had an affinity for farms. They give families roots."**

ON THE MORNING OF THE DAY THAT CLAY WOULD nearly fall off the side of Looking Glass Rock, he and his wife, Lisa, still living in Georgia, took Jake to his regular appointment with his pediatric psychiatrist. The couple got devastating news: Jake would *never* live an independent life, the doctor told them. They needed to accept this. "Our quest up to that point was to think that there *must* be a solution to this: There's an answer, and we're going to figure it out," Clay says. "Like going to the doctor for any other condition, you think, 'You're going to make this better, right?'"

Clay and Lisa are both engineers, trained to see a problem and find a solution to it. The two met in lab class in 1978, their freshman year at Mississippi State University. Clay was studying to be an environmental engineer, and Lisa, a chemical engineer. They started dating and married seven years later, in 1985, the year Clay finished grad school. He landed a job with one of the largest environmental engineering firms in the country, which took the couple to Florida, where daughter Morgan was born in 1988 and son Jordan arrived in 1992. Then they moved to Georgia, and Jake was born two years later. By 2002, Clay had left the firm and started his own company, ESG Operations. Financially, the family was set. But there were challenges with Jake: He wasn't learning on the same level as his two older siblings. His doctors said he had severe ADHD and was on the autism spectrum.

Clay didn't worry much at first; he had ADHD, too, he says. Eventually, though, Lisa had to quit

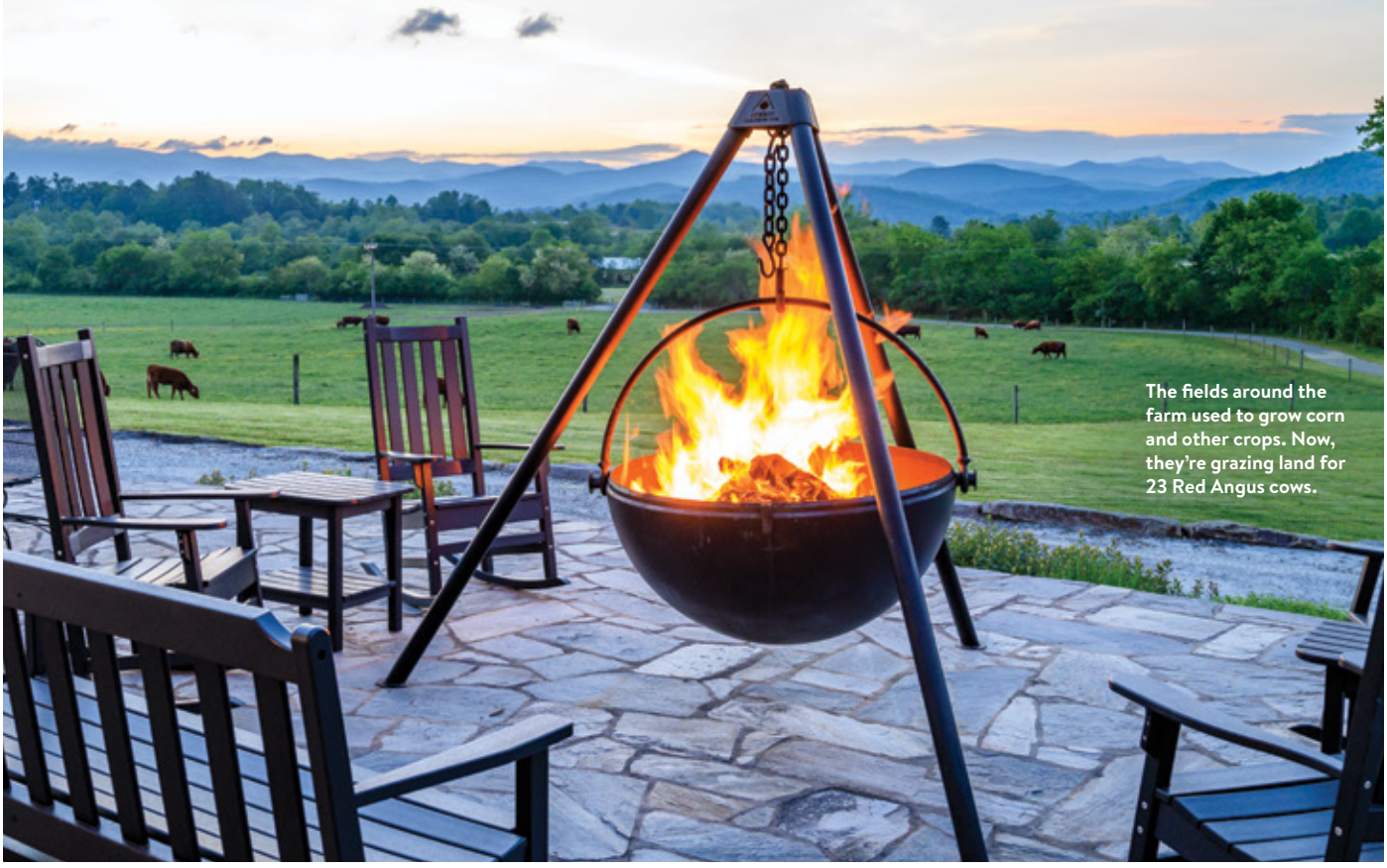
her job to spend more time at home, taking care of Jake. "It consumes your life," she says of those earlier years. "It puts a real strain on your family."

