

THE EFFICIENT HOME



IT'S
ALWAYS
You Do You
SEASON.

Be a true original
one choice at a time.

5 ways to rent smart.
Own your energy even if
you don't own your home.

MISSING CAT

Mr. Biscuits



Last seen leaving a drafty home.



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Get a Home Performance with
ENERGY STAR[®] audit and make your
home a place your cat refuses to leave.



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

EVERYONE'S UNIQUE

Especially Around Here

“

We hope you'll see **Issue 5** as a chance to examine and embrace what makes you you.

We all live in Maryland. We're all unique. And yet, a lot of us face a similar set of familiar challenges. Eating healthier, grabbing a bit more fresh air, getting expenses under control, better sleep ... you know the list.

That's why this issue is about embracing the puzzle that solves the rest: ourselves.

For five issues, we've brought you solutions that (ideally!) motivate you to save energy—and put money back in your pocket. But what motivates you? For some, it's a tangible reward. For others, it's pride in a home well run. Perhaps it's praise. Perhaps it's Otterbein's.

Stop and consider: What helps you get from where you are to where you want to be?

We hope you'll see Issue 5 as a chance to examine and embrace what makes you you. Maybe you're a to-do lister. Maybe to-do lists give you night terrors. Maybe you're a DIYer. Maybe you should hire someone.

No matter who you are, the answer to a more efficient home can always be found in the same place: within.

So, when it comes to making changes, start small. Or ... maybe, start big! (Just don't forget to start.) Because everyone's unique. And we wouldn't have it any other way.

— YOUR FRIENDS AT THE EFFICIENT HOME

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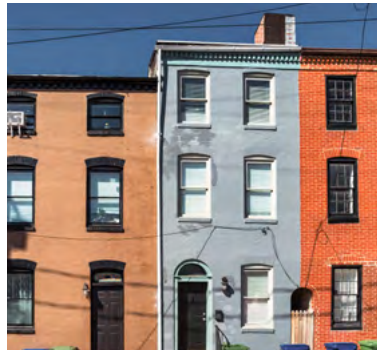
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YOU DO YOU SEASON

THAT TIME OF YEAR

The Danish Art of Being Cozy

Ten ways to turn your home into the most comfortable place on earth, and save energy while you're at it

Hygge is a Danish and Norwegian word that does not translate perfectly into English, which might be exactly why it has found such a natural home in Maryland. This is a state that knows how to make something its own. The closest we can get is warmth, comfort, togetherness and the quiet pleasure of just being exactly where you are. A candle on the table. A bowl of something warm. The feeling that the house is on your side. Creating that feeling does not require a renovation or a flight to Copenhagen. It requires a home that actually feels comfortable, not too hot, not too cold, not drafty in all the wrong places. That is where smart energy habits come in, because a cozy home around here looks a little different than it does in Norway.

It's called "**hygge**" and the Danes use it to express the feeling of comfortable contentment.

Tip 01

The Thermostat

Set it and forget it at exactly the right temperature.

Physical comfort is the foundation for everything else. When you are fighting your home's climate, you cannot relax into it.

Energy angle: A smart thermostat learns your schedule and keeps your home at your preferred temperature without you thinking about it. BGE offers rebates of up to \$100 on eligible smart thermostat models.

Learn more at

BGESmartEnergy.com/SmartThermostat5

Tip 02

The Radiator

Warmth is the whole point. Make it efficient.

In Denmark, cozy living almost always involves fire—a wood stove or a cluster of candles. The flicker and warmth signal your brain that it is safe to slow down. While many Maryland homes have cast iron radiators that clank and hiss their way through winter, true comfort means a home that stays warm without a bill to match.

Energy angle: Air sealing and proper insulation keep heat from sneaking back outside. A BGE home energy audit identifies exactly where warmth is escaping and what it will take to keep it where it belongs.

Learn more at

BGESmartEnergy.com/HomePerformance5



Tip 03

The Ceiling Fan

Easy breezy

The gentle spin and soft movement of air make the whole room feel like it is exhaling. No noise, no blast of cold air, just a steady, unhurried breeze that says, “nothing to do.”

Energy angle: Ceiling fans use a fraction of the energy of air conditioning and can make a room feel up to 4 degrees cooler. A well-maintained system works smarter alongside a fan, running less while maintaining your preferred climate. A BGE HVAC Tune-up keeps your system at peak efficiency so your fan can do the heavy lifting.

Learn more at
BGESmartEnergy.com/TuneUp5

Tip 04

The Windows

Close the curtains. Keep the cozy in.

A cold, drafty room cannot feel warm and welcoming, no matter how many candles you light. Heavy curtains pulled at dusk are the domestic equivalent of putting on a good sweater.

Energy angle: Up to 30% of a home's heating energy is lost through windows. Be strategic: In winter, open coverings on sunny mornings to let the sun warm your home and close them at dusk. In summer, keep them closed on windows that get direct sunlight. Not sure where the drafts are? A BGE Quick Home Energy Check-up can identify gaps around frames.

Learn more at
BGESmartEnergy.com/Quick5



Tip 05

Something Warm

Put a pot on.

The smell of crab soup simmering or bread baking fills a house in a way no candle can replicate. It says someone is here, something good is happening and you are welcome.

Energy angle: A slow cooker uses roughly the same energy as a light bulb over the course of a day, dramatically less than an oven. It is one of the most energy-efficient ways to cook a full meal while you do other things.

Learn more at

consumerreports.org/appliances/best-energy-efficient-kitchen-appliances-a1040572723/

Tip 06

The Porch

Take it outside,
6 months a year anyway.

