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**TWO-KITCHEN HOMES
REINVENT GREAT
ROOM CONCEPT**

By Joe Dowd

Designer 'Gives Back' Through Community School Project

Although kitchen design is a passion for Shannon Davis Johnston, her finest professional work didn't earn her a dime.

Money isn't everything and, for the owner of a kitchen and bath design firm on the North side of Chicago, the prospect of making a difference at the community school just down the block was a life-changing experience. In addition to giving back to her community, her involvement in this rewarding volunteer project created a wonderful opportunity to utilize her design skills while networking with other industry professionals.

TEACHERS' LOUNGE

"I live in an amazing neighborhood, and the community puts a lot into the school, but they are always short on money. We've actually had to raise money to pay for an art teacher and a music teacher," says Shannon, who is not only a Certified Kitchen Designer

but also the mother of a second-grader and a two year old.

She is involved with "Friends of Audubon," a non-profit organization which raises funds to support Audubon School. Unfortunately, the school has seen neglect caused by municipal budget cuts and the ravages of time. She and other volunteers in FOA were working on another project when she was approached about Audubon's teachers' lounge.

"Another mom, Friends of Audubon member Karen Lee, said, 'You've got to check out the teachers' lounge; it's so crummy,'" she says. "The teachers do so much for our kids and we thought we should do something for them."

Shannon described the kitchen as "disgusting." She continues: "The refrigerator was ugly and dirty; the cabinets were old. The paint was peeling and the floor was a mess. Many of the teachers wouldn't even eat there. They just ate lunch at their desks."



Designer Shannon Davis Johnston put her skills to a different challenge when she volunteered to remodel a teachers' lounge at her local school.

Expanding on Lee's idea, Shannon talked with others in the Audubon school community. What started out as a plan to paint the room soon grew into a full-blown renovation; the group

would launch a grass-roots effort to redesign a brand-new teachers' lounge.

Shannon has been working in the kitchen and bath design industry for 20 years, having worked in several showrooms and done freelance work as well. Ten years ago, she "took a leap of faith" and went out on her own.

She now operates Shannon Davis Designs out of her home office, relying primarily on design software to virtually "build" and customize remodeled and new kitchens for her clientele. Her business is focused on the Chicago area, particularly the North Shore, but she also has some out-of-state clients. Many of the clients come from contractors who recommend her work.

Initially, she used her garage as a storage facility and transported samples of her cabinetry, tile and countertops to her clients. But her business has since grown to the point that she now uses a separate storage facility. She brings the products to her clients so "that way they can touch and feel the product," she explains.

"A lot of my work comes from referrals from contractors, but sometimes a client comes with a general contractor," notes Shannon, who meets with clients at their homes or in her home office. "Others want to interview several contractors. Every job, every client is unique."

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Design that maximizes function while encompassing all of the senses is a hallmark of Shannon Davis Johnston's projects, as seen in this kitchen.

WORKING TOGETHER

Over the past summer, the project at Audubon Elementary took shape. Shannon started talking with people in the immediate community, a well-kept Chicago neighborhood known as Roscoe Village filled with shops and eateries.

"I live in an amazing neighborhood and the community puts a lot into the school," Shannon says. "But they are always short on money." While a teachers' lounge might be low on the list of most pressing priorities, the group felt it was time to provide a livable space for the teachers to relax in.

Shannon donated the cabinetry and started making calls: "I was

able to get a contractor who I work with who just happens to live in the neighborhood," she says. "I got him involved, and he paid for the paint and painters, and installed the cabinets."

Another neighborhood merchant, the owner of a furniture store, donated furniture. Yet another local man, the uncle of a student, installed new flooring. The local Home Depot gave Friend of Audubon a good deal on a floor model refrigerator to replace the old "disgusting" one.

"I was able to repurpose a piece of granite pulled from the island of another job (pictured above), and another expert comp'd his labor," Shannon notes. "He came and installed it."

Shannon was surprised by the willingness of the community to pitch in. "It turned out to be fun getting all of those businesses involved; we had a sense of community and it could spark even better things for the future," she enthuses.

If the job had been done retail, Shannon estimates the cost would've been about \$30,000 in materials and labor. Instead, the job was completed with about \$2,200 from the Friends of Audubon for out-of-pocket expenses.

Working as the pro-bono general contractor was Bill Bigane, another community businessman and Audubon parent.

The installation and the finishing touches were completed just in time for the return of school in September. The FOA held a surprise party for the grand opening of the new teachers' lounge. Not surprisingly, the teachers were thrilled.

Now the new refrigerator is packed with paper-bag lunches and teachers have that place to recharge between classes.

The school project is a mirror of Shannon's business philosophy:


"I passionately believe that great design enhances your overall well-being by encompassing all five senses and improving the functionality of your environment," she states. "I find

it incredibly rewarding to see how life-changing a properly designed space will become. At the end of each project, I feel great satisfaction when the reward of this transformation is achieved."

Giving back to the community also taught Shannon some valuable life lessons, which she feels are applicable both to her business and her life.

"It started out as a simple paint job and a few new pieces of furniture," she remarks. "What it taught me is not to be afraid to ask for help. We were floored by the amount of goods and services we received and, if we had more time, it could have been even bigger.

"It was amazing how we asked people to give us things for free and how many people were willing to give. Whether their time, their service or a product, it was amazing. That made it really fun, and it went a long way for those teachers," she says.

In November, Shannon revisited the teachers' lounge and found her vision transformed into something entirely new. "What we've created is a meeting spot; a place to celebrate birthdays, host baby showers and collaborate on lesson plans," she explains. "It has been incredibly rewarding to witness some of these moments first hand." 

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