When they got home from the doctor that morning, Clay lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling. "You're thinking in circles. Your mind just gets trapped in this loop," he says. "I was feeling hopeless." That's when he made a decision: "It occurred to me that I can either lie here and surrender — just give up, be depressed — or I can do something. I can create a challenge for myself, something that will give me a sense of accomplishment." He'd always been an adrenaline junkie — backpacking, climbing, cycling perilous mountain roads. So he gathered up his climbing gear, hopped into his gray Chevy Silverado 2500, and drove three and a half hours to Brevard to climb Looking Glass Rock.

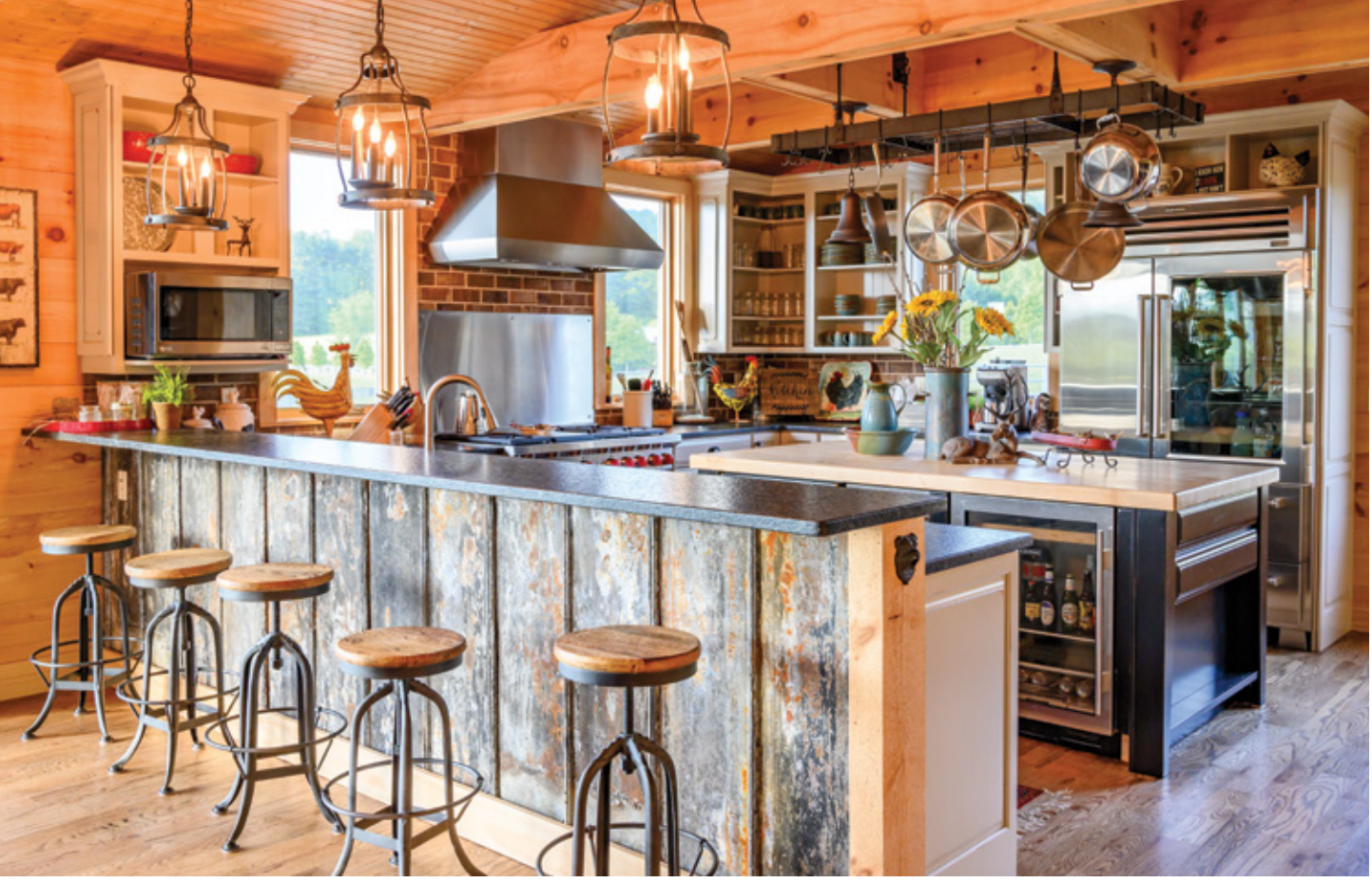
"It occurred to me that I can either lie here and surrender, or I can do something."