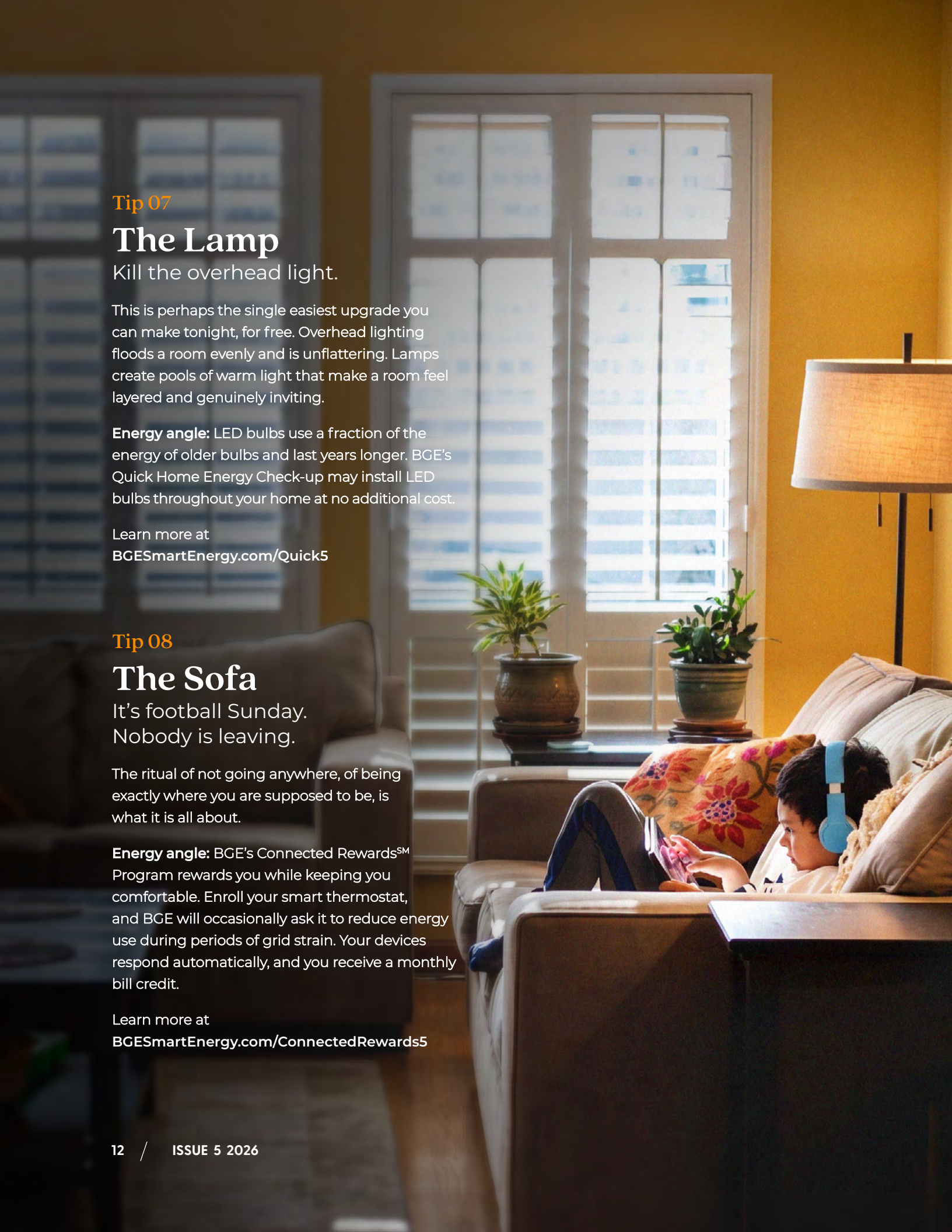
Maryland has a seasonal outdoor extension most states don't have. For half the year, the front porch is the living room, and that is exactly as it should be.

Energy angle: Electronics and lights in standby mode quietly drain energy around the clock. A smart power strip detects standby mode and cuts power automatically, including to those string lights on your porch.

Learn more at

energy.gov/energysaver/save-energy-your-household-smart-power-strip



A living room with a large window, a floor lamp, and a sofa. The room is warmly lit, and a child is sitting on the sofa, looking at a tablet. There are potted plants on a table in front of the window.

Tip 07

The Lamp

Kill the overhead light.

This is perhaps the single easiest upgrade you can make tonight, for free. Overhead lighting floods a room evenly and is unflattering. Lamps create pools of warm light that make a room feel layered and genuinely inviting.

Energy angle: LED bulbs use a fraction of the energy of older bulbs and last years longer. BGE's Quick Home Energy Check-up may install LED bulbs throughout your home at no additional cost.

Learn more at
BGESmartEnergy.com/Quick5

Tip 08

The Sofa

It's football Sunday.
Nobody is leaving.

The ritual of not going anywhere, of being exactly where you are supposed to be, is what it is all about.

Energy angle: BGE's Connected RewardsSM Program rewards you while keeping you comfortable. Enroll your smart thermostat, and BGE will occasionally ask it to reduce energy use during periods of grid strain. Your devices respond automatically, and you receive a monthly bill credit.

Learn more at
BGESmartEnergy.com/ConnectedRewards5

Tip 09

The Rug

Get low. Get grounded.

There is something about being physically low in a space that feels safe and settled in a way that a formal living room does not. A good rug anchors a room and makes it feel complete.

Energy angle: A thick rug adds a layer of insulation underfoot and makes hardwood floors dramatically more comfortable. If you want to understand your home's overall insulation, a BGE home energy audit is the place to start.

Learn more at
BGESmartEnergy.com/HomePerformance5

Tip 10

The Plant

Breathe better. Feel better.

Plants bring something organic and unhurried into a space while cleaning the air. They remind you that growing things takes time and patience.

Energy angle: Indoor air quality is an underappreciated factor in home comfort. A properly maintained HVAC system with a clean filter is your best lever. A BGE HVAC Tune-up improves performance and air quality so every breath is as clean as it should be.

Learn more at
BGESmartEnergy.com/TuneUp5

A woman with curly hair is sitting cross-legged on a light-colored rug in a living room. She is smiling and looking at a laptop that is open on the rug in front of her. The room has large windows and a leather sofa in the background.

EmPOWER Maryland programs are funded by a charge on your energy bill. EmPOWER programs can help you reduce your energy consumption and save you money.



GO ELECTRIC



Remember how we used to complain about a lack of flying cars? Well ... they're still not here, but with so many fun futuristic gadgets to play with, who cares? Electric devices are a great way to shrink your energy footprint—and just might also shrink your money use a notch or two. Take a look at four of our favorite future-y finds.

