

*n*FOCUS

LOUISVILLE

JUNE 2013

Derby
Weekend
Recap

**Homes of
Distinction**

Lee W.
Robinson

The Art of Refinement



Photography: Steve Squall
Creative Direction: Gunnar Deatherage
Hair and Makeup: J. Christopher
Location: Robinson's Malvern House, Louisville

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LEE W. ROBINSON

Perhaps you read his contemplation on the similarities between perfume and paint in *The Wall Street Journal*. Maybe you admired the room he designed for the Evelyn Lauder Showhouse on Fifth Avenue in New York featured in *Traditional Home*. Certainly you coveted his hospitality if you read about the four days of Derby festivities at his home, Malvern House, in last month's issue of *Town & Country*. It seems everyone wants a slice of the Lee W. Robinson lifestyle these days. Louisville's own Lee sat down with *NFocus* after his exhausting Derby hosting duties (yet before one of his routine whirlwind trips to New York) to share with our readers how he turned a hobby into a commercial success and how soon everyone can have access to the Lee W. Robinson lifestyle thanks to some thrilling developments at his company.

A Man of Many Lifestyles

Design clients at Lee W. Robinson Company are presented with three lifestyle brands to inspire and guide the process of defining their personal style. Lee describes the Owsley Lifestyle as sophisticated, opulent and eclectic. The Thruston Lifestyle is more urban, modern and hip. The McDowell Lifestyle is characterized by warmth, elegance and tradition. These brands are named after the three sons he shares with wife Babs Robinson and are interestingly indicative of their individual personalities. Each unique style is associated with a paint palette from Lee's own proprietary paint line along with his custom room fragrances and furniture lines. "Coincidentally," adds Lee, "those descriptions could also be applied to the ancestor for whom each of our sons is named."

It's not surprising that Lee Robinson found a way to merge the future and the past when it comes to his work. A forward thinking and innovative entrepreneur and designer himself, everything about Lee seems to carry a strong historical reference to tradition – a nod to the past. He and his wife share deep roots in the Bluegrass and their sons bare the names of recognizable family members who made significant contributions to the Commonwealth. Eldest son Walker McDowell, 22, was named for Ephraim McDowell credited for performing the first successful ovarian surgery in Green County, Ky., in 1809. Thruston Rodes, 20, carries the name of Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston, collateral descendant of George Rogers Clark and often called the "guardian of Kentucky history." Their youngest son, Owsley Cox, 13, is the namesake of Governor William Owsley and Carrie Gaulbert Cox for whom Cox Park, which sits just below the family home on Upper River Road, was named.

Lee was raised in the small historic Central Kentucky town of Harrodsburg – 25 miles from Lexington and known for Saddlebred horses and Shaker Village. He was born, he recalls, with an innate ability to design, and by age eight, to the amazement of his family, was making perfect scale models. "No one in my family could figure out how I could do that," he reminisces. "I always wanted to be an architect but felt pushed toward a banking career since I was surrounded by such strong men in my family with an entrepreneurial spirit." Along with those influences, Lee credits his maternal grandmother, Fannie Walker Smith, as his child-

hood mentor. "She had a tremendous amount of style paired with wonderful taste and I always looked up to her. I think today I am a combination of the business-minded men I grew up admiring and my grandmother's flair for living," Lee says.

As the only son in the family, Lee pursued degrees in economics and management, assuming he would continue the family banking tradition in his hometown. However, it was at Centre College that he met his wife Babs Rodes, whose strong family ties would lead them to Louisville to begin their life together. By any definition, his career in the banking industry was a success earning him the title of Vice President at National City Bank, but after the unfortunate passing of his father to lung cancer when Lee was only in his twenties, he became more detached from the industry and started questioning his professional direction in life. So in 1999, with no further plan than to "find" himself, Lee retired from banking and pursued his passion. He moved to New York to study at Parsons and Christie's, the latter so he could learn in great detail about the art and antique collections he and his wife had inherited.

The Lee W. Robinson Company, which specializes in architectural design, renovation and interior design, is a combination of Lee's 14 years of business experience and his gift for residential aesthetics. He now boasts clients in New York City,

Palm Beach and the Hamptons as well as Louisville, and has earned accolades such as finalist for the Ernst & Young Kentucky Entrepreneur of the Year, Business First "Fast Fifty" list and the designation as the second largest renovation firm in Jefferson County. Lee prides his business model on a one-stop shop concept, offering an array of services and a complete design package to clients. This growing national brand serves both the do-it-yourselfer and what he terms the "boutique client" who wishes to work with Lee personally. Most recently this concept expanded with the creation of Robinson Kelley LLC, a partnership between The Lee W. Robinson Company and Kelley Construction, Inc., creating a concierge renovation and construction firm licensed in 48 states to provide all-around construction and design services.

A new third component to Lee's business model could very likely take his company global and make him a household name. Lee revealed to *NFocus*, for the first time, his plans to open The Lee W. Robinson Design and Lifestyle Academy in fall 2013. This eight-week certification program will allow 12 students to study with Lee in a Louisville residency program five days a week with the opportunity to buy franchise rights upon course completion. "It's important to me that everyone has access to this opportunity," he details. "It's not just for people who have recently graduated or have a formal background in design." The process to identify the ideal teaching staff is underway as well as an effort to engage potential students all over the country as part of the inaugural class of the Academy.