Within two years of Clay's epiphany on the summit, he'd moved his family of five to Brevard and into a 5,000-square-foot home in Straus Park, an upscale neighborhood at the edge of Pisgah National Forest. He connected with the Brevard cycling community and often set out by himself to survey the area's farmland. In 2011, a friend told him about the property in nearby Penrose. Shuford Farm had been in that family since the mid-1800s and was now up for sale. It was gorgeous: sprawling fields with a 1940 stone house near the road and an old barn 300 feet behind it. The fields had been leased out for corn and other crops. The house was in disrepair. You could see right through the walls of the barn. Clay took Lisa to look at it. She laughs at the memory. "I was like, 'Oh my goodness.' It was a little overwhelming," she says. "So then I said, 'OK, two things: I hope this isn't going to affect my quality of life, and I am not coming out to slop hogs.'"

What Clay saw was a farmhouse where he and Lisa could live and take care of Jake, and a pasture where Jake could focus on learning how to work with cows and other animals and not be confused by the nuances and complexities of adult social norms. Jake was 17 by then. Life was getting tougher. "My vision was that Jake would be graduating from high



The fields around the farm used to grow corn and other crops. Now, they're grazing land for 23 Red Angus cows.



The rusted tin paneling around the kitchen bar is scrap metal from the barn's original roof.

school pretty soon, and I would have this all set up where he could raise cattle, and that would be his job, his career," Clay says.

He began converting the cornfields into pasture in the spring of 2012 and released the first of his cows the following year. "I remember being apprehensive about buying $50,000 worth of registered Red Angus cattle and having them just run away, busting through the fencing — particularly the wire fencing, which didn't look too substantial to me," Clay says. "Instead, the cows jumped out of the trailers and immediately put their heads down and started eating the grass."

Construction on the stone house began in 2012, too. "It was built before power or water or anything had been brought into the valley, so restoring it was a challenge," Clay says. He walks through the front door, which still has a metal insignia on it bearing the name of its original owners, the Shufords. The walls are pure granite and clay brick — and more than a foot thick. When Clay and a cycling friend, Chris St. Peter, began working on it, there was no insulation in them, no electrical wiring. "Everything was made out of stone," Clay says, knocking on a section of the wall between the door and the front window. "It took a lot of craftsmanship to put in these modern windows." He looks down and taps his foot. "Luckily," he says, "we were able to keep the hardwood floors."

What Clay saw was a farmhouse where he and Lisa could live and take care of Jake.

As impressive as the work on the house is, it's nothing compared to what he and Chris did to the barn out back. What was once a mess of dust and hay is now a short hallway dotted with stunning old photographs of the property, and bedrooms off to each side. To the right is a full kitchen with an island and bar trimmed with tin from part of the old roof. The tin began as an emergency fix for a hole in the adjacent sitting room. The barn wasn't quite finished when a college friend of the Sykeses' daughter used it for her wedding in May of 2015. "Chris went behind the barn and found two pieces of tin lying out in the pasture, and he put one against the wall," Clay says. It was supposed to be temporary. "But all these people standing around, having drinks, they're saying to me, 'This is amazing. Who did this for you? How did you get it to look like this? How much did it cost?' I'm like, 'Well, it's just tin

The elk motif — skulls and antlers throughout the barn — comes from Clay's passion for the animals. He co-owns a 2,200-acre elk preserve in Georgia.

that was lying around in the pasture. It was rained on. I guess God did it.'"