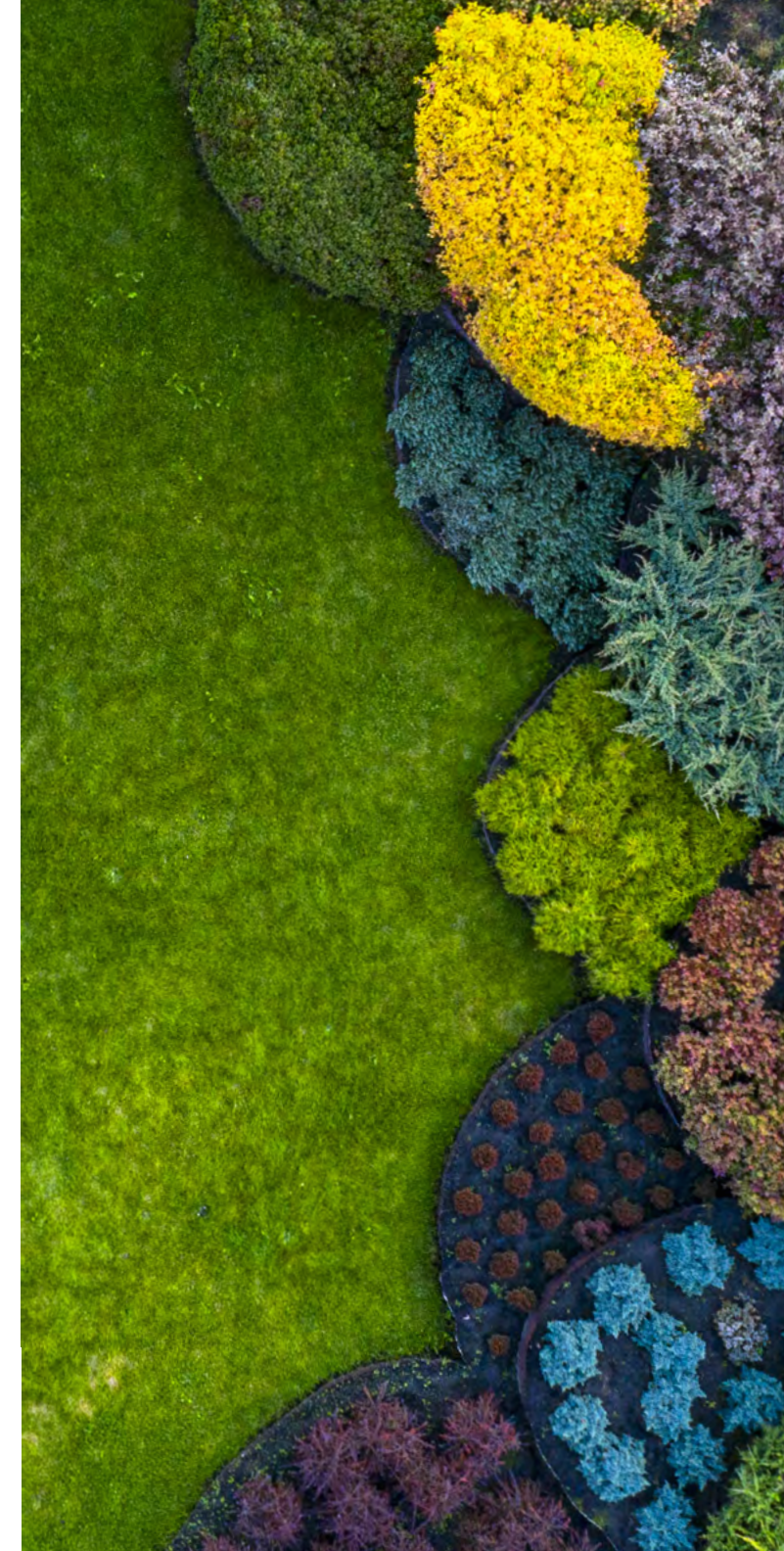
01

Buh-Bye, Bluegrass

First off, let's cover any initial concerns. Robotic mowers are great at knowing the difference between your grass and your neighbor's rosebushes.

Here's how: computers. All of them, all at once. Gone are the days of guide wires, replaced in today's top-of-the-line mowers with a mixture of GPS, AI, cameras and lasers—yes, lasers. Together, these technologies create an overlapping symphony of signals as mathematically beautiful as it is brutal to Bermuda grass.

That's what makes robot lawn mowers so special: sheer grass-cutting power. With no human operator hovering nearby, autonomous units can cut lower and move faster than their hand-push counterparts. They pack more blades than a Canadian hockey team, with some models sporting as many as eight blades cutting simultaneously. That bluegrass never had a chance.





02

Grill Out With More Than Your Grill

We are in no way asking you to grill steaks or tailgate without an actual grill. Far from it. Instead, look at your portable induction cooktop as the high-performance athlete of the kitchen—fast, precise and ready to dominate the home game. Induction cooktops transfer heat directly to the cookware, minimizing wasted energy and getting the cooking done faster, giving you the cooking power of a closer with a 100-mph fastball. It also lowers greenhouse gas emissions tied to cooking.

Having that extra burner on tap in the backyard or at your tailgate is a total cheat code when the main grill is occupied; it's the perfect high-performance specialist for searing steaks with hushed intensity or simmering a pot of Old Bay butter for a massive bushel of crabs. It's a savvy, budget-friendly way to act as an energy boss, keeping your sanctuary cool while you grill out like a pro.

03

Tomorrow's EVs Arrived Early

America's first electric car was introduced in 1891. No, really. Good news: They've come a long way since then, with panoramic glass canopies, dual-motor all-wheel-drive power trains and legroom for days. (Hey, not having a gigantic combustion engine helps.)

It's true: Today's electric vehicles are a whole new ballgame. They're as big on cargo space as they are on regenerative braking, often including front-trunks, or "frunks." (Again: no giant engine.) Some of today's top models even get 500+ miles to the charge. Better build a longer playlist.

With thousands of charging stations throughout Maryland, that's a range you'll rarely have to test. And unlike our friends in New Jersey, there's no pressure to tip at the pump ... but feel free to slip yourself a few bucks anyways.



Explore electric vehicles:
[BGE.com/EVsmart](https://www.bge.com/EVsmart)



Hot Showers. Sci-Fi Technology.

It's sad, but true: Water heaters use about 18% of your home's energy.¹ That's more than your fridge, washer, dryer and dishwasher combined²—something we would not recommend. Things would get messy. Now, if these numbers shock you, consider the new and innovative electric heat pump water heater.

It uses a small amount of electricity to transfer heat from the air around your tank straight into the water, a process as efficient as it is high tech. They're so cool, the U.S. Department of Energy officially classifies them as not just efficient but *super efficient*. If that doesn't warrant inclusion in *The Efficient Home* magazine, what does?

ENERGY STAR® certified models can save a household of four approximately \$550 a year compared to traditional models, which adds up to over \$5,600 over the life of the unit. Don't feel like waiting for the savings? You can get up to \$1,600 back on one through these rebates from BGE through EmPOWER Maryland—and even more when switching from natural gas, propane or oil to electric.

Don't just take our word for it. Hop **online** and see what fellow Marylanders think of these electrified wonders that put a little more comfort in your everyday life.

And don't forget: You can always find savings on efficient appliances at **BGESmartEnergy.com**.

¹Source: energy.gov/energysaver/water-heating

²Source: energystar.gov/products/energy_star_home_upgradesuper_efficient_water_heater



It's time to break up
with your old fridge
Recycle your old, working fridge or
freezer and get a \$50 reward.



Schedule your pickup at
BGESmartEnergy.com/Recycling5

EmPOWER Maryland programs are funded by a charge on your energy bill. EmPOWER programs can help you reduce your energy consumption and save you money. To learn more about EmPOWER and how you can participate, go to **BGESmartEnergy.com**.



IT'S ALWAYS *You Do You* SEASON.

BEING A TRUE ORIGINAL IS SOMETHING YOU
BUILD ONE CHOICE AT A TIME, IN A HOME THAT'S
UNMISTAKABLY, UNAPOLOGETICALLY YOURS.

MAKE IT YOURS.

Every square foot of it.

With the world changing constantly, home has never mattered more. For a while there, we were all handed the same idea about what a home should look like. Cathedral ceilings. An open-concept kitchen. Shiplap. So much shiplap. And honestly, there is nothing wrong with any of that. But the most interesting homes have never come from a Pinterest board. They come from the street you live on, the neighbors you have, the life you're actually living.

