

### Episode Title: Julia Marcum: Making a Home Is Making Memories

#### Episode Description:

You've found your dream home but now what? There are so many decisions that come after purchasing a home. In this episode of The Better Buy, Julia Marcum, the designer behind *Chris Loves Julia*, shares the story behind her family's recent cross-country move. Learn how she chose their fixer-upper home, the story behind her nightmare moving experience (including the red flags you should look for when hiring movers), and the first DIY project she tackled in their new house.

**Episode Type:** Full

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#### Episode Transcript:

*Music begins.*

#### Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):

Welcome to The Better Buy, a new podcast from Better Homes & Gardens. I'm your host, Mélanie Berliet. Each week, we'll talk to experts about the highs and lows of home ownership, and share stories, advice, and practical tips you can actually put to work in your own space.

In this episode, I'm speaking with Julia Marcum (aka *Chris Loves Julia*), who turned her passion for building beautiful spaces into a successful lifestyle blog and family business. Julia and Chris believe in celebrating every step of the home improvement process, enjoying their home at every stage — and sharing their journey with their millions of fans along the way.

*Music fades out while Julia's voice fades in.*

#### Melanie Berliet:

Well, thank you so much for being here, Julia. We're really excited to speak with you.

#### Julia Marcum:

Thank you so much for having me.

**Melanie Berliet:**

I would love to start with the story of your first home purchase.

**Julia Marcum:**

Oh, my goodness. That's such a great story. So, we bought our first home back in 2011. We had been living in a basement apartment, married for about a year and a half, and we had a one-year-old (almost). And we didn't have a lot of money, but we caught wind that there was a grant available for first time home buyers. And it was a \$5,000 grant in the State of Utah, where we were living at the time. And we thought if we had a \$5,000 grant and an FHA loan where we only had to put 3% down, then maybe we could actually swing this. *Chris Loves Julia*, our blog, had already started. I was very interested in really bringing to life something instead of a move-in-ready house. Like a move-in-ready house was not something I was interested in at all. But we told our realtor that we were like looking for a fixer-upper and he did not catch the vision at all.

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs)

**Julia Marcum:**

He was bringing us to these homes that were condemned. Like, I think we even said our budget was \$130,000 for a house. And the homes that he was bringing us to were just not suitable. And we finally stopped working with him as a realtor. This is not an exaggeration: we had seen over 80 houses in our first home search.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Wow!

**Julia Marcum:**

And none of them were clicking and I could see he was frustrated and we were frustrated and we kept sending him houses that we were interested in. You know, something like this, something like this, but the area wasn't right. And we ended up getting a new realtor and we looked at two houses and found the one. And put in an offer and it all ended up being great. And you know, we moved in and started making it our own over the next two years we lived there. But I think that first experience really taught me that finding the realtor that really understands you is so key because they literally are the key in getting you this house. We were just so misaligned on that and it was such a long experience, but really fun once it paid off. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

You mentioned that you knew you wanted a fixer-upper rather than a move-in-ready house. Do you think it takes a certain personality type to go for a fixer-upper? And if so, can you describe what traits make you a fixer-upper type?

**Julia Marcum:**

Yes. Here's one explanation. It can't be one person. If you're moving into a house with another person, you both have to be fixer-upper people. Otherwise, (laughs) your relationship is doomed as much as the house. So, Chris and I work really well together. I mean, we've been married for 14 years now and we are just the kind of people that love to see the potential in something. We see the potential, we like to make it better. There's so many houses out there that could be improved on and I just started treating our homes like canvases and I have all of these creative ideas and it's more fun for me to see the potential and make it my own rather than walk into something brand new and change it. I just feel so wasteful. And so for me, there's a lot less guilt, there's a lot more excitement. And a lot of long nights and hard work – I'm not going to lie – to go in on a fixer-

upper, but the love and bond that you make with a home when you like, put blood, **sweat, and tears into a** fixer-upper is just something. I just might be addicted to it.

**Melanie Berliet:**

And your husband too. It sounds like.

**Julia Marcum:**

And my husband too. I will say he's probably less so than I am, but definitely supportive and excited to jump on any projects that come to my mind.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Do you tend to divide and conquer when tackling the build out of a home or do you tackle all projects as a unified front?