A Legacy of Giving

A look at Lee Robinson's list of community involvement and philanthropic endeavors is quite like reading a comprehensive list of Louisville nonprofits and charities – it's seemingly endless. A quick glance reveals contributions on behalf

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of Locust Grove, Waterfront Development Corporation, Heuser Hearing Institute, Boys and Girls Club and Home of the Innocents. Lee explains, "My wife and I believe in Louisville. We are proud of Kentucky and we want to make our city a better place. We want to lure our children back here to live so they will be 10th generation Louisvillians and we want them to consider this their primary home."

"All three of our sons attended Louisville Collegiate, so it's very important to us to support the school," Lee explains. "Babs is a past President of the Board of Trustees and along with the Rodes family, we were able to dedicate the Mary Rodes Lannert Athletic Center in honor of Babs' sister who died at a very early age as a way to continue her legacy," Lee passionately explains that the Louisville cultural and arts community is important to him because it is what he feels makes Louisville so unique. He has served as Chairman of the Community Business Blitz Campaign for Louisville Fund for the Arts, Vice President of Walden Theatre, member of Actors Theatre Board of Directors and has contributed in multiple capacities for The Speed Museum as well as Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft. Lee encourages, "This city is losing our patron saints of the arts and it is time for the next generation to step up. Board members have to lead by example in their capital campaign giving and be willing to go out and get the money or give the money. "I also think we need to explore statewide outreach with our cultural programs and take our beloved exhibits and performances outside of Jefferson County so people can enjoy that might not otherwise have the opportunity."

"My father died of lung cancer at a very young age and the disease has impacted my wife's family so cancer charities and research initiatives are also very important to us both," Lee is a past President of the Jefferson County American Cancer Society and Babs is currently on the Board of the James Graham Brown Cancer Center. Her father Joe Rodes was chairman and president of the James Graham Brown Foundation where he had served as a trustee since 1968. This year, the Robinsons generously hosted a Derby morning brunch for the celebrity supporters of The Julep Ball benefitting the JGB Cancer Center. Guests such as Carson Kressley, Christian Siriano and Kate Pierson of the B-52s could be overheard admiring the extraordinary Malvern House and its immaculate Olmsted-designed gardens (soon to be featured in Garden & Gun). Despite the remarkable impression that the Robinson's home makes on any guest, Lee explains that perfection is never his goal. "What is perfect is imperfect and what is imperfect is perfect to me. I always like a room to be a bit off. I never want the homes I design much less my own home to look contrived. I am always tickled to see people who are afraid to use the fine things in their home. What are you waiting on?" he exclaims with a generous laugh. "Every red wine stain on a rug is a sign of a good

party and every ring on a piece of wood becomes like a photo album."

Lee's efforts to give back don't stop in Louisville. He frequently appears as a sponsor, co-chair or guest at fundraising events in New York City where he currently spends about two weeks of every month. Most recently he served as Design Co-Chair alongside Mario Buatta for The Horticulture Society of New York's Flower Show Dinner Dance. With centerpieces that included cages of automated butterflies and modern sculptures made entirely of orchids, it is no wonder that his talents have earned him a name across Manhattan. Just last month he could be seen among the likes of Mrs. Alfred Bloomingdale, Leonard Lauder, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Rockefeller and Mrs. Oscar Wyatt at the Versailles Foundation dinner to benefit The Statues Restoration Campaign in the Parc of the Chateau de Versailles where he welcomed Her Royal Highness The Crown Princess Margarita of Romania.

Despite his growing reputation in circles outside of the Derby City and the professional demands to spend an increasing amount of time away, Lee emphatically exclaims that there is no other place he wishes to call home. "In New York, they appreciate the Southern details I bring to the table in terms of design. I don't want to just bring New York to Louisville – I want to bring Louisville and Kentucky to New York!" he declares. You can also be assured that fashion icon Carolina Herrera and television personality Deborah Norville, both of whom he acquaints, get the same version of Lee Robinson as those from his hometown in Central Kentucky. "I don't try to put on airs for anyone because my goal has never been to conform," he clarifies. "I'm just Lee. I don't always fit in but then again I don't want to fit in. Conformity shows lack of creativity. You learn to gravitate toward the people in your life who accept that. When you've experienced great loss in your life, as my wife and I have, you don't waste your time trying to please everyone because you can't. I like beautiful things because they make me happy. If I drink out of a sterling silver cup, it's because that is what I like, not because I'm trying to impress anyone."

Personal style is important to Lee. He encourages clients to identify their own personal style and creatively interprets it in their home. His primary professional goal is to expose the world to the Lee W. Robinson Lifestyle. Lee lives out loud and makes no excuses for it, yet behind the gregarious laughter and the designer wardrobe, his compassion exceeds his ambition. The key to personal style, you see, is that in order for it to work, it has to be authentic. With Lee Robinson, it absolutely is. **11**

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