Thankfully, this part of Maryland never quite went along with it. Walk down any block in Hampden, Federal Hill, Annapolis or Ellicott City and you'll find row homes with the same bones, built the same way, and they couldn't look more different from each other. A painted mural on one. Window boxes overflowing on the next. A front door painted a color that has no business working as well as it does. Your home isn't a product to be upgraded. It's a canvas to be lived in. And the most original thing you can do with it has nothing to do with trends and everything to do with you.

FIRST, *prep the canvas*

Here's what the design blogs skip: A beautifully decorated room that's drafty in January and swampy in August isn't a beautifully decorated room. It's an expensive one. Before you pour yourself into making a space yours, the bones have to work. BGE's Home Performance with ENERGY STAR® Program connects you with a certified contractor who does a comprehensive assessment of your home, covering insulation, air sealing, heating and cooling, and helps you make the improvements that actually move the needle. Tighten up the bones and everything else gets easier. You can't paint a great picture on a canvas full of holes.

Learn more at BGESmartEnergy.com/HomePerformance5



A modern, sunlit living room with large windows, a green sofa, and a couple sitting together. The room features a large potted plant, a round coffee table, and a wooden bookshelf. The text "COMFORT IS AN INSPIRATION. Set the tone." is overlaid on the right side of the image.

COMFORT IS AN INSPIRATION.

Set the tone.

There's a reason you can't focus when you're too hot and can't relax when you're too cold. Comfort isn't a luxury. It's the foundation for everything else. When your home feels right, you actually want to be in it. You notice the details. You fix the things that have been bothering you for months. You start making it exactly what you want it to be, one upgrade at a time, all on your terms. Don't know where to start? A smart thermostat is a good place to begin. It learns your schedule and keeps things exactly the way you like them: warm before you wake up, dialed back while you're out, just right when you walk back through the door. BGE offers rebates of up to \$100 on eligible models, so your home gets smarter, kickstarting your energy savings.

THE CREATIVITY ENGINE

is the Kitchen.

Every home has a creative center, and in most Maryland homes, that's the kitchen. You know it the second you walk through the door. The smell of Old Bay, Maryland's emotional support spice, and a tray of crabcakes coming out of the oven. And when it's 90 degrees outside, the last thing you need is a hot oven or conventional stove making it worse. An induction cooktop heats only the pot: precise, fast, no wasted energy heating the whole kitchen. A toaster oven handles roasted vegetables and weeknight pizza without a 20-minute preheat. An air fryer cooks food worth sitting down for in less time than your streaming queue can make a decision. Cooking efficiently isn't cooking less. It's cooking with more intention.



Originality IS BASICALLY FREE.

Originality was never supposed to be a luxury. The most personal homes aren't the most expensive ones. They're the ones where someone made intentional choices, one room at a time, with whatever they had. An efficient home just gives you more to work with. Less wasted on heating a drafty hallway. Less lost to appliances running harder than they should. More left for the things that actually make a house feel like yours.

Not sure where to start? That's exactly what the Quick Home Energy Check-up is for. A certified pro walks your home, helps you understand how it's performing and points you toward your next best step.

Schedule yours at BGESmartEnergy.com/Quick5



YOUR ENERGY. YOUR MONEY.

I Wish I Knew When ...

Experienced
homeowners give
advice to their
younger selves.



One is a boots-on, hands-in-the-dirt kind of owner. The other? A self-proclaimed “energy czar” of her family. What do they both have in common? Experience. And experience has led to decades of stories and advice.



Meet Russel.

Kind, friendly and always quick with a smile, Russel Kirk has been managing his homes for decades and has found out what to do from family and what not to do through his own mistakes. Yet he never lets setbacks hold him back. Instead, he learns from them and moves forward.

Tell us your home ownership story.

My story begins with my godfather's house. As a kid, I'd paint or do yard work there, and eventually, I helped him fix up his rental units. That experience led me to buy my first house at 20. Since then, I've renovated an apartment in Jersey City and a house in Towson. Fourteen years ago, I bought a farmhouse that was built in 1860. I'm a dedicated DIYer out of necessity; as a musician and teacher, I can't afford to hire people. I'm not the poster boy for efficiency, but I've seen exactly how it works through decades of projects.

What would you tell your younger self?

Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty or tackle something out of your wheelhouse. Home ownership has no instant gratification; projects take time, so pace yourself one piece at a time.

How do you handle problem rooms that are never the right temperature?

It could be as simple as a closed vent. Start small: Grab a ladder and check. For a novice, electricity and gas are no-goes, but almost anything else can be cleaned up if you make a mess. Short-term wins include heavy curtains, towels under doors or plastic window film.

Energy Efficiency Opportunity

The **Quick Home Energy Check-up** is an easy first step toward transforming your living space into a center of energy efficiency at no additional cost to you. During this one-hour exam of your home, a certified energy analyst will evaluate your home's “vitals”—including insulation levels and door sweeps—to identify exactly where energy is being wasted. It is a stress-free consultation designed to provide immediate comfort while helping you understand how your home interacts with your daily habits.



What was a project that pushed your comfort zone?

I sawed the roof off my house to build an attic dormer. It was scary and it leaked that night, but it taught me you have to walk before you run the marathon. Now, I'm comfortable hiring out for things like roofing while doing siding myself.

Any advice on balancing costs versus outcomes?

Do your homework so you can guide your contractors. I also look for "pieces of vanity"—like a specific recessed light—to provide instant gratification during long-term projects.

Do you still get a sense of accomplishment?

More now. I'm showing my kids what hard work looks like while stewarding a house that could be theirs one day.



Meet LaKeisha.

Calm, wise and always in control of the room, LaKeisha McClendon has been managing her home—and her family—since the 70s. Her approach is researched and strategic with the goal of creating an environment that supports a more efficient home. She sees every twist and turn of home ownership as an opportunity for her and her family to grow.

Tell us your home ownership story.

My husband and I were first-time homebuyers who bought our home in Howard County before the boom in the 70s. We didn't know what we didn't know, but we chose to stay in our original home rather than trade equity for a bigger house. We recently finished a major renovation, and that's when the value of energy efficiency really became real over time.

When did efficiency become a priority?

We bought our home in September, when neither the heat nor the A/C was running. The sellers were able to mask bottlenecks in the air circulation. When the first winter hit, we realized certain rooms were always freezing. We learned the hard way that ductwork, insulation and windows are what actually make you comfortable. For example, a bedroom over a garage has four walls touching the outside air, which heavily impacts insulation.

What small, quick wins would you recommend to a new homebuyer?

Change your filters monthly and find the gaps. Stand by your windows to feel for drafts; even if it's not the most aesthetic choice, use plastic seals until you can afford an upgrade. Also, pay attention to the weather—if it's safe, open the windows and let the house breathe rather than run the A/C. Finally, use a smart thermostat to find a comfortable temperature your family can stick to.