**Julia Marcum:**

We are very slow and steady when it comes to renovating. You know, flippers have been a really big sensation over the last decade or so, and I've never considered myself a flipper. We have bought, moved in, and renovated our homes while living there. This is our fourth house that we're living in right now over the last 14 years. And so, it's just a passion and it's not like when a house is done, we buy another house. It's like, the whole time that we're living in our homes, they evolve because we evolve as people living there. Whether we have another child – we have three young girls now – and our priorities change, or the way we live in the house changes, or we're suddenly living by a bunch of family, we want a really big dining room and that brings new possibilities. Or, you know we're living in a new climate and what does that mean for us? And so, we do it slow and steady and I sometimes—I'm not gonna lie—look at people that are able to renovate a whole house up front and divide and conquer and bring in everything and then in six months it's all done and they like, live happily ever after in that house. I like, sometimes get super jealous of those people because I'm like, I've lived in a construction zone for the last four years, but that is my choice and we have budget restraints and we have time restraints and we enjoy the process along the way in a different way.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Can you speak to me in that vein a little bit about your mantra and how you are definitely not a before and after blog?

**Julia Marcum:**

Yeah. I've always said *Chris Loves Julia* is not a before and after blog, that we are a process blog and we are a progress blog. And my main mantra is: Don't wait to enjoy your spaces until all the dust is cleared and settled and all the shiny new furniture is unwrapped because you never know when that's going to be, but also the moments that you miss waiting. That big lesson came to us, actually, as we were renovating an A-frame cabin up in the Palisades in Idaho that we had bought. And we had been renovating it for a year and a half and we had so many fun nights up there with friends during the renovation. We had Christmas up there, we didn't have a kitchen. There was saw dust and we were having sleepovers and it burned down.

**Melanie Berliet:**

The entire home burned down?

**Julia Marcum:**

The entire cabin burned down.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Oh wow.

**Julia Marcum:**

And we were not done with the renovation. We probably had another year, to be honest. And all we have left is the memories that we made during that time there. That's when I just started preaching: like, don't wait to live in your houses until they're done, or don't wait to invite people over until you feel confident or until, you know, it's perfectly clean, like, we entertain all the time and I'm always like, "Oh yeah, that room's getting renovated." Or, there's sawdust and there's plastic taped up and I even- I let guests wear shoes in our house because I'm like, "It's a construction zone still. Don't worry about it." And I don't care. I care more about the experiences than the carpet. I just do. And I'm so passionate about home and I think home is so much more than a structure, but it really comes down to: it's the memories that you make in it. And I love improving spaces because through that we're making memories, but also we're improving the spaces to really bring out these wonderful memories that we hope to someday.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Yeah. I love that notion that a home never even is really finished, right? It's constantly evolving to meet your changing needs.

**Julia Marcum:**

Right.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Did you ever determine the cause of that fire?

**Julia Marcum:**

It was something in the furnace room. That's just where the fire started, they determined. We were fortunate to get, you know, insurance to cover it, but we had professionals install HVAC, and there was a gas leak and it was a pretty bad situation, so...

**Melanie Berliet:**

But everyone was safe, right?

**Julia Marcum:**

Everyone was safe. We were in the cabin less than 24 hours before, and it happened in the middle of the night.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Wow.

**Julia Marcum:**

It was honestly so scary just to think of the what ifs, but we're so fortunate that we get to focus instead on the things that we were able to do there instead.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Mm-hmm. Wow! And you're currently living in your fourth home together with your husband.

**Julia Marcum:**

Yes.

**Melanie Berliet:**

How was the search for home number four different from the process for searching for home one?

**Julia Marcum:**

Each home search was totally different. This one was unique because it was across the country, which we had never done before. The search required us to block off weekends of flying across the country, searching for houses for 12 hours a day and then flying back, but this one, we actually saw our very first visit. And I remember walking into it and it honestly felt too big. It was the same square footage as what was our current home, but I just couldn't make sense of all of the rooms. It just seemed like there were so many rooms and it was a lot different than our other house, but I wanted that. I love the architecture in North Carolina. It's so traditional, colonial. I grew up in a red brick house in Pittsburgh, and so moving back east in a red brick house was something that I really wanted. And we ended up looking at these other houses our second trip out and I couldn't stop thinking about this house. And this was the beginning of 2021, the real estate market was super hot. Every house we looked at, our realtor said, "If you want it, you gotta move on it because it's gonna go fast." And we were about to put an offer on this other house and we slept on it. We woke up the next morning. I said, "Before we put an offer, I just wanna go look at that other house one more time." Because we loved the neighborhood so much and we loved the look of it and the exterior, and it was so much of what we wanted and it needed some work, but we wanted that too. And we just went room by room. We started visualizing what it could be. We're like, "What if we did this? And what if we did this? And what if this room was this? And this could be this daughter's room and this could be this daughter's room." And it was amazing that once we assigned, almost, a story to every room in the house, we were hooked and we were like, "Yes, we wanna put in an offer." And we ended up surprisingly getting it and we were so thrilled, but I really do think the first house, it was kind of the only house we could afford and we made the best of it. And our fourth house was like, I feel like it's our dream house. It's just, we were telling a story of our family growing up here before we even got it and it made me so excited. And it was that devastating feeling. Like, if I don't get it, I don't know if there's another one.

