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For immediate release

Sara (Wheeler) McDaniel '98 (Renovation takes root)

By Jon Merryman

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For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

If you've ever wondered why Minden, La., is called "the friendliest city in the South," one visit with Sara McDaniel '98 explains it all. She is genuine, friendly, humble and kind – much like others you'll meet in this sweet, Southern town.

After teaching elementary students in Texas for 10 years, McDaniel shifted to a career that supported teachers through educational sales and consulting. During this time, she went through a difficult divorce, struggling with what was next.

After feeling the Lord leading her to return home to Louisiana in 2014, McDaniel set her sights on restoring a cottage built in 1926. She closed on the house in 2016, beginning a 22-month restoration process. Her journey and her home have been featured in such magazines and social media accounts as *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Southern Living* and *Cottages & Bungalows*.

"Everything I've been able to do goes back to God – His redemption and favor," McDaniel said. "I put pictures on Instagram about the house and my story, thinking my mom and my sister would like them. After about six to eight months of posting, magazines started sharing my posts. I just restored the house how I wanted to live in it. Now it's a whole other world that I never saw coming."

McDaniel also was instrumental in bringing the HGTV show *Home Town Kickstart* to Minden for an episode in its inaugural season. The show, which features hosts Ben and Erin Napier, seeks to "give struggling cities the kickstart they need to thrive" through three renovation projects.

Together with a friend, McDaniel submitted a video nominating Minden, and their efforts paid off. A design team including designers Page Turner, Carmine Sabatella, Mike Pyle and Russell Holmes helped create a community center that honors the past, refresh a local restaurant that helps women make a fresh start and create more space for two local mentors. The episode, titled “Making Over Minden,” was episode six of season one and aired on May 31, 2022; it’s available to view via streaming on Discovery+.

Since completing her home that launched her design career, McDaniel has continued renovating other homes in Minden and most recently remodeled a collection of short-term rental units, The Villas at Spanish Court. As her business has grown, she’s partnered with other designers and companies – even launching her own rug line. See more of McDaniel’s story – and photos of her renovations – www.simplysoutherncottage.com and www.mindenstays.com.

“I can trace back who I am today to my days at Ouachita,” McDaniel said. “The entire experience shaped who I am as a person and shaped my career.”

To hear more of Sara’s story, check out the Tiger for Life Podcast at obu.edu/tigerforlifepodcast.



By Jon Merryman '00, *director of alumni relations*