You seem to take great care of your home. Any advice for others?

Treat the behind the scenes of your house like your own health; just as you watch your arteries, be mindful of what you pour down your 55-year-old pipes. Establish a family culture around efficiency, like a rule for turning off lights. I also highly recommend budget billing—it divides your average annual cost into equal monthly payments so you don't get hit with a massive spike during the summer or winter.

Who is the Energy Coach in your house?

I'm the efficiency czar. I tell my kids that if they want the house wrapped in Christmas lights,

we have to save energy elsewhere all year to afford it. As a professor, I try to teach my children that lifestyle comes at a cost and isn't free.

Any final thoughts for young homeowners?

A well-managed home doesn't happen at once; it's about intentional choices that align with your budget. Save a little from every paycheck so you aren't forced to make a repair decision based solely on the lowest cost. I never buy the cheapest or the most expensive—the best product is usually somewhere in the middle.

Energy Efficiency Opportunity

Achieving a high-performance home doesn't have to be a guessing game. Through **Home Performance with ENERGY STAR®**, you can conduct an "invisible renovation" that targets the bones of your house to enhance daily comfort and reduce energy expenses by as much as 20%. This comprehensive approach goes beyond aesthetics, focusing on critical systems like ductwork and insulation to ensure your sanctuary remains at the perfect temperature year-round while saving energy.



5 Ways to Rent Smart

Vampires, Cheat Codes and Why You Should Talk to Your Landlord

As a renter, you may have experienced sharing a wall with a neighbor who “dabbles” in playing the trumpet at 11 at night. Also, as a renter, you’ve experienced the pure, unadulterated joy of never having to spend a Saturday morning at a hardware store debating the structural integrity of a sump pump. In short, it’s a give-and-take existence. But money-wise, you should forget the outdated myths on renting. In fact, there’s a certain financial brilliance to the lease. Studies show that if you’re planning to stay for less than 3 years, renting isn’t just a choice, it’s the wiser fiscal move.

So, take pride in your place, your finances and your energy. Even if you have to deal with an upstairs neighbor who, judging by the noise,

has taken up either interpretive dance involving wooden clogs or juggling bowling balls.

Now that we’ve shot down the misconception about renters, let’s aim our sights at another myth—the belief that energy efficiency is a “homeowner thing.” Just because you don’t own the studs in the walls or the HVAC system, it doesn’t mean you’re destined to settle for drafty windows and massive energy use.

Here’s the truth: You don’t need a mortgage to have a high-performance home.

Whether you’re in a light-filled loft in Baltimore or a garden apartment in Columbia, efficiency isn’t just about infrastructure—it’s about lifestyle. With insights from the U.S. Department of Energy, here are a few tips that will help you leverage your rental for maximum comfort and minimum cost.

1

The Low-Hanging Fruit (Literally)

The “vampire” hunt: Your home office and entertainment center are full of vampire loads—devices that pull power even when turned off. Use smart power strips to kill the ghost power and keep your money in your pocket.

Get hunting: Picking up a smart power strip will help you end vampire energy and keep you from crawling under your desk to plug and then unplug that printer every time you want to use it.

2

The Climate Master

You might not be able to replace the HVAC system, but you can control how its work is preserved.

Windows as insulation: In the summer, keep your blinds closed on the sunny side of the apartment to block the greenhouse effect. In the winter, let the sun in during the day, but shut those curtains the moment the sun dips to trap the heat inside.

The 1-degree shift: Every degree you lower your thermostat in the winter (or raise in the summer) can save you up to 3% on your energy bill. It’s a change you won’t feel in your bones, but you will see in your bank account.



3

Go Electric

Efficiency doesn't stop at your front door. If you're a renter, you may have chosen your location for its proximity to work or play. You could consider Maryland's growing EV charging infrastructure—or public transit options. Reducing your transportation energy is the final piece of the Efficient Home puzzle.

4

The BGE Advantage

The Quick Home Energy Check-up: This is the ultimate renter's cheat code. BGE will send a certified contractor to your home to identify exactly where you are losing money. The best part? They often provide and install energy-saving items—like pipe insulation, efficient-flow showerheads and faucet aerators—at no additional cost to you.

HVAC Tune-ups: Even if you don't own the unit, a struggling A/C or furnace can spike your bill. BGE offers HVAC Tune-ups that ensure the system is running at peak efficiency, keeping your costs predictable and your home comfortable. Talking to your landlord about this will make things go smoothly and you'll earn some points by being proactive and caring about the property.

Air filter maintenance: One of the simplest ways to lower energy use is to ensure your HVAC system isn't working overtime. Regularly changing your air filters is a low-cost habit that protects your indoor air quality and keeps the motor from burning excess electricity.

Dehumidifier rebates: Maryland summers are notoriously humid. If you're running a portable dehumidifier to keep your basement or apartment dry, you can get instant rebates at Lowe's and The Home Depot. Also check BGE's website for rebates on ENERGY STAR® certified models, which use significantly less power than standard units.

The My Account dashboard: Knowledge is power. By logging into your BGE My Account, you can see real data on your energy usage. You can set up High Usage Alerts to notify you if your consumption spikes, allowing you to adjust your habits before the bill arrives.

5

The Conversation

Don't forget that this whole energy efficiency thing is a two-way street. Many landlords aren't aware of the opportunities available to them.

If your rental includes aging appliances, talk to your landlord about how BGE can help. It's much easier to convince a property owner to upgrade to a new smart thermostat when said property owner can get up to a \$100 rebate for the right model.

Next time you speak with your property manager, mention BGE's energy efficiency programs. Upgrades like rebates on new high-efficiency appliances don't just lower your bills—they increase property value and decrease maintenance calls. It's the ultimate win-win.

The Bottom Line

You pay for the energy you use. You deserve to get the most out of every kilowatt. By making small, smart adjustments today, you're not just renting—you're investing in your own quality of life.

WHO DID IT BEST?



Alex, one of your very many impressive titles is energy auditor. What ... is that?

It's like a home inspector with a focus on energy use.

What kinds of energy problems are you looking for? You know, the red flags?

The first thing I look for? Attic access, always. In a lot of old Baltimore row homes, there just ... may not be one. No hatch in the ceiling, no pull-down stair—there may be no clearance up there. It might be just nothing.

And that's where most of a home's heat loss is through.

So when there's not a lot of clearance and it's been sealed off completely, I don't have a lot of faith in their air sealing and insulation overall.

Truly, the attic is the hat of the home. What's something else a future homeowner should watch out for?

So, sometimes, you get into these crawl spaces or attics and you'll find air ducts, right? Well,

sometimes the ducts are just ... not connected to anything.

You'll be in a room wondering why no air's coming out of the vents, and you'll find that the duct that feeds the room is completely disconnected from the main trunk line.

The heating and cooling is blowing directly into a crawl space or attic space ... which sends it right outside. I see it more than you'd expect. One out of 10 homes, sometimes two out of 10.

