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HELP! I WON AN INTERIOR DESIGNER

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THE BACK DOOR

BY MARNI ROTH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK RIGHTMIRE

HELP! We won an interior designer



AFTER

Something about being all dressed up and holding a glass of champagne just makes you want to drop a wad of dough. Which is the only way I can explain how it was that my husband and I went to a fund-raiser for our daughters' school and came home with an interior designer.

In general, I avoid interior designers like I avoid doctors. Though I've used them, and know there's a place for them, they make me nervous and I sense pain in the proximity. I've heard the horror stories, and have had my own. My husband, Dan, is even more dubious. I know, because every time the subject comes up, he puts his hands in his pocket and jingles his change, which he does when he's worried about money.

So when he suggested we bid on the "Dream Room," one of several items up for live auction at the school fund-raiser, I immediately felt his forehead. The Dream Room package pooled the talents and resources of five local home-improvement experts to revitalize one room in a home. "Would we use it for the office? The family room?" I delicately probed — though in our house almost every room is a contender.

"I was thinking the master," he said.

"How much champagne have you had?" I asked. But he was sober and serious. After 12 years of marriage, I've learned this: Moments like these are few and need to be seized.

It wasn't even ours, and already I was fantasizing. The package included 10 hours of interior design from a top designer, a painter, wall-

TRAVERTINE AND MARBLE (above) replaced tile and carpet in the original bath (below). Framed mirrors and updated light fixtures also helped transform this into an inviting space.



BEFORE

paper hanger and paint, 60-linear feet of six-inch crown molding installed, and a faux finisher. Of course, I did not point out that it lacked the three expensive Fs: furnishings, fabrics and fixtures, mainly because Dan lobbying for a bonafide interior design project is a stand-out historical moment. Why spoil it? (Normally his idea of home improvement runs along the lines of a new big screen or rain gutters.)

Now there was just the small matter of beating out anyone else who also had their hearts set on room revitalization. As the bidding opened, my heart raced with adrenaline and desire. I noted that most items – the lavish trips, the prime school parking place—were going for well over their valued price. We'd never go there. This package was valued at \$3,400 and we agreed to go \$2,400 tops. As the dream room bidding started, more than a dozen bidders friskily ran up the price and ran down our prospects. But then the bidding fell sharply, eerily away, until there was just us and one other vigorous bidder, whom we couldn't see. We sparred, then it was ours for \$2,200!

Only then did we realize why everyone had bailed. The other bidder? The school's headmaster and his wife. Which means, though we got a great deal, our kids may not graduate.

After the initial winner's euphoria came sheer panic. Turned out our new designer, James Charles of Europa Design Group of Long Beach, had a client list that included folks like Tina Turner, Duran Duran and the sultan of Brunei. And now me? Where's the Alka-Seltzer?

Suddenly I felt Hobo Kelly humble, like our budget. Gulp. When we first talked by



AFTER



BEFORE

DESIGNER JAMES CHARLES added intimacy and character to the cavernous master suite by evicting the original palette and replacing it with romantic gold, rust, azure and burgundy in a variety of textures.

THE BACK DOOR



AFTER



BEFORE

A HEAVY DRAPE separates the master suite's new luxurious sitting area from the bath. Textures and color warmed the room. And a faux finish turned the pre-cast white plaster fireplace into natural-looking stone.

phone it got worse. I was giving him directions to our home, which is in a gated community. Once I told him how to get through the gate, he changed the subject.

"But wait," I stopped him. "Don't you want to know how to get to our house from the gate?"

"Oh, the gate's not at the house?" he asked, mildly confused.

Smelling salts, please. Sensing my intimidation, he then joked that before he came he would first send his bodyguard to collect the \$2 million retainer. Very funny. Later he would tell me that budgetary limits like mine actually inspire creativity, which, of course, was the polite thing to say.

With no way out but through, we set to work. The biggest problem with our master suite was its size, too big, "cavernous," said James, who hails from London and has this proper British accent that right there makes me feel inferior. "They never throw space around like this in Europe," he tutted. "This place needs intimacy and character. Nothing here entices you to stay." (Who else but a designer can, within five minutes of meeting you, walk straight into your bedroom and hurl insults?)

STUFF OF DREAMS

He ordered a buttery color for the walls and set the painter to work. He selected a gold-tone wallpaper that looked like antique plaster, for the bath. He told the faux finisher, Eric Hill of Irvine, to turn the pre-cast white plaster fireplace into natural-looking stone.

He evicted my oatmeal/taupe palette and replaced it with real color. In rolled fabrics of rust, gold, azure and burgundy in a variety of textures, from sheer to chenille. We ordered many yards and set to work covering two chairs, and an ottoman for the sitting area, and creating all new bedding and drapes.

He surrounded my existing vanilla-cotton Roman shades with a sheer gold voile that swagged over dark wood rods, to romantically soften the room's hard lines. Then he put a heavier drape in the arched doorway to better separate the sitting area from the bath.

In the bathroom, he replaced all the standard production mirrors with handsome framed ones, and traded out the tacky light fixtures (chrome strips with round bulbs) in the bath.

Then, just when I thought we had gotten through this with our retirement savings still secure, Dan — going for a second landmark in history — confessed that he hated the plain sand tile and carpet in the bath and wanted stone. As in travertine and marble.

Even though that doubled the budget,

delayed the project six months and required us to live through year-long weeks of dust, workmen and jack hammering, the improvement was huge. James had come up with a more economical way to spiff up the existing tile, but he applauded the move, saying, as only he could: "Leaving the old tile and carpet would be a little like putting a cloth interior in a Mercedes."

As the three-month project turned to 12, James far exceeded his 10-hour commitment, though he was too polite to say by how much. Nonetheless, he graciously kept guiding me and the other vendors along, charging little more for the effort until I had a room that went far beyond my limited vision, and really felt like the stuff of dreams.

More important, along the way he earned my trust, lessened Dan's resistance, and reminded us again why working with a designer makes sense. This is why: I can make a room look good. The right designer can make it look incredible — for not that much more.

Now, the only problem is my dependency issue. I want to decorate my entryway, and I'm not making a move without James.



MARNI ROTH

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