

# GRANDEUR

LUXURY LIVING ON THE GULF COAST / FEBRUARY 2008



INSIDE  
At home with interior designers  
After dinner with Rose O'Dell King  
In tune with 'Vibrant Violins'



# Karen Benson:

## Putting her design signature all over town

If you've been in Vincent Salon, the McGregor Café, the Imaginarium or Sun Harvest Citrus, you've seen Karen Benson's commercial efforts. She's equally prodigious residentially, having designed interiors for homes from Whitefish, Mont., to Greenwich, Conn., to Useppa Island.

Commercial, residential: It's all good for Benson, because the mix "keeps it interesting," she says. "I have the nicest clients I could ever imagine. I'm blessed. My parents had a lot to do with this, I think. 'Treat others as you want to be treated,' was the rule, along with, 'Always do your best.'"

And she has, for more than 30 years.

After earning a bachelor's degree in interior design at the University of Florida in 1978, Benson married a Fort Myers man and settled in Whiskey Creek. For the next 13 years, she designed office and retail spaces for architectural firms Parker-Mudgett-Smith and Burt Hill/Pollack

"I love this happy room that was part of a remodeling project in an older home near downtown Fort Myers.

We removed a wall between the living and dining rooms and added crown molding and columns to separate the two spaces. I designed the built-ins to flank the end window and give a lovely focal point to the space, as well as to provide needed storage, which older homes lack."

— Karen Benson,  
Karen L. Benson  
Interior Design

Kreig. Shortly after she designed jeweler Mark Loren's original south Fort Myers store, she was recruited by Freestyle Interiors (whose offices and showroom were in the same center at the time).

She launched Karen L. Benson Interior Design in 1996.

Benson and her husband, Lowell, an independent residential architect, share a 1950s home off McGregor Boulevard with their seventh-grade son, Daniel, and daughter Julie, a junior at the University of Central Florida.

"I am a very spontaneous person who drives my organized architect husband crazy at least once a week," she says. On the job, that means she can easily change direction — a good thing in a profession where clients often don't know what they want until they see it "or until it feels good." There are many design principles at work, she explains,

but clients don't necessarily know that.

Benson knows it, however, and thrives on that part of her work. "I love what I do," she says. "I really feel called to design."

### What's it like to live where you live?

I love where I live, even though we're constantly struggling with the small size of this house. Our lifestyle is very casual. I spend a fair amount of time on the lanai or hanging around in our living room/dining area working on my laptop while Daniel builds Legos or does his homework.

### How do you define your style?

Classic, uncluttered, with lots of natural light. I have a need to see grass and sky from every room. I love to mix antiques with contemporary lighting. I would rather spend money on art than electronics.

### Your childhood bedroom?

It had sloped ceilings and a wood floor, which I loved. I had an old brass bed with different quilts, depending on my color preference of the day. The bed had wheels, and I moved it every few months.

### Interior design pet peeves?

"Faux-verload" and poor lighting design. "Faux-verload" was recently coined by a client to describe the unrestrained use of faux finishes. Poor lighting is when bad placement ruins the mood or feeling you're trying to create, which is especially true in retail stores but also a significant problem in homes. Generally speaking, if you're doing a new space, hire someone knowledgeable in lighting.

### What's the first thing you do when you come home from work?

Check on Daniel. Did he have a good day? Did anything interesting happen in the science lab?



Photo courtesy of KAREN BENSON





#### Second thing?

Walk outside with my dog, Dixie, and a glass of wine to see if Bunny or Sally are out. If I'm lucky, they have something to eat.

#### Who are Bunny and Sally?

Sally Bamman (next door) and Bunny Terry (across the street). Everybody who has ever had a kid at Fort Myers High School knows Bunny; she taught math there. They are great friends and good cooks. We frequently sit outside, eating, drinking and visiting with other neighbors and their dogs.

#### What couldn't you live without?

Jesus and dancing.

#### What's in your junk drawer?

There's no room for an extra junk drawer in a 1950s house. Really.

#### Favorite paint color for a bedroom?

Benjamin Moore HC-144 Palladian Blue with Benjamin Moore OC-130 Cloud White on woodwork.

#### Favorite luxury item for a home?

A personal chef would be the best. Actually, when I moved my office from the house to downtown, Lowell started cooking. Lucky me! Next on my list would be a Miele built-in coffee system.

#### Memorable client incident?

When a client was showing me around his house, which we were going to remodel, he opened the bathroom door and we walked in. Suddenly, he realized there was someone in the shower. It was his son, an 11th grader who was skipping school. Busted!

#### Designer you'd most like to visit at home?

Mariette Himes Gomez.

#### If you were not an interior designer, you would be...

A camp director for Son Servants Youth Ministries. **G**