The local phenomena of disconnected ducts. What's one more issue you see that's unique to area homes?

Because this was a particularly cold winter, we got a lot of water pipes freezing and bursting in spaces like wall cavities, crawl spaces and—worst of all—attics.

You know, these spaces are not properly insulated or protected from outside temperatures. Which means they'll achieve outside temperatures. So, a lot of burst water pipes exposed the energy inefficiency of these older homes and buildings.

He knows all. He sees all. He loves attics.

An energy expert shares common red flags he spots in Maryland homes.

Energy expert Alex Olson teaches you how to spot the most (and least) energy-efficient homes on the Maryland market.

Do you know what separates an energy-efficient home from an energy-sucking nightmare? Alex Olson does. He's the energy program manager at Windsor Hills' own Winner Insulation. He's seen everything the area has to offer, from drafty old 19th-century row houses to frighteningly efficient zero-energy townhouses. Now, he'll teach you exactly how to spot an energy-efficient home, including what to look for, ask for ... and run from.

Well, what's cheaper: proper insulation or fixing every burst pipe in your soaking wet basement?

I believe you already know.

Let's say I'm looking to upgrade an older home but looking to start small. What's a good place to start?

In some cases, you can do a standalone water heater replacement project, where you're swapping out an older water heater for an electric heat pump water heater.

The quick pitch? They use, like, one-fourth of the energy. And because hot water is something you use year-round, it's a big chunk of home energy use. You're using hot water for showers, cooking, laundry, dishes ... everything.

The more people in your home, the more you're using. So, an electric heat pump water heater will significantly cut your hot water energy usage ... and when it comes to savings, it can be a lot.



What's another low barrier energy-efficient option?

I'd start with a home energy audit, which usually starts with a blower door test, usually on the front door. It's a big fan we use to blow air throughout the house, allowing us to track where hot or cold air may be leaking from your home.

While that's running, we work our way from the top down, measuring each floor and entering data into an energy model. Usually, it starts in the attic, we do an insulation inspection. We'll check out those top plates, junction boxes, those ceiling and wall penetrations.

We're checking windows, exterior doors, working our way on down toward the bottom of the house and then, if we can get to it, the sort of "foundation groups," the room and band joists, whether it's a basement or a crawl space. Do we have air coming in from there?

Well, I should hope not!

We're examining ventilation, including kitchen exhausts, bathroom exhausts ... we'll do an exterior walk around just to sort of scope out those foundation groups and any potential other maintenance issues we can find. Drainage concerns, or plants growing on or into your house ... roofing issues, whatever we can find.

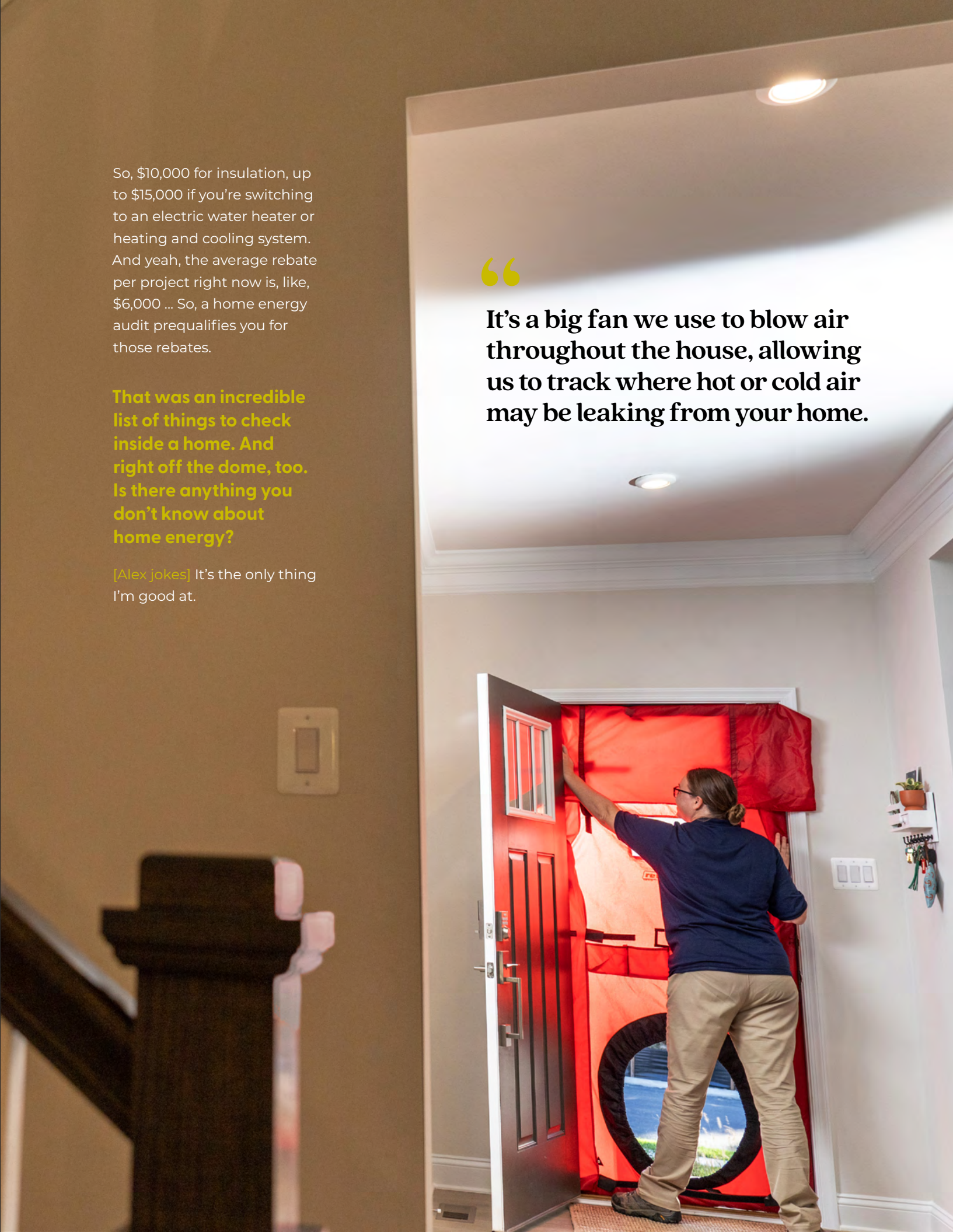
So it's like I said at the top, it's a home inspection, but with a focus on energy. It takes about an hour and a half, maybe two hours, but all the data we collect goes into our energy modeling software. It estimates how much energy you can save by improving things like your air sealing or insulation or HVAC systems, and it also tells us how much in rebates you can get for those improvements.

So, \$10,000 for insulation, up to \$15,000 if you're switching to an electric water heater or heating and cooling system. And yeah, the average rebate per project right now is, like, \$6,000 ... So, a home energy audit prequalifies you for those rebates.

