



COUGAR WITH AN Italian Accent

BY LESLIE LIMBO

Graduates of the University of Houston use their degrees in many unique ways, including branching out into areas they never thought possible. For one Cougar, who was recently featured in Southern Accents Magazine, her business has brought Texas and Italy closer together.

Darlene Marwitz (1975) has used her University of Houston textiles training to weave together several successful careers – as an author, a designer, a historic preservation consultant, and now as a retailer.

Marwitz is president of Studio Portico, her Austin-based consulting and design firm where she assists clients in restoring old commercial and residential buildings and advises clients on new home design.

Her latest venture is Villa Texas, a retail store in Fredericksburg that supplies shoppers with imported home furnishings and personal products for the bath and kitchen.

But while she discovered her passion for all things Italian during a post-graduate trip to Italy, her love of architecture, old buildings and textiles goes back to her undergraduate days in Houston.

“The University of Houston’s School of Architecture, now the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, was the first school of architecture that I had been exposed to,” Marwitz said. “I used to love to walk through the building and view exhibits and classrooms, but I didn’t want to change majors at the time because I would lose too many hours of credit.”

Igniting Her Passion for Italy

She completed her fine arts degree at UH and then turned to design work and running

a small antique store. In 1982 she enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin where she received two graduate degrees – a Master of Science in Architectural Studies (1986) and a Master of Architecture (1989). Both degrees included certificates in historical preservation.

While serving as a teaching assistant in 1988 at UT Austin’s Architectural Study Program in Oxford, England, she took a trip to Italy that ignited her passion for Italian design.

“It was the lure of old buildings, all those Roman structures. When you love old buildings it’s wonderful to begin with Italy,” Marwitz said

After receiving her Master of Architecture degree, she went to the Texas State Capitol, which was undergoing a major restoration. She asked for a job working on the late-Victorian building, which she describes as a “splendid example of Italian Renaissance Revival architecture.”

Marwitz was determined to be part of the restoration project.

“I told them I’ll do whatever it takes. At first it was mostly office work, photocopying and such. Then I started working as the Capitol Historian and eventually I became the furnishings project manager,” she said.

UH Professor Served as Mentor

The training she received in textiles during her arts studies at the University of

Houston proved invaluable to Marwitz in her role as the Furnishings Project Manager. It also came into play when she oversaw the restoration of the Capitol’s period carpets.

But it wasn’t only the technical knowledge of her UH coursework that boosted Marwitz’ career. She credits a former Cougar faculty member for helping in her artistic and entrepreneurial success.

“Professor Mary Ruth Smith was a major influence in my life at UH, both as a mentor and as a friend. She inspired me to be creative in non-conventional ways; her discipline was my discipline; she instilled in her students that projects should be works of passion - the same way I approach my work today.”

Becoming an Author

Marwitz shared her passion for Italy with readers in 2000 when she self-published her book *Italy Fever: 14 Ways to Satisfy Your Love Affair with Italy*.

She took classes in writing and publishing, going to workshops in Chicago and New York. The first printing of her book was 5,000 copies and the second was 10,000 copies. With nearly all those copies sold, she is considering a third printing.

“I like to do it myself. I didn’t even consider the possibility of someone else publishing it. I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life,” she said.

Marwitz and her husband opened Villa

Texas as a joint venture in April, 2004.

In the store she sometimes juggles as many as 300 different vendors to order and stock the myriad Italian-made products she offers.

“It’s exciting to find new things to show people in the store. I want them to feel that they’ve stepped into the Mediterranean world,” Marwitz said.

Her latest venture is a one-acre lavender farm that was harvested in early summer.

Her Lavender Market at Villa Texas features products made from lavender.

“I like to find ways to help people enjoy Italy in their own homes. I want them to enjoy their own moments of la dolce vita.”

For more information about Villa Texas and the Lavender Market at Villa Texas, visit Marwitz’ shop at 234 West Main Street in Fredericksburg, Texas or call 830.997.1068 or visit her Web site at www.villatexas.com.

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