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Interior design students tackle extreme makeover

December 01, 2008 | Rachel Guelzo

This summer two LU senior Interior Design students put their renovation and design skills to the test. Kennon Lowry and Sarah Justice took part in a Lynchburg home renovation project for an internship design contest, Designers' Challenge: LU Style.

Introduced and directed by Mary Simpson, the chair of Liberty's Department of Family & Consumer Sciences (FACS), this internship based design project was inspired by HGTV's Designer's Challenge, providing students with hands-on experience.

"This is the first time we've ever offered this type of competition," Simpson said. "Our desire was to create an outlet where our interior design students could directly apply the design concepts that they have learned in the classroom within a real-world setting." Simpson offered her own home for the competition. Built in 1900, the Lynchburg, Va., residence is situated adjacent to the beautiful historic district of Rivermont Avenue overlooking the James River.

Simpson's personal interest in older home restoration led her to purchase the structure in 2006, and it has been under renovation since fall '07, receiving both structural and aesthetic treatment. Several areas of the home, including the kitchen, had already been restored prior to the start of the competition, while most rooms remained untouched and in need of repair.

The design contest was open to all senior Interior Design majors who met internship pre-requisites and developed a story/color board based on a room in the home they would like to renovate. Students chosen for the competition were expected to know how to develop a complete floor plan using digital software to map out the various elements that comprise the room, including electrical, plumbing and furniture placement.

Lowry came to Liberty with some design experience, having worked at her family's home, gift and garden store in Charlottesville, Va.

“I pretty much knew from childhood that I wanted to pursue some aspect of home or fashion design. I worked in my parent’s store each summer and would often be the one responsible for designing the store displays. I love the challenge of creating something visually appealing,” she said.

Enrolling at Liberty as a freshman, Lowry immediately declared Interior Design as her major. When it came time to decide on an internship during her senior year, Lowry was specific about what she wanted.

“I chose to apply for the designer’s challenge competition because I really wanted hands-on learning experience in the field. I didn’t want to participate in an internship where I would end up just manning a store or following a designer around.”

For Justice, a native of Houston, Texas, the decision to study interior design came during her sophomore year.

“All throughout my freshman year I wasn’t even aware that Liberty offered such a program. As soon as I found out, I declared my major. I knew right away that I wanted to study interior design,” she said.

And she knew right away she wanted to enter this competition.

“This unique internship opportunity jumped out at me. I love old homes, and I knew it would be a great opportunity for me to get my feet wet in understanding the process of home renovation.”

Understanding Simpson’s passion for maintaining the charm and character of the home, Lowry and Justice dove right in and took creative lead in the overall concept and theme. Lowry chose to work in the dining room, while Justice selected the upstairs guest bedroom.

“My goal throughout this competition was to have Kennon and Sarah actively participate in every aspect of their room restoration,” Simpson said. “From choosing furniture and deciding the décor, to establishing and maintaining a project budget, to purchasing materials and supplies, as well as overseeing and physically participating in the actual renovation, such as sanding, stripping, and painting the walls and molding.”

Simpson immediately took on the roll of client.

“She [Simpson] stated her desires and expectations for each of our rooms,” Lowry said, “while allowing Sarah and me to be the design experts.”

Simpson’s collection of antique maps served as the source of Justice’s inspiration for the bedroom, choosing “old world travel” as her theme, while one of Simpson’s favorite pictures, a framed vintage ad, was the element Lowry used to build her theme for the dining room.

Unlike most reality TV home renovation programs where you see only the beginning and the end of a project and miss out on the nitty-gritty details, Lowry and Justice were able to experience

firsthand what happens when unexpected problems arise and learn how to devise workable solutions.

“Beginning work in the dining room was a bit overwhelming at first,” Lowry said. “The ceiling was caving in, and the irregularity it caused created a major challenge later on when it came time to put up the crown molding.”

In fact, the ceilings were in such poor shape in the dining room that a professional carpenter had to be called in.

The hours of planning and hard work were worth it for both students, realizing the future benefit of their participation in the competition.

Simpson’s approval of her students’ work is apparent.

“I’m so pleased with the outcome of both of the rooms. Kennon and Sarah did an outstanding job of bringing to life their creative vision. Their hard work and dedication through this design contest has resulted in two beautiful rooms that perfectly compliment the house.”

Simpson hopes to continue this type of internship program in future semesters, drawing in the participation of other homeowners in the area.

“Our first design competition was a huge success, and now we’re looking into other home renovation or decoration opportunities for future semesters. I really believe that this project can serve as an excellent stepping stone toward a successful career in interior design,” she said.

A 1986 Liberty University graduate, Simpson was part of the second graduating class of the Family & Consumer Science program.

“For the longest time the FACS program has been a little-known jewel within Liberty. Now we’re gaining ground in getting the word out about all that we offer.”

Celebrating its 25th anniversary, the Department of Family & Consumer Sciences is experiencing considerable growth, increasing student enrollment by 10 percent in the last year alone. In addition to Interior Design, the department offers majors in Fashion Merchandising, Family & Child Development, Family & Consumer Sciences, and Family & Consumer Sciences with teacher licensure. Numerous minors are also offered.

Recently, the Interior Design Society (IDS) began its first student chapter in the United States at Liberty. The IDS is an organization with a focus on residential design with more than 4,000 members globally. The LU chapter of IDS will be the model for future student chapters at other colleges and universities. Membership in IDS will help Interior Design students advance their career, obtain CQRID (Council for Qualification of Residential Interior Designers) credentialing, network globally and receive discounts and other special benefits.

Upcoming projects and events for LU's chapter include Designer's Dorm Challenge, a trip to High Point, N.C., Home Depot Saturday events (tiling and other useful workshops) and a Christmas social.

Looking forward, the FACS program hopes to introduce a Culinary & Food Service Management program in the future to further diversify the career fields available to LU students.