**Melanie Berliet:**

It sounds like you really envisioned yourselves there.

**Julia Marcum:**

Yeah.

**Melanie Berliet:**

You experienced some difficulties with the most recent move. And I'm wondering if you can tell us what happened and what you learned.

**Julia Marcum:**

Whew. Yeah. Basically what happened was we were moving from Idaho to North Carolina and we were looking for a full service moving company. Someone to come, pack up our stuff, drive it across the country, unpack our stuff. We had some help in Idaho, but on the other side of it we didn't know anyone at the time. This was our first time actually hiring movers. Before this we've always just done it ourselves, but this was a big cross country move. And so we ended up calling this brokerage company, which is a red flag, and I've shared a lot of moving red flags on my blog *Chris Loves Julia* about moving. I know some people won't agree that a moving brokerage is a red flag. I'm not saying it's a deal breaker. I'm saying it's a red flag and do your due diligence when you're doing this. So, we hired a moving brokerage company to hire packers and movers to come to the house and he gave us an estimate of how much it would be and it was expensive. I wanna

say he quoted us around \$12,000, which didn't seem too high. But he said, it might go up once we get your breakdown of everything in your house. And so that was his first initial thing. We're like, "Okay, \$12,000." Then over the next couple weeks leading up to our move, he had us measure every piece of furniture in the house. We did a virtual walkthrough of the house and we had to put everything in an Excel sheet of all the furniture measurements and everything, so he could give us an accurate estimate of how much this would be. And he came back and it was less than a week before we were supposed to be moving. And he said it was going to be \$25,000. We're like, "Well, that's more than double the initial estimate." But we talked to some people and they still said it seems like that's an okay number for: our house was 6,000 square feet, we were moving across the country, it was full service. And we were like, "Okay, \$25,000." The day of the move came and the crew showed up and they started packing up all of our things. And I was there to kind of direct everyone to what needed packed and a couple hours into the packing, a man who was kind of leading the group pulled my husband Chris aside, and just said that he looked over everything in the house and he thinks that this is going to be way more than \$25,000. And they had already started packing everything up. We're like, "What?" It was like we had to be out the next day. We signed the closing papers already. And at the end of that day, he said it was gonna be \$53,000.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Oh my.

**Julia Marcum:**

I felt so sick to my stomach. We just felt trapped.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Yeah.

**Julia Marcum:**

Like we didn't know what we were going to do. When I tell the story, I always say, "Me saying these words now, it sounds ridiculous." Now, I could easily say, "Well, forget it. Leave everything where it is and I'll figure out something else." But when you are in this really vulnerable, chaotic, stressful situation, your mind is not in the right space. And those people prey on that. And there's so many news articles that have come out recently since we've told our story and they prey on these situations and they find these really vulnerable people and they keep extorting them for more money. By the end of the second day, they had put everything in the moving truck and he sat down with us and we were going to pay the \$53,000. And he said it was actually going to be \$85,000.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Wow!

**Julia Marcum:**

And they had all of our stuff and they had driven it away. And he said he was gonna need \$30,000 cash. And I was like, our bank doesn't even give that much cash. We're not gonna give you that much money before we even get to our final destination. Anyway, it just got worse and worse. And by the time we got to North Carolina, I think we had paid them \$70,000 and they showed up and the truck driver that arrived said, "Just so you know, this isn't all your stuff. I saw a storage unit in Idaho that has your stuff in it." And he took a video—thank goodness!—of the storage unit. We were eyeing all the TVs, all the bikes, our dining room table, the piano that was Chris's great grandmother's, all of these really high ticket items that they still had. And they had already taken so much money from us. And when they arrived, they said, they're not unloading anything until we give them \$10,000 cash. And it was just this nightmare situation that, every step of the way there was a red

flag, and every step of the way, there was an opportunity to stop. We didn't get our money back. We were able to get our stuff that was in that storage unit – no thanks to them. We actually had to get a court order and I am 100% confident that they were planning on selling all of that stuff because that's how the other news stories go. We were able to get our friends and family there, load up a different truck and get it to North Carolina for additional money. And what I learned there was just that you feel helpless in those situations and to just have someone present that maybe is a little bit outside of the situation that can help you see clearer. If something doesn't sound right, call the police or just call your authorities. I don't think that we're ever gonna get our money back, but fortunately I think our story can help warn other people. And I do know the FBI is still on this case, trying to find these people and stop them from doing this to anyone else, which is the biggest thing that we can ask for right now.

