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LAUREL McMANUS BROWN

DESIGNING
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Laurel McManus Brown

Designing — and living — boldly



"I am so grateful that
I am an American woman,
because I can do anything
I want to in this country."

- *Laurel Brown*

Photo by C & N Photography

By Kathryn Kingsbury

Laurel McManus Brown, owner of Brownhouse Designs, has created my dream workplace environment. It's one in which the meeting-room walls are painted a sassy red, cookies are abundant and people are free — though not required — to wear cocktail dresses to work.

When I meet Laurel at her downtown interior design office, she is wearing a fitted, black-and-white satin dress with an asymmetrical neckline — the perfect balance of traditional styling and unconventional flair. It's a streak that shows up again and again in her work, including her landmark project in the heart of the UW-Madison campus. Lucky, a 360-unit complex of luxury furnished apartments on University Avenue that opened in August 2008, is a place where stainless steel refrigerators, sleek pocket doors, modern pendant lights, granite countertops and walls in classy colors (never apartment white) are par for the course. Furnishings are a tasteful merger of funky and classic.

Boldness is not just part of Laurel's designs; it's her approach to living. She traces this characteristic to her childhood in the town of Oregon. "I had parents that were both extremely gutsy people, so I have this very entrepreneurial spirit," Laurel says. Her mother, Dorothy McManus, learned how to fly airplanes at the age of 22, earned a master's degree in chemistry, worked in cancer research and was a competitive bridge player. Laurel's father, the high-profile trial attorney Jack McManus, was known for his flamboyant courtroom style.

Laurel started Brownhouse in 2002, and its work quickly drew local and national attention. "People think, 'Oh, you're successful. This just happened to you,'" says Laurel. "No — it took 25 years to get there."

Young entrepreneur

The journey started in 1982, when her mother died of cancer at age 53. Laurel dropped out of UW-Madison and moved to Atlanta, where her sister and aunt lived. She entered design school, started working for an architectural firm and, when the firm dissolved shortly after hiring her, decided to hang out her own shingle as McManus Consulting.

"I was 25 and I would be the only woman there in the room" when she met with clients, she recalls. "My knees would shake under the table. I was intimidated that someone would ask me something I didn't know."

She worked 60-plus hours a week, never taking a vacation longer than a couple of days. "I didn't have a fallback — if I screwed up, I'd be out on the street," Laurel says. "Fear can be a great motivator. I channeled my fear into working my butt off and making my clients happy."

Then, in 1994, she had what she calls "my first midlife crisis." Laurel says, "I think I suffered from acute burnout. I really couldn't sustain that kind of 12-hour workday." Plus, she was getting tired of living in such a large city; she didn't know her neighbors and her apartment had been burglarized three times.

Laurel sold her business, bought a Jeep and drove to Alaska. One of the attractions was her father, who lives there for most of each year; but she also wanted to be somewhere as remote from big city life as possible. She settled in Anchorage and finished her bachelor's degree in art and design at the University of Alaska.

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After her idyll, she moved back to Madison in 1997. It was the happy medium between crowded “Hotlanta” and the cold isolation of Alaska — a city big enough to offer plenty of things to do, but small enough so you run into neighbors while you’re about town. She went to work for an architectural firm and, while continuing to work full time, entered the MBA program at UW-Madison in 2000.

Laurel was excited about the life she was building for herself. Her favorite television show growing up was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, a 1970s sitcom that broke ground for its portrayal of the life of a single — and happy — career woman. Laurel felt a little bit like Mary. She enjoyed her independence and “had accepted the fact that I was never going to get married,” she says.

Then, at age 41 and a few months before her spring 2002 graduation, Laurel humored a friend who wanted to set her up on a blind date. When she met Steve Brown, it was pretty much love at first sight. “I knew on the second date we were going to get married,”

she says. They wed soon after, and their partnership extends to work; Steve Brown Apartments owns and manages the Lucky apartments that Brownhouse designed.

Becoming Brown

Taking a new last name mid-career was not Laurel’s first impulse, but she is glad she did it. “I probably wouldn’t have changed my name if my husband hadn’t asked me in one of those doe-eyed moments and explained how important it is to him,” she says. She realized, as a feminist, that the important thing was to have a choice in what her last name would be. And “Brown,” she decided, was a great choice: “It’s a really nice last name.”

Women in the United States, she says, “have fabulous choices. The human rights we experience in this country are so profoundly wonderful in comparison to other parts of the world.” In the past few years, she has traveled extensively in China, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand and notes that the high levels of poverty are a serious barrier to women there.

“I am so grateful that I am an American

woman, because I can do anything I want to in this country. Yes, there are still inequities. But there are other ways of leveraging being a woman to your advantage ... Whenever I feel sorry for myself, I just stop and think how wealthy we are in this country — and I mean wealthy in all ways,” especially the opportunities we have, she says.

Laurel likes to grab those opportunities by the horns. She recently expanded her business to offer more residential services, such as designing a house from the ground up, remodeling an existing house or one of its rooms, and suggesting and securing new furnishings.

“I think 99 percent of success is an internal job,” she says. “If you work on the inside and on overcoming any barriers you have put in your own way, you can succeed. Overcome those internal demons that tell you you’re not good enough.”



Kathryn Kingsbury might start wearing cocktail dresses in unexpected places. Her web site is www.kathrynkingsbury.com.