

Former Homer Glen resident won Emmy for work on ‘The Kelly Clarkson Show’

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‘It’s never too late to follow your dream’

One of the Emmy’s “The Kelly Clarkson Show” won this year was for “outstanding art direction/ set decoration/scenic design.”

One member of that team was Kevin Grace, formerly of Homer Glen, lead set decorator for the show.

Grace had two thoughts about winning the award.



“Kelly is an amazingly great person to work for and so good at his job,” Grace said. “We all knew we had something special with this show.”

The second?

“I’m so glad I sat in front of the TV watching Bob Vila when I was 11 years old instead of the Road Runner,” Grace said.” How to put shingles on the roof or lay bricks – all these things fascinated me.”

Vila has hosted a number of home improvement shows over the years, which Grace enjoyed, never realizing he'd use some of that knowledge one day.

The road to the Emmy, for Grace, was following opportunities. The first was working in men's fashion at Carson's in Orland Square Mall. It was the 1980s, men's fashion was "coming into its own" and Grace loved it, he said.



When Grace started studying journalism and television and film set design at Columbia University, Grace transferred to the former Carson Pirie Scott store on State Street, he said.

Grace started in men's fashion and gradually moved into the window design team.

"This is what set it all off for me, where I learned all about design – fashion design, interior design," Grace said. "It just wasn't about putting a mannequin in the window. It was about turning it the right way, so the light hit it the right way with the right outfit...I had to be on top of my game."

Grace also met celebrity designers when they launched new designs, which he felt was great fun to a kid who wasn't even 20.

"I did it all through college," Grace said.

The job married well with his degree. Grace said he always loved film but didn't have "the acting chops." Set design felt like window design "except on a bigger scale," he said.

"I could design something really fast and make it look like a thing and then tear it down and do something new," Grace said.

Another company eventually recruited Grace as a regional merchandise director, "just shy of graduation," so Grace didn't finish college, he said. This new role became his career for the next 23 years, he said.

Grace said he was successful and made good money, but he wasn't happy with the job and found himself "becoming a miserable human being."

“My heart wasn’t in it,” he said.



So Grace started outsourcing his own job and eventually walked away from it, he said.

Friends urged him to start an interior design business “because he was good at it,” Grace said.

Grace heard comments, such as, “I love your apartment. Will you help me with mine?” So he did. But Grace also knew building a new full-time career took time. The learning phase would not pay the bills.

“I was 42 when all that happened and there was no way I was going back to school to start all over again,” Grace said. “I had the innate ability to do this. I think I’m really good at it. But to just start a business – is this something I can do? How do I brand myself? I did not want to struggle for five years.”

A friend suggested, “Just get on a reality show,” which Grace thought was brilliant. So he went searching on the internet and found that HGTV Design Star was hosting auditions at a hotel in downtown Chicago that very weekend.

“I was like, ‘That’s crazy,’” Grace said. “They wanted me to bring my resume, bring my credentials, bring my book, bring my certificates – bring every single thing I don’t have.

“And I was like, ‘You know what?’ I was living in the South Loop at the time, on South Michigan Avenue, and I’m just going to jump on the bus, grab a coffee and go wait in line with everybody else.’

After a short wait, Grace was called before five casting representatives. He had none of the requirements but was told to return the next day for a camera test.

Then he did a demo.

After that, he was flown to New York.

And then he had a couple phone auditions.

Grace landed the spot.

He moved to Brooklyn for two months during the filming and made it to the top five. Grace later learned he was not expected to do well; he was chosen because of his personality, he said.

“That show changed my life,” Grace said.



Back in Chicago, Grace handled his own publicity, covered events for Chicago3Media, did a segment called “Grace My Space” for Windy City LIVE and eventually landed a role as creative director on the Steve Harvey Show.

While Grace was building his brand, a friend let him live at her house rent-free for two years, he said.

When Harvey’s show moved to Los Angeles in 2017, Grace went with him, not knowing what to expect, he said.

Grace’s parents John and Margaret Grace still live in Homer Glen, he said. Nevertheless, Grace soon fell in love with the west coast.

“The first time I watched the news in December or January, and it was talking about all the snow in the Midwest and east coast, I’m sitting with the doors wide open on my little balcony and thinking to myself, ‘Yeah, this is right. This feels



right,” Grace said.

Final thoughts?

“It’s never too late to follow your dream,” Grace said. “I’m so glad I took the risk.”

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