



Karen Kalmek Champions Sustainability At Green Home Chicago

The South African designer built her business by channeling her creativity and passion for protecting the planet and its people.

Madeline Lena
12/03/2018

Despite insurmountable evidence to the contrary, don't call Karen Kalmek a tree hugger. Originally from South Africa, Kalmek let her entrepreneurial spirit and interest in people guide her through careers in speech therapy, the travel industry and human resources for a Fortune 500 company before arriving in the U.S. A combination of education and experience illuminated the importance and significance of the green movement, leading Kalmek to find her passion and purpose.

Kalmek founded Green Home Chicago in 2007 at the intersection of social impact and sustainability, with a goal of marrying the green movement to job creation in the design world, benefitting people and planet at the local level.

Tell me about your journey leading up to the opening of Green Home Chicago. I've had many careers, former and current. I have master's degrees in education and psychology that really enhanced my fascination in people. When I came to the U.S., I got into career counseling, something I still do today. My introduction to design came through a part-time marketing job with a small cabinetry company who worked mainly with with architects. I began learning about how the industry worked and the new trends on the horizon, one of which was the green movement. I thought it referred to the color, not sustainability.

I did my homework to educate myself on the green movement and developed a vision for a design company that sold eco-friendly products, forging a new segment related to the preservation of the planet and its people and creating jobs in the process. I told my husband the market was wide open, so we jumped in. I'm an artist on the side, so there was this confluence of what I enjoy and everything just sort of came together.

What inspires and motivates you? I enjoy people and tend to derive inspiration from them. We attract very interesting clients, all of them thoughtful and conscious. Our customers are take the time to explore new trends and pursue the cutting edge, which is motivation for us to deliver.

My time spent traveling was wonderful because the architecture in other countries bombards you with stimuli from different cultures. Finding beautiful things that are also good for the environment serves as great inspiration.

How does Green Home Chicago stand out in the crowded design market? We have a very specific niche, which requires us to communicate differently. The environment I've created at Green Home Chicago is less about trends than it is about relationships and education. Our main differentiator is quality and sustainability. We use eco-friendly products in all of our designs, most of them local and coming from within a 500-mile radius of Chicago whenever possible. The products we carry all meet green standards as well and we are very proud of that.

Part of our mission is community building. Had fundraiser for humple design last week. I'm a connector and an ideas person. Made it happen. Preserving planet, do what we can. Every year, we hold a fundraiser for a local not-for-profit called Humble Design that works with families transitioning from homelessness. They launched in Detroit six years ago and are now in Chicago, Seattle and San Diego. Green Home Chicago contributes to their cause by transforming an empty apartment space into a home for those families to begin again.

What is the biggest challenge your industry is currently facing? I find humankind's attitude toward global climate change distressing, so our challenge is in education. I know what we do is a drop in the bucket, but it's something and we try to talk about sustainability whenever we can. There are much bigger things that can be done to protect our planet and we are looking to build our platform to let people know what we do as a point of entry to discuss and promote further action.

What's exciting about the future of the design industry and where do you see the most

opportunity? There are so many creative young people that have access to amazing new tools through computer design and technological advancements in the industry. They bring hope. Young people are learning to be cognizant about where things come from which, I think, will propel more research and development in the field, something the design industry as a whole is in need of.

Do you have any advice for someone looking to break into the design industry? As part of my work as a career counselor, I always talk about the internal locus of control. You have to find your passion, immerse yourself to learn everything you can and find your particular role in the industry. Don't discount the importance of the business aspect of design, as well. But most importantly, be bold. Bring your specific twist and what makes you different out in your design, don't keep it a secret.

As the calendar turns to 2019, what are you most excited about incorporating into your work in the year ahead?

We always try to promote reuse and reinventing pieces, so that will definitely continue. I recently took a sofa of my own and added arms and a different fabric to it, turning it into something completely new. Cutting down on consumption by using what we already have and what is available is in our best interest as well as the planet's.