*Music fades in.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

We'll be back with more from Julia Marcum after the break!

*Music fades out.*

*[Mid-Roll Break]*

*Music fades in.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

Welcome back to The Better Buy, a podcast from Better Homes & Gardens.

*Music fades out.*

**Melanie Berliet:**

Well, moving on to, hopefully, a more lighthearted aspect of the home buying process, I'm wondering where you get your inspiration when you embark on fixer-uppers.

**Julia Marcum:**

Yeah. Honestly, a lot of it comes from old movies or TV shows that I'm currently watching. That's where the inspiration starts, but then I always make it my own because each family is so individual and your needs are individual, and I really focus on family friendly design. You know, with three kids, I want our home to be as much theirs as it is mine and my husband's. And so I strive to make it feel and look really nice and calm and sophisticated and traditional and modern and all the things that we like as adults, but also unbreakable and a place where they can be themselves and a place where nothing's off limits. There's no room in our house that you can't sit in as a child. I don't know if you had one of those rooms growing up, but we were like, oh, we don't actually sit in that room. That room's just for show (laughs). And it goes back to that "Don't wait" mantra that I'm like, "We're not gonna wait to use the good plates and we're not gonna wait to use this really beautiful room. We're gonna use it all every day."

**Melanie Berliet:**

I agree. 100%. I did grow up with one of those rooms I wasn't allowed to sit in... You've said that people should never abandon their budget in the name of time. And I know that when you started out from being a reader of your blog, that your budget at first was \$20 a month.

**Julia Marcum:**

Mm-hmm.

**Melanie Berliet:**

So, I'm wondering if you can share some of your favorite money saving tips.

**Julia Marcum:**

We do something every day called the daily dupe where we share like, this really high-end item and this really great look-alike for less money, but honestly the best place to go if you're on a budget is second hand. That is the best bang for your buck, almost always. In every single one of my spaces, I like to include something old or vintage. I always work on a budget and for me, the best way to save money is one: figure out what your budget is first, but then also: spend all of that money. If your budget is \$25, then you have \$25 to spend. And that doesn't mean that you should try to go under budget. Be realistic with your budget and that will allow you to create a room that you don't want to redo over and over and over again. I think a lot of people feel like, "Well, I don't have the money right now, and so I'm gonna buy the cheapest version of everything to get this room done." When realistically, give yourself more time to do it. Invest in pieces one by one, have a little patience, watch the room evolve, and then you're not going to want to redo the room again. Buying the cheapest version of everything will usually lead, down the road, to just wanting to redo it and spending more money.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Are there any specific items or projects that you recommend consistently splurging on?

**Julia Marcum:**

Okay, so, paint is such an inexpensive way to give a room an entirely new life. I love paint, and it's such an inexpensive way to do it. I mean, you can transform a whole room for like 50 bucks a can. Just get the nicer paint. It's such a small thing to splurge on that it's worth it because it might cost you 20 more dollars and you're not gonna have to do five coats. You might only have to do two coats and it's gonna wear a lot better, wipe a lot better. There are different qualities when it comes to paint and the price difference isn't that much. And generally, in a kitchen, if you splurge on cabinets, well, that's a difference of tens of thousands of dollars. But if you splurge on the hardware on the cabinets, that's the difference of tens of dollars. And so splurge on the hardware because that's gonna make your cabinets, no matter how much they cost, look more expensive. Right now in my life, I really like splurging on lighting because I think lighting makes such a big difference in a room. I like to have at least two to three sources, and I think it brings so much personality to a space. And so that's something I'm currently splurging on, but I always recommend splurging on paint, hardware, anything you're gonna sit on, like your main couch. I was just explaining to a friend over the weekend, Let's say the normal house, you maybe have one living room. Maybe you have a second, like family room space. So, a max of two couches you're gonna buy.. One or two couches for your whole house. Save up. Buy the thing that you really want.

**Melanie Berliet:**

When you tackle a new home, how do you decide where to start and what to do next along the way?

