



FRONT ENTRY WAY AT PRIORY COURT

# Designer Showhouses: More Than Just Window Dressing

By Bernadette Suski Harding

When Dr. Gail Bengowarni toured Priory Court just before the opening of the Junior League of Greater Princeton's 17th biennial Designer Showhouse & Gardens, she felt like her mother, Lucille, was sitting on her shoulder.

"The house is stone, inside and out, with these old-fashioned, arched casement windows. It's a piece of art, really," Gail said of the Gothic-style home her parents had owned. "My mother used to say, 'I wonder what somebody could do with these windows, and I could hear my mother laughing and saying, 'Ah, now that's what they could do.'"

"They" refers to the 28 interior and landscape designers who spent six weeks putting their personal stamp on their assigned spaces – everything from a butler's pantry to a cloister house/music room to the grounds – for an event that is the Junior League's most successful fundraiser.

"It all flowed so nicely, and it was all so much fun," Gail said. "Each room was different and interesting. They did a great job respecting the architecture of the house, and they didn't cover the windows, they let them stand out. I was very pleased. It was, truly, a showhouse."

The day Gail spent at the house – she lives in Cincinnati, where she is gastroenterologist – was a joyful reminder of the past, and a celebration of her parents' ties to the Princeton community.

"There were a lot of people I didn't know, but who knew my parents," Gail said. "It was like celebrating them, and the beauty that was brought to their house."



THE LANDSCAPE DESIGN WAS PERFORMED BY RUTGERS LANDSCAPE & NURSERY

### All for a good cause

That beauty doesn't happen overnight.

First, the Junior League must find a home that meets specific criteria (20 – 25 rooms, excellent character, interesting history, eye-catching architecture, curb appeal and solid structure) and whose owners are willing to move out from the end of March through the middle of June.

Then, the Junior League reviews applications from interior and landscape designers; chooses who will decorate the spaces; solicits corporate sponsorships and silent auction prizes and finally publicizes the event. When doors open to the public, Junior League members and sustainers are on hand to act as docents.

From start to finish, the process takes longer than a year.

But, the investment of time and effort is well spent: as the Junior League's largest fundraiser, proceeds from the Showhouse enable the Junior League to continue its commitment of giving back to the community through programs and projects focused on increasing the literacy skills of young children and their parents.

More than 3,000 people toured the Priory House in 2012. Ticker sales, corporate sponsorships, donations, and proceeds from the café, boutiques, designer sales, Patron's Party and Silent Auction netted \$115,000 for the group. (In total, Showhouses have netted \$1,125,000 since the first one in 1974.)

Members of the Junior League spent 2013, an off year, helping Mercer County Dress For Success (DFS) implement the Going Places Network by Walmart, (Walmart provided a grant to cover the costs of hosting the program, and the Junior League provided the presenters and mentors.)

"This was the first year we launched a partnership with Dress For Success," said Christina Bailey, the Junior League's communications chair. "We worked in a classroom setting for eight or nine weeks with about 20 clients – these were women who wanted to get back to work or improve their job situation."

Minda added, "These women come from difficult situations, and are recommended through

community institutions." Classes are held in Lawrenceville, at Dress For Success' Mercer County headquarters.

Going Places is an organization with a 40-percent success rate across the country. Eighteen women "graduated" from the first one sponsored by the Junior League, and three or four were already back at school or placed in good jobs. A new session began Sept. 25.

Minda served as a mentor, coaching a single mother of small children. The woman had been laid off, and was thrilled when she was chosen for the program.

"We helped her with her job search, and getting her resume together. She had never been in an office setting before, so she didn't know she couldn't wear jeans," said Minda. "She was very grateful, and wrote me a note thanking me for my mentorship. She got her degree in July, and is very motivated to make a better life for herself and her children."

Other Junior League members lent their skills to the classes as well.

Wendy Komjathy, a co-chair for the 2014 Showhouse, said she worked with Katie to present two sessions: how to put your best face forward, and interview skills.

"We talked about how when you walk into an office, you need to pay attention to all the people around you, because they're paying attention to you," said Wendy. "And, we talked about the interview process – not just what they should ask in an interview, but also could be [legally] asked of them, giving them insight to ensure an employer didn't overstep his or her bounds."

Any uncertainty Wendy and Katie felt at the beginning of the sessions was soon replaced with elation.

"We left there [the sessions] feeling so good. It was so nice to meet and interact with these ladies, and so much fun to see the different personalities," said Wendy.

"We learned a little about the women: one was a college student, another was underemployed," said Katie. "We've done so many good things for children, so to add this was really nice and rewarding."

For almost eight years, Christina explained,

THE CLOISTER MUSIC ROOM

The owner of Deborah Leamann Interior Design, based in Pennington, NJ, was "extremely flattered," when invited to participate in her first Showhouse in 1993.

"What it does, especially for new and upcoming designers, is get what you do into a lot of peo-

ple's line of vision very quickly. It also shows that you're serious, and that it's not just a hobby, but a career," she said.

The intensity of the process (lots of early mornings and late nights, packing and unpacking, and hauling things here and there) is quickly forgotten "once the phone calls start coming in. It becomes a little irresistible. It's a total high."

For Deborah, "It's the greatest thing since sliced bread." She likens Patron's Night to "opening night on Broadway. You're standing [in the room you've decorated], and watching people react, and you hear them say things like, 'Wow, this is fabulous!'"

Deborah participates in a Showhouse as often as possible, both for the philanthropic contribution, and the challenge of pulling something together very quickly.

At the Priory House, Deborah decorated the Cloister House music room, where Albert Einstein once performed.

"The room was exquisite -- and huge!" Deborah said. Her solution was to create three intimate seating areas, layer rugs on top of one another, and install a custom-made bookcase and a concert grand piano.

"I knew the room 'worked' when people passing through sat down to play the piano," she said.

A Showhouse's grounds also are primed for the exposure.

At Priory Court, six landscape design companies worked to transform the home's grounds for the event. Kris Santiago of Rutgers Landscape and Nursery describes the process as a lovely way to connect with the community and try new stuff.

"You can really be playful. We had fun with Priory Court because it was an older stone home, and we could play off that rough stoniness with planters. We used a sculpture by Steven Snyder from Point Pleasant, PA, as part of one section. He was so gracious to loan us one of his sculptures." MW

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