A winding staircase leads to the massive hayloft — now a party room — where barn swallows once nested and hungry rat snakes slithered below. During construction, the barn had to be fully covered. "We waited until the swallows left before we enclosed it," Clay says. "We didn't want to knock the nests down. But then the next year, all of a sudden, one day there's thousands of barn swallows circling around, trying to figure out how to get back in the barn."

A BARN IS JUST A BARN — UNLESS IT'S MORE THAN a barn. For Clay, it has become an obsession, like mountain climbing or cycling: a place of escape, a place of healing, a place of renewal — a place where he can give back to his community. In the four years since he completed its construction, what was once a tattered, 79-year-old structure behind an old stone house has blossomed into a glorious gathering place for family and community events. Every August, the barn plays host to a barbecue fund-raiser, where Clay smokes more than 100 pork butts, sells them, and donates the revenue to the Cindy Platt Boys & Girls Club of Transylvania

"To this day, we've never had another cow act like Nick. He still likes to be petted."

County. He also opens the barn to numerous other organizations — the Boy Scouts, the local 4-H club, the Transylvania County Cattlemen's Association, Eagle's Nest Foundation and Outdoor Academy, and others — for meetings and dinners. And he throws a big blowout at the barn each spring for the finale of Assault on the Carolinas, a spectacular Pisgah National Forest cycling event that begins and ends in Brevard.

During construction of the barn, Jake worked the farm, getting up early each morning to tend to the cattle and gather eggs from the chicken coop. He'd jump on his green John Deere Gator, count the cows and calves, transfer the herd to different areas of pasture to graze, fill up the mineral feeders, put insect-control dust on the cows' backs, and clean the fence lines to keep them looking neat. "That herd of cows would follow Jake to downtown Brevard if he was driving that green Gator," Clay says. In the original herd, there was a young bull that took a liking to Jake. "I would return from being out of town," Clay remembers, "and Jake would tell me, 'You should come out and pet Nick. He follows me around and likes to be petted.' I asked him, 'Who is Nick?' and he said, 'He's a bull calf out there who is my pet.'" Jake, who loves numbers, named the bull Nick because it had a No. 5 tag in its ear, and five pennies equal a nickel; thus, Nick.

Clay walks from the barn to the bull pen, opens it, and approaches Nick, who now weighs more than 2,200 pounds. "I figured over time the bull calf would become wary and start acting more like the rest of them," Clay says. "But to this day, we've never had another cow, calf, or bull act like Nick." Clay rubs a hand over Nick's face. "He still likes to be scratched and petted."

As much as Jake loved working on the farm, he eventually needed more help socializing than his parents (and the cows) could provide. Earlier this year, Clay and Lisa sent him to a wilderness therapy program in Utah, which uses positive psychological methodologies to help kids with developmental issues assimilate to more normal

routines. When Jake returned to North Carolina, he moved into a group home in nearby Hendersonville, where he is slowly transitioning into his own space. After he completes the program, he'll come back to the farm.

Last year, the Sykeses began construction on a new home on the farm, designed by noted area architects Al and Parker Platt. "My dream house," Lisa calls it. It extends from the back of the stone house via an outside living area that connects the old with the new. The plan is for Jake to eventually occupy the old house, and for Clay and Lisa to live in the new one, where they can have more privacy. "A child like Jake — their life becomes totally insular," Clay says. "His whole world is just my wife and me."

For Jake, the barn is not just the center of the farm; it's the center of his world. Clay is acutely aware of this and plans to help his son continue his journey to adulthood with new projects, like maybe blacksmithing. When Jake was younger, Clay says, "he could build the most incredible things out of paper and tape." Metalwork could be a new outlet for his creativity.

Father and son both have intense focus — Jake loves numbers, Clay loves details — but they also have their distracted, impulsive sides: Clay summits giant rocks alone at midnight; Jake withdraws from the world around him. And they both have been changed by the barn. "The incident on Looking Glass," Clay begins, considering what it means these 15 years later. "The easy way out would have been for me to give up — to say, you know, it's crazy to keep climbing. But I continued. And I remember sitting up there, looking out over the rolling mountains of Pisgah National Forest, bathed in soft moonlight, and just feeling at peace and hopeful for the future. It was transformational."

Today, Clay, at 59, is gazing back toward Looking Glass Rock from the deck of a nearly 80-year-old barn that's experienced its own transformation through perseverance. ***OS***

Mark Kemp is the senior editor at Our State.