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5 questions? Debra Lellbach Interior designer

By Kathy Millen, staff writer

Debra Lellbach knows how to make a house a home.

Working in tandem with her husband, Dough Lellbach brings the decorative touch to Lellbach Builders, a home renovation business Doug launched in 1988.

A licensed interior designer, Lellbach, 53 hadn't fully explored her creative side until she was in college.

Born in Hammond, Ind., the third of four children, she moved to Wheaton from Crown Point when she was 12. She earned a degree in fine arts, with a concentration in interior design from Drake University in Des Moines and moved to Indianapolis where she did interior design planning for the Paul Harris store chain. She came back to Illinois to work for an office furniture dealer. By then, a single mother of two sons, she went to work for her father who opened a self-storage facility, The Extra Closet, in Warrenville. While managing the business and eventually buying it, she started to freelance as an interior designer.

She married Doug 13 years ago and they became partners in business as well. They opened up a second storage facility in the North Plainfield area and sold it in 2005. Since then, Lellbach has brought her design skills and marketing savvy to Lellbach Builders.

A longtime community volunteer, she also has been an active member of the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce for the last eight years, during which time her storage company earned the chamber's Small Business of the Year award and The Business Ledger's Excellence in Business award. She has served on the chamber's board of directors for the last four years and was appointed board chairman in January. Previously she had also served as a member of the Plainfield Chamber of Commerce board.

Lellbach's other interests include gardening, exercising, cooking and calligraphy. She and her husband are completing a major renovation of their Cress Creek home which the couple also shares with her two sons, Nicholas and Christopher.

1. *Have you always been artistic?*

I went to St. Francis High School and, at the time, I don't even know if they had art. They might not have. I took the math, science stuff and for some reason I always just kind of thought that (art) was what I wanted to do. So when I went to college the real interesting thing was that I had never really done anything artistic. So taking the painting and the drawing and finding a gift you didn't know you had was really kind of neat. As time has gone on, I see it more and more in my life. That creative part of me comes into business, it comes into relationships, it keeps me more open. And through the business situation where we sold the business and stuff, even though I wasn't doing design work at the time, those five years of building the business was creative. And so it's funny. Now you start to realize there really is a thread through everything you do. ...I find now, and it's true of anybody, in life you get more comfortable with your talents the more you realize what they are.

2. What are the trends you see in decorating?

What I've observed is there's a lot of stuff that we've seen 30 years ago. If you look at what's out in the catalogues and stores, there is a lot more trend to a little more contemporary. The colors are more contemporary – the aquas, the browns, the color palette we haven't seen in awhile. I like it. The challenge is so many of the customers that we have, that's not necessarily their taste. What I try to do is maybe bring some of the color in and touches. They like that. But in what we do in kitchens and a lot of baths and additions, material-wise, there is a lot of opportunity with stones and mosaic tiles. That whole area has just exploded in terms of what's available. It's an opportunity to be creative. ... It gives you that splash where you can make everything else pretty neutral. The other trend is using green (environmentally friendly) materials.

3. What mistakes do people make when decorating?

I think people are inherently afraid of color and they're too concerned about everything matching. If it blends, it's much more interesting. Building or renovating, I think some people don't make use of professionals enough. I think there's the perception that it's going to be more expensive if I do that, but the outcome is going to be better. And it's not necessarily a lot more expensive, but you get a different result. Or they come to you too far along in the process. ... Sometimes the working together at the start of the project can save you money, give you different ideas. And it really changes the outcome or the process too. Sometimes you don't think to start with the contractor. You think to start with the architect. Truly, I do think bringing those two together from the start is a real good thing.

4. How would you describe yourself?

Tenacious, empathetic, creative, open-minded. I think I find the positives in the tough situations. I really want just to be positive. It's hard sometimes. ... My two motivators are to set a good example for my sons and to be a good reflection of my parents, even though they are gone. Those are my yardsticks.

5. Do you have a personal philosophy you live by?

There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it. ... Attitude is everything and it's so true. I say that to my kids, too. Attitude makes all the difference in the world so why have a bad one?