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Space Invader

Bill Keith

Building on the success of his steady gig as Oprah's design divo, Nate Berkus is finding new ways of getting into your home.

Growing up, Nate Berkus knew he was different, and so did his parents: "It was very, very important to me that my room was always clean and organized. Everything had its proper place," he recalls. Unfortunately, he shared his room with a slovenly younger brother who had zero appreciation for his fastidiousness and developing design eye. Mercifully, his parents recognized his need for a room of his own and his emerging passion for decorating and encouraged him to follow it. When he was 11, they gave him a bedroom and bathroom in the basement and with that a blank canvas to indulge his every aesthetic whim.

"Parents often don't take time to nurture their children's true interests," Berkus notes. "They say 'You're not supposed to like dolls, you aren't supposed to be into design or cooking or whatever. Go play football.' Fortunately, I had parents who said, 'You want to spend your Saturday at the flea market buying things for your room? Fine, we'll drop you off.' "

When other kids in Southern California raced off to the beach after school, Berkus headed home to watch his bathtub being installed or to oversee the hanging of new wallpaper. "One day I came home and found my mother trying to make a whole paisley thing happen and threw myself in front of the wall," Berkus remembers. "I was fascinated by the whole process of putting a space together."

Don't get the wrong idea, though: Meeting him today, it's difficult to picture young Berkus poring over schematics and swatches while other kids were out running around. The affable, energetic designer jumps up at least three times during

our interview to adjust himself, and his mind bounces from topic to topic as easily as he moves between varied business endeavors. In addition to being Oprah Winfrey's resident design expert, he contributes regularly to her magazine *O at Home*, has written a book, *Home Rules*, and produces his own line of products for *Linens 'n Things*—all the while running his interior design firm.

After spending much of his adolescence rearranging his neighbors' living rooms, Berkus took a fairly direct route to become a TV design personality. His first job out of Lake Forest College was at an auction house in Chicago, where he honed his keen eye and got his first taste for the TV business. "My boss hosted two shows on HGTV and I styled every area of the auction house that the camera filmed," he says. Conditions were anything but ideal, though.

He was working 70 hours per week, not making a lot of money, and struggling to make it to work by 8 o'clock every morning. "They fined me \$10 each day I was late, which happened at least four days a week," Berkus says. "That was half my food budget at the time!"

Though the early morning call time was certainly problematic, it's clear that the bigger problem was that he wasn't running the show. After a year, he'd had it: "I finally went into my boss's office and said, 'Look, I'm tired. I'm art-directing your show, I'm running your monthly auctions, and I'm paying you \$40 a week for being late. I need to work for myself.' "

In 1995, at age 24, he opened Nate Berkus Associates. Friends who were successful real estate brokers introduced him to many of his first clients, and though initially he had no portfolio, he was able to talk his way into a lot of work. "I was up-front," Berkus emphasizes. "I'd say, 'Listen, I don't have anything to show you, but I can tell you that I'm honest and that I can work really, really hard for you because I'm working



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really, really hard for me.” He asked people to let him start with one room in the house to prove himself, and soon he was working on 10,000-square-foot projects.

Berkus’s easy confidence and ability to speak matter-of-factly about nearly anything has become a bit of a trademark characteristic. “All of the most successful relationships in my life, both personal and professional, are the ones where we have the hard conversations as much as we need to,” he notes.

How does that translate into his work, exactly? “When I meet with clients, the first thing I ask them is, ‘Who are you?’ It’s really hard for some people to answer, but it’s all about being true to who you are. Design can be a snobby, high-end situation—and there are certainly things about that that I enjoy—but there’s also a life and a meaning behind my projects. It’s about how I connect with people and how we work together through mutual appreciation. I always try to be direct, sometimes to a fault, but I think it’s why I’m successful.”

Six years after opening his firm, he was having dinner with a family friend who also happened to be an executive producer at The Oprah Winfrey Show. “We were talking about fame,” Berkus remembers, “and someone at the table mentioned that they would hate being famous. I said I’d love to be famous because you get to talk to people all the time and I love that. I didn’t see it as an interruption of my privacy.”

Soon after, an associate producer at Oprah called to see if he’d be interested in making over a small space in Boston—in 72 hours. “I think I didn’t sleep for 68 out of those 72 hours, but my work ethic was the same as the crew’s and we had a great time. The audience loved it, Oprah loved it, and something was born in that moment.” He’s since made 30-odd appearances on the show.

When I ask him about the January 2005 appearance he made within one month of losing his partner, photographer Fernando Bengoechea, he doesn’t miss a beat. The couple had been vacationing in Sri Lanka when the deadly December 26, 2004, tsunami that killed more than 200,000 people throughout South Asia struck

their hut and washed them away. They were able to cling to a telephone pole and each other for 30 seconds before being separated.

Though he describes his condition on the set that day as “catatonic,” Berkus was able to engage viewers in an unprecedented American television moment. The designer, who had never discussed his sexuality on-air, described not only the events he endured that day but his and Bengoechea’s love story. For millions of viewers, it was the first gay relationship they’d ever been able to relate to. That the human face now representing the tragedy to many Americans also happened to be that of an openly and even casually gay man was nothing short of extraordinary, and later that year he received the Human Rights Campaign’s Visibility Award.

Beyond the \$1.9 million the episode helped to raise for the region through Oprah’s Angel Network, Berkus says that telling his and Bengoechea’s story had an unexpected effect: “After the show, I got a tremendous amount of letters and e-mails from kids across the country who were coming out. They said that watching the way my relationship with Fernando was presented on the show gave them the courage to say to their friends and parents, ‘You know what, I’m gay just like him and I want to have what he had.’ The most touching correspondence I received came from an 18-year-old who said, ‘I’d never seen a gay couple’s love story presented like that on TV before. Now that I’ve seen it, I realize I’d be wasting a lot of time if I didn’t get out there and try to find it for myself.’ It was amazing, and it makes me really proud, because somebody somewhere was watching the show and it changed how they viewed themselves and their own opportunities to live in a successful gay relationship.”

The last thing he considered was how Oprah’s conservative audience might react to his story. “I wasn’t concerned about presenting my relationship with Fernando to the world,” Berkus says. “I wanted people to know about our life and what I lost. Why not go out there and tell a story that needs to be told?”

He doesn’t watch much in the burgeoning television genre of home makeover shows—“I get stuck on all the



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production details”—but he is very supportive of what it’s doing for American design overall. “Put a million of us on TV,” he says. “Everyone has an opinion, and the more choices people are offered, the better they’ll live. People are much more willing to take risks now; they’re mixing and matching from different sources—the Internet, catalogs, flea markets, high-end showrooms, and pieces that have been in their family for many years. Americans are finally realizing that they have all these options to make creative spaces that tell the story of who they are.”

So, does he enjoy fame as much as he thought he would? “Oh, yeah! At the very beginning I asked myself: Do I want to have my name on tags? Do I want to be recognized in airports? Do I want to do what it takes to keep all that going? Yeah, I do. It all fits in well with my makeup.” He’s currently expanding his product line to encompass all elements of the home, including furniture and lighting—“We’re going huge,” he says. He’d also like to explore even more television work, like a recent special he did for Oprah with Hurricane Katrina survivors.

More than anything though, he’s gotten a sense of perspective from Oprah: “Working with her, I’ve learned how important it is to think about the meaning behind my actions. Having all of this exposure changes the way you live and makes your life a little more in service. And after almost dying, you realize that your word and your actions are all that you have in the end, and you’re forced to think a lot more about what your impact will be when you’re gone.”