

Bridges has designs on broader audience

By TATSHA ROBERTSON
The Boston Globe

She has graced the pages of nearly every major interior decorating and style magazine. Time magazine named her the best at her craft. When Bill Clinton needed someone to design his sprawling Harlem office, he chose Sheila Bridges.

And yet, this rising star in the world of interior design insists on keeping herself grounded and in touch with the masses, despite her grand client list.

She sees her book, "Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime" (Bulfinch Press), as one way of appealing to people with whom she normally wouldn't



Sheila Bridges

have the chance to work.

Packed with practical wisdom, the book is for the everyday person trying to make that transition from Ikea furnishings to timeless and affordable pieces that will endure. And now, Bridges hopes to reach an

even broader audience in her television series, which made its debut on Jan. 28 on the new Fine Living Network. (In the Milwaukee area, the Fine Living Network is carried on digital cable.)

"It's a normal progression," Bridges, 38, says. "Not everyone can afford to hire me. I felt like, 'How can I make what I do accessible to regular people?' The first thing I did was write a book, because I love to write. The next thing was, 'How do I meet a bigger audience?' The next step was television."

The show, which airs Tuesdays at 7 p.m., will advise viewers on how to find good-quality home decorating items for affordable

prices and offer "usable advice for anyone who is interested in expressing their own sense of personal style in their home," Bridges says.

Creating a personal space

During the 13-week series, Bridges, who describes her own style as simple and eclectic, will take her viewers to the Brimfield Antique Show in Brimfield, Mass., and to flower markets in New York. Her goal is to inspire people to create a personal space for themselves, she says.

Bridges believes decorating is part psychological, evidenced by the chapter

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Famed designer finds way to connect with the masses

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titles in her book: "Style schizophrenia" and "Furniture codependency and separation anxiety."

"I have become a walking, talking fabric-wielding designer-decorator-stylist-psychologist-florist-accountant-collection agent-publicist-attorney-trucker-analyst with a Stanley Powerlock 25-foot tape measure," she says in her book.

While creating a personal style is important, and, according to Bridges, should be taken seriously, she suggests that anyone planning to decorate his or her home should calm down and allow the journey to be enjoyable rather than overwhelming.

Rise early and drive to a country auction, scour the newspapers for an estate sale, or drive to flea markets to find pieces that will last through marriages, births, and even style changes.

First, though, she suggests flipping through home decorating magazines to find what you don't like.

"The magazine is a good place to start and identify what your style is," she says. "What you like and dislike is a very important part of the process. The reason I say mark what you don't like is because, generally, that tends to be intuitive. We often walk into a room and say 'This is great.' But when someone asks us to pinpoint why, we can't say."

A timeless look

Teri Williams and her husband, Kevin Cohee, of Brookline, Mass., met Bridges 10 years ago.

Williams and Cohee had just moved to a penthouse in Manhattan and they were desperately trying to merge their after-college furniture. He had the typical black leather couch, and there was a greenish table.

"Looking back, she was probably appalled," recalls Williams, "but she just said 'OK,' and just helped us transcend that era of our lives to developing something timeless."

Williams and Cohee, who own One United Bank, have two children and live in a large Colonial home. They thought about calling a local interior designer, but instead called Bridges once again.

"I have adopted some of her style and she has taken in some of ours. What I like about Sheila is that we end up with something timeless but not staid," says Williams, 44.

Williams is not surprised that Time magazine named Bridges "America's Best Interior Designer of 2002" and



ANNA WILLIAMS PHOTO

This Sheila Bridges-designed dining room reflects her timeless style. It is included in her new book, "Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime."

that Bridges was also included on House Beautiful's list of America's most brilliant decorators.

"I knew 10 years ago that she was gifted," says Williams.

As a young girl in her native Philadelphia, however, Bridges did not know a paint chip from a fabric swatch.

She wanted to be a biologist or a veterinarian. She studied sociology at Brown University in Providence, R.I. After college, she moved to New York City, where she joined the buyers-training program at Bloomingdale's. She hated it. As she says, she spent too many hours in the stock room marking down pink angora dresses.

She found a job working at an architectural firm in New York. At night, she studied design at Parsons School of Design. In 1994, she opened her interior design business in Harlem, where she also lives.

Portfolio for Clinton

"It was important for me to live in a community around other African-Americans, especially an area recognized throughout the world for its contributions of African-Americans and the arts and creative professionals," says Bridges.

When Bridges and her small crew of assistants heard that Clinton was moving his office to Harlem, they put together a portfolio. Bridges won't discuss her famous clients, who include

Sean "Puffy" Combs, author Tom Clancy, and software magnate Peter Norton, but she will say that Clinton was an ideal client.

"It was great. The job went smoothly," she says. "The nice thing about working with a former president is he has an ability to make decisions swiftly — unlike other clients. I love to work with clients that are decisive and clear. It makes it easier."

Bridges, who is single, keeps a busy schedule, traveling from California, London, and Boston for her clients. She has a second home in upstate New York and teaches snowboarding for fun at Ski Windham in the Catskills.

Her busy schedule and high profile have some dubbing her the "black Martha Stewart." Others believe she was a protege of Stewart, which baffles Bridges.

She does not know Stewart, she says, and points out that their backgrounds are totally different.

Bridges studied interior design, and Stewart was a stock broker and model before becoming a caterer and America's matron of domesticity.

Bridges is just pleased that Americans are discovering the art of nesting.

"I love to surround myself with good-quality pieces," she says. "That is part of the message. The important thing is that you are encouraged to cultivate your own personal style, whatever it is."