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## Designer Sheila Bridges on Love, Life, Work—and Hair

By Michelle Thompson



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*Bridges (right) with Esther Sadowsky of the American Society of Interior Designers*

Few things define a woman's femininity like her hair, so when a prominent woman intentionally or unintentionally undergoes a drastic change to her locks, it can have a devastating effect on her psyche, relationships, and professional life.

When it happened to renowned, Harlem-based interior designer **Sheila Bridges**, she came to grips with the experience in her memoir, **"The Bald Mermaid,"** and continued to do what she does best: interior design.

Bridges, 49, developed alopecia in 2004 at the height of her television show, "Sheila Bridges Designer Living" for the Fine Living Network. As she prepared to tape segments on the show, she noticed clumps of her hair falling out. In order to complete taping the 4<sup>th</sup> season, she wore a wig against her will.

Most jarring for Bridges was that she faced such a private health challenge publicly. "People who watch you on TV feel like they know you and will say anything to you without thinking," she noted, speaking at a recent SoHarlem salon event.

Fans had no problems asking whether she was alright as her hair thinned, how her cancer treatments were going, etc. Fine Living Network stopped her show after that season and her television appearances also dried up. "I don't know if this is because of my hair," she said, but she has her suspicions. She finally had the space to digest what was happening to her in private and it is in this context that she started working on the memoir.

A study abroad semester in Rome stoked Bridges' desire to become an interior designer. She loved that, "Italian children were exposed to art and design daily. I met creative, intelligent people who loved what they did." Over time, this fueled her decision to attend Parsons School of Design.

Eventually she built her own interior design business. Her clients have included Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, Tom Clancy, and President Bill Clinton.

Times have changed since Bridges launched her company, most notably the economy. She also believes that cable television's rapidly proliferating home-decorating shows have convinced everyday consumers that they are their own best interior decorators. Gone are the days when people really considered texture and quality of the materials. Instead, they base their ideas on what is available on the web and are not engaged in a "tactile experience." She has witnessed many businesses go under in this environment. "If I were starting out as an interior designer today, I'm not sure I would do it," she says.

Her response? Bridges has developed multiple income streams such as her home products and her line of Harlem-inspired wallpaper.

Living with alopecia has not diminished her life professionally or personally. This experience has helped her "weed out the riff-raff." She is clear, she says, that when potential suitors come around, they are really interested in her and not her appearance (which is stunning). Ultimately, writing the memoir was about having a legacy – it is about her personal and not professional life. "I don't have kids, so this is something I can leave behind," she says.

Her legacy: Helping people feel comfortable in their own skin.

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