**Julia Marcum:**

Oh, that's the million dollar question. Where to start. I have this thing, and my readers will know this, where I like to start in the smallest space because I use it as kind of a little mood board for the rest of the house. I try out an aesthetic. In our last few houses, I've started with a powder bathroom. It's almost like a little tiny hint of what's to come, but I love to start in main living spaces where you can kind of set the tone for the rest of the house. Traditionally, your primary bedroom comes last and, I tell you, it's worth it to do it first to **kind of give**



yourself a little sanctuary while you work on everything else.

**Melanie Berliet:**

That's smart. What is your favorite room in your current home and why?

**Julia Marcum:**

I think that my favorite room in our current home is probably our family room. It's upstairs. It's paneled in like a really bold cobalt blue paneling that we added and we painted, but we have a TV in there and a big sectional and lots of windows. And it really feels like a memory maker room. You know, we have Friday night family movie night there and we play virtual reality there. And when we have people over, we usually hang out upstairs and our girls have their little computer stations in there. And so it's this really intimate space because it's upstairs, but it's also this gathering place that feels so good. And we went so bold in there, which I'm so grateful for. I think I, it feels like a room that would be in like a modern day Little Women. It has the nostalgia of, like, an old room, but then some really modern elements, even the color feels kind of more modern. I can just see it being a room that we remember for a really long time. The blue room as my girls call it.

**Melanie Berliet:**

The power of paint is real.

**Julia Marcum:**

Yes.

**Melanie Berliet:**

And I love that association, that tendency to associate rooms with television and film that you mentioned earlier. That's fascinating. Not just Pinterest for inspiration.

**Julia Marcum:**

Right.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Right?

**Julia Marcum:**

Right.

**Melanie Berliet:**

What is the first thing you notice when you enter someone else's home?

**Julia Marcum:**

Lighting. Every time. I just am such a stickler when it comes to light bulb color. I'm like a 2700 to 3000 Kelvin. Like, I know the Kelvin that I like, and when I go in someone's house and the light bulb colors are all different or they have too cool of light bulbs. I always notice. And, yeah, that's about it. (laughing)

**Melanie Berliet:**

That's so specific. I love it.

**Julia Marcum:**

Yeah. (laughing).

**Melanie Berliet:**

If you could give one piece of advice to new homeowners, what would it be?

**Julia Marcum:**

I gotta bring it back to budget. Set a budget, talk about it with your partner. If you're buying the home with someone else, get on the same page about it, and then give yourself that budget every single month to improve your space. My sister recently bought a home and I told her that advice. I was like, "Give yourself a budget. Every month, you get to buy something for your house. Make that a part of your budget." And she's like, "This month, I'm gonna do the guest room." It's really exciting to give yourself that freedom to do that, but it all comes down to budget, I think. And also invite someone over. I think inviting someone over helps the home feel like a home faster than anything else.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Great. So I'm going to just ask a few rapid fire questions.

**Julia Marcum:**

Okay.

**Melanie Berliet:**

What does home mean to you in a single word or feeling?

**Julia Marcum:**

Family.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Spacious lawn or large basement?

**Julia Marcum:**

Spacious lawn.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Super high ceilings or lots of natural light?

**Julia Marcum:**

You're gonna make me choose between the two things I love the most. Lots of natural light. Lots of natural light can make a ceiling feel taller.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Neighbors or privacy?

**Julia Marcum:**

I love living next to neighbors, so I'm gonna choose neighbors.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Playroom or game room?

**Julia Marcum:**

Mmm. Playroom now, but in five years, maybe game room.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Fully renovated or fixer-upper?

**Julia Marcum:**

Fixer-upper. Every day, all day.

**Melanie Berliet:**

And last, but certainly not least, pompoms or tassels?

**Julia Marcum:**

Tassels. I just got a new armoire with a little key with a tassel on it, and I can already tell it might be one of my favorite pieces in our house. So tassels all day.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Wonderful. Is there anything you wanted to speak to that we didn't get a chance to cover today?

**Julia Marcum:**

I just want everyone to feel like the best thing that you can do in your home is make it your own. That's the best part about owning a home is you get to make it your own. I'm there to inspire people, but think about one or two things that you can change to adapt it to your own space.

**Melanie Berliet:**

That's really great advice. Well, thank you so much for joining us, Julia. It's been an absolute pleasure having you on the show.

**Julia Marcum:**

Thank you, Melanie. It's been so great to be here.

*Music fades in.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

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*Music fades out.*