That was an incredible list of things to check inside a home. And right off the dome, too. Is there anything you don't know about home energy?

[Alex jokes] It's the only thing I'm good at.

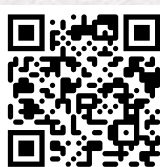
“
It's a big fan we use to blow air throughout the house, allowing us to track where hot or cold air may be leaking from your home.





Through Sunday morning pancake marathons and spontaneous living room dance parties, your home has been there for you. It's time to return the favor.

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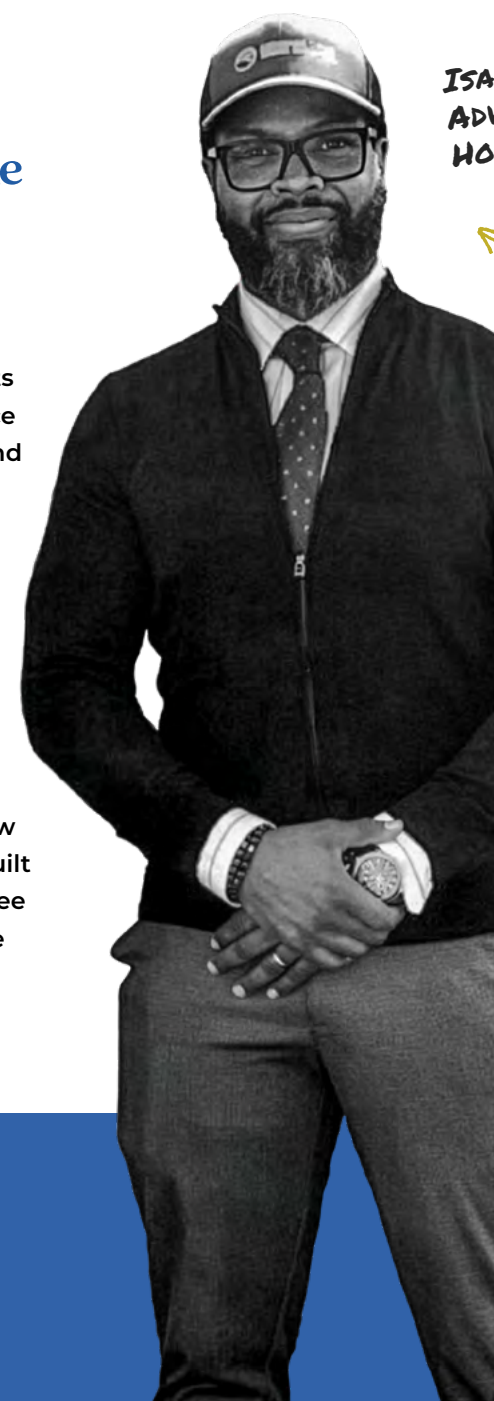
EmPOWER Maryland programs are funded by a charge on your energy bill. EmPOWER programs can help you reduce your energy consumption and save you money. To learn more about EmPOWER and how you can participate, go to BGESmartEnergy.com.

YOU'VE GOT THIS

SECRETS FROM A CONTRACTOR

**Get a pro's take
on improving
your home.**

Isaiah Allen talks and acts with the quiet confidence of a person who has found his calling. He is in his element when he's at work. Which makes sense; after all, he runs the company. Once a contractor himself, he still enjoys taking the time to be in a client's home while training an employee. And that's how he's wired. The man is built to help others. You can see it in his work and how he works with others.



*ISAIAH ALLEN WITH
ADVANCED GREEN
HOME SOLUTIONS*

How did you get into this whole thing?

I got in the industry in 2012. I recently graduated from high school—I graduated in 2010. I was going to school and then when you leave and you come back, I couldn't go back to my old job; it was already filled.

Someone who played on my old basketball team, his next-door neighbor started a company in this industry and recommended me. I started out on the multifamily crew just installing light bulbs, showerheads and aerators. I wanted to learn the business—how they ran it.

So I applied for a position as a technical operations assistant.

At first, I got denied, but I kept pressing and eventually got the job. I was able to see the different service lines, how everything came together and how EmPOWER Maryland fed into it. I was able to see it from a different lens. I was there for about 4 and a half years. Then I got with Advanced Green Home Solutions (AGHS) and have been growing this company since 2017. We went from about five people when I started to about 40 or 45 now.

What do you love about the job?

Because we use building science principles, we know what we do works. It's not guessing; it's measurable. We do the full service: visual inspections, Quick Home Energy Check-ups, energy audits and full installations. When our auditors pitch recommendations, it's really a consultation.

We're not pushing anything; we tailor it to the customer's needs. We're not getting over on a customer; we're trying to help them and, in turn, helping the entire grid and environment. Also, I like giving others the same opportunities I was given. It took someone taking a chance on me to let me learn and grow, and I like doing that for others.

WE'RE TRYING TO HELP THEM AND, IN TURN, HELPING THE ENTIRE GRID AND ENVIRONMENT.

How easy is it to convince a person you're there to help? Does it take long for them to figure it out?

You have to be personable and have a conversation rather than it being strictly technical. If you just send a report, it seems "salesy." You build a rapport while doing the work. Sometimes it's tough to get them to speak to you, but once they hear the explanation of charges and the purpose of the program, they understand the value.

I use the example of a 60-watt light bulb versus a 9-watt bulb—that's low-hanging fruit to show value. It's harder to show value for things like insulation or air sealing because the customer doesn't see them all the time like they do a new window or HVAC unit.

Do you miss being in the field?

I still go out because I'm training my team. It's all hands on deck. I enjoy meeting different people—connections are how the world moves. But I also enjoy the administrative part and watching the company grow. It's stressful managing different people and expectations, but I care about the AGHS family. They have families to support, and I look at them like my own. My daughter was born when I started with this company, so I look at it that way.

What is a quick win you usually advise for energy efficiency?

For customers who haven't participated in EmPOWER Maryland, the programs help everyone overall because they reduce the strain on the grid. If those projects weren't done, rates would probably be higher for everyone from the jump. It's a collective effort. I'm not a "closer" or a seller, but I focus on educating. It's on the profession to get in front of customers and have these conversations.

What are the typical problems customers come to you with?

Bills are too high, or a particular room is too cold. Often the upstairs is hot and sticky in the summer while the downstairs is freezing—sometimes a 10-degree difference. But too often, we find health and safety hazards unrelated to the initial call. People are unaware of mold, mildew or moisture in basements and crawl spaces. We find houses with no air sealing or leaking fossil fuels and gas.

I was once at an audit testing a gas stove for safety, and the detector went off the charts for carbon monoxide. The mother was feeding her daughter breakfast just four feet away. She had no idea she was being poisoned every morning. Our motto is "first, do no harm."

I have to see the conditions of the home before I air-seal it, because if I tighten a house up without fixing a leak, I keep those hazards inside. Delivering that news can be a tough pill to swallow, especially if they've already spent \$30,000 on new windows because a salesman told them they'd see a 30% improvement, which isn't always true. That's where rebates are helpful—they help you make the changes you actually need.

Do you get follow-up from excited customers?

Yes, because we do the work. We have lifelong customers. I had a customer contact me 2 days ago because a different contractor did a project that didn't go well. I fixed it, then fixed her neighbor's roof leak that was affecting her home. If you reintroduce someone to their home in a thorough way, you're always top of mind. People call me for opinions on roofs or siding even though I don't do that work, because they trust me.

Do you have recommendations for ways people can check things themselves before they even call you?

I'll give you two easy ones. First, if you have attic access, pop your head up there. If you only see a couple of inches of insulation, you could benefit from work. Second, check for pressure variances. If you open the front door and a bedroom door elsewhere in the house moves or closes on its own, there's a pressure problem. Those are telltale signs.

Do you notice this stuff when you're off the clock?

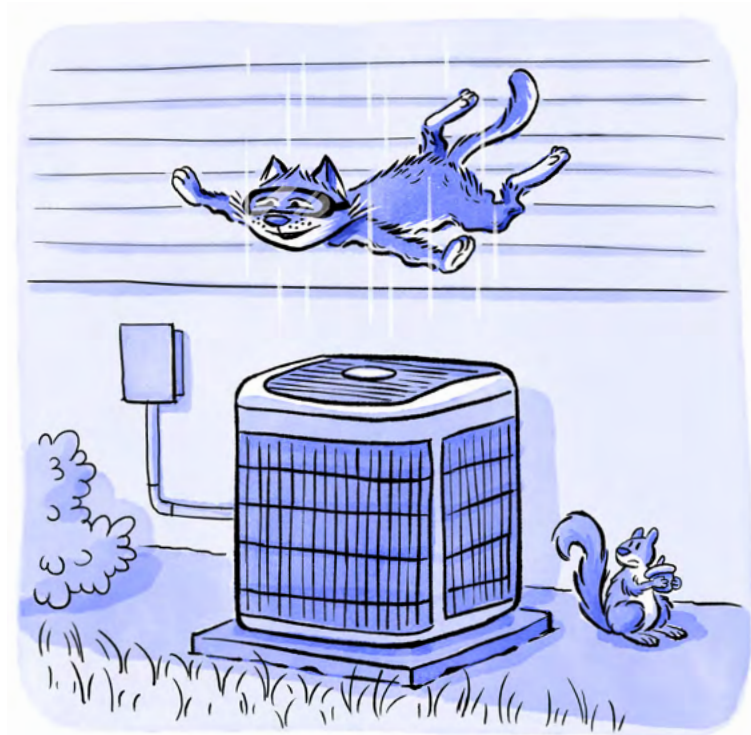
You can't help it! I'll be at a friend's house asking why they still have certain light bulbs. In the winter, I notice which houses have snow on their roofs and which don't [indicating heat loss]. My kids get sick of listening to it. It's always on the brain.

ISAIAH ALLEN, DOING WHAT HE DOES BEST, HELPING OTHERS



COMIC CONVERSATION

CAPTION THIS!



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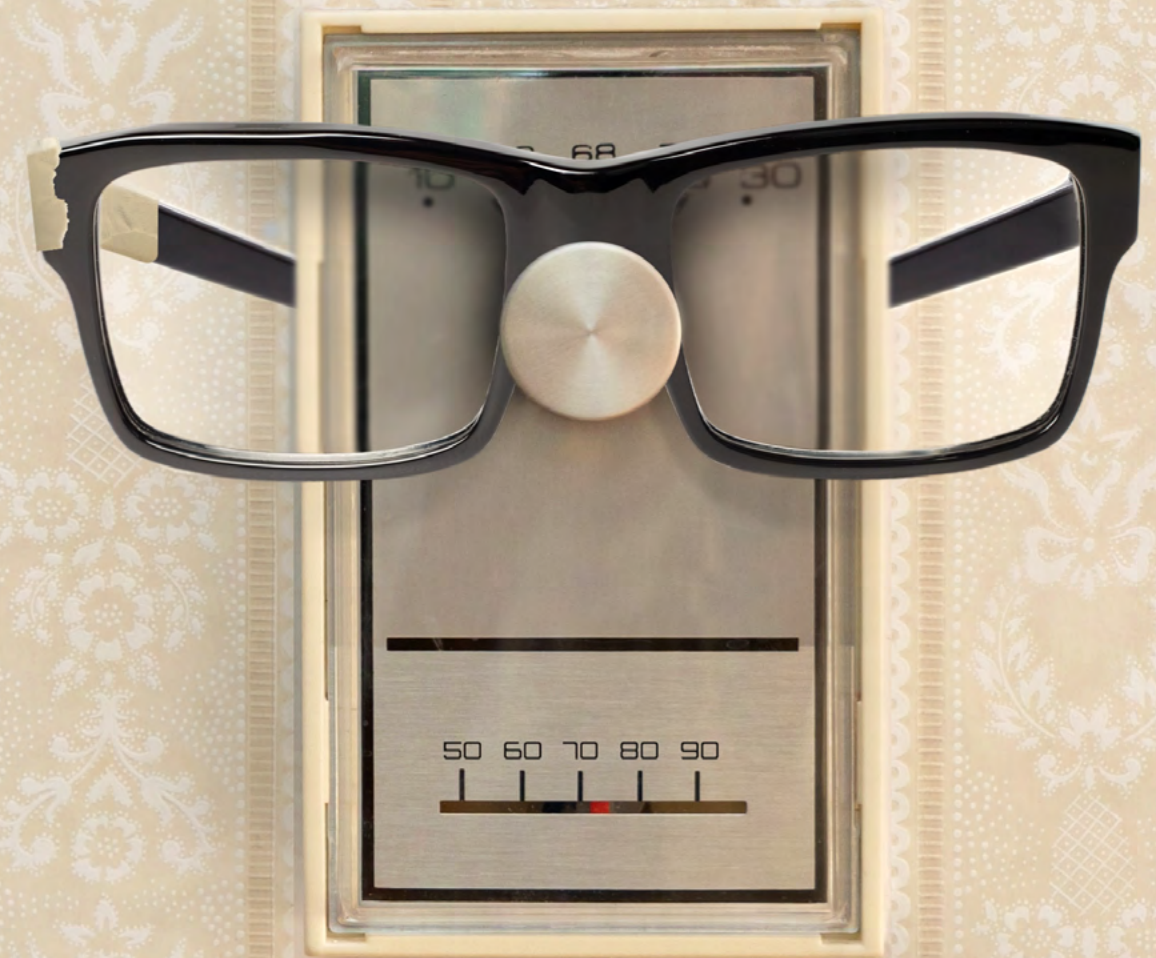


ISSUE FOUR WINNING CAPTION

***“The 4-R’s: Reduce.
Reuse. Recycle. Reknit.”***

– BILLY W.

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