

LAKE FORESTER

Interior designer enjoying expansion into Lake Forest; 'We like to find solutions around everything'

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Lauren Collander opened the second location of her eponymous design firm in downtown Lake Forest. (Daniel I. Dorfman/Pioneer Press)

When veteran interior designer Lauren Collander meets a client, she enjoys taking them on a visual journey.

“I enjoy showing people possibilities that they could not imagine on their own,” she said. “I like to see their face when I show them an idea and they say, ‘Let’s do that.’”

For nearly a year, Collander and her team have been working out of a Lake Forest studio on Oakwood Avenue.

“We love the mentality up here, and the architecture,” she said. “We love the historic homes.”

Collander’s expansion into Lake Forest is the chapter in a life where the overall industry has always been close to home. Growing up, she would observe her father, who worked in furniture design sales at Chicago’s Merchandise Mart.

Those experiences set the stage for her career, where after college she started a decadelong odyssey of designing hotels in Russia, Dubai, China and Morocco, among other international destinations.

Eventually she made the decision to start her own firm.

“As my life got more settled as I got married and had children, I knew it was time to move back to Naperville and raise my children and start a business,” Collander said.

She developed a client base with many people from the northern suburbs. That paved the way for her decision to open in Lake Forest earlier this year after 10 years of a solo operation in Naperville.

“We needed a way to support our North Shore clients,” she said.

Collander likes being in Lake Forest, and that feeling has been reciprocated in the greater community.

“Lauren and her delightful team are a welcome addition to the community,” Lake Forest/Lake Bluff Chamber of Commerce executive director Joanna Rolek wrote in an email. “There is such a wonderful assortment of styles and talents represented in the design industry in our towns, and the Lauren Collander firm’s aesthetic adds yet another beautiful dimension to the crafting and embellishment of both personal and professional spaces.”

With a client base often cultivated through word-of-mouth or social media, Collander describes in the early stages of the design process, clients come to the studio discussing their dreams for their home. One of the early goals is to find compatibility.

“It has to be a good fit both ways,” she said. “What we do the best, is we listen to each client individually and we customize the design process around them.”

There are questions posed to the clients starting a process that can take up to 10 months. Computer programming is often used to illustrate a potential design.

“We will get to know how they want to live in their home,” Collander said.

She said the interior design sometimes starts from scratch, but in other cases, her team works with the client’s existing furniture and other pieces.

“As long as a client really has something that meaningful to them and they are happy with, we will work around it,” she said. “It is all what they need, not what we think aesthetically.”

Like any business, she concedes she faces challenging moments at times. In an interview, she recalled one time that she had to get a 13-year-old to approve to the entire house, not just the teenager’s room. On a larger level, she speaks of the difficulty visualizing a potential design.

“I wish I could snap and show people the picture inside my mind, because it is so exciting and so perfect for them,” she said. “That is the hardest part — they can’t see what is inside my mind.”

In March 2020, Collander started adapting to a new world, as people started working at home due to the coronavirus pandemic. She notes there were many cases of reconfiguring an attic, where the noise generated in other parts of the house would be less intrusive.

“The biggest change I have seen is the home office, and needing it to be acoustically private,” she said.

Collander said the pandemic had a positive effect, as people really started to enjoy the value they get from their home.

She works with a team of employees, and her husband Matt is now part of the operation. He retired two years ago as an emergency room physician.

“We both had intense careers, and we had to choose one because our family couldn’t handle it anymore,” Collander said, noting they have two small children. “We needed to choose happiness over money. We chose mental health.”

Today he works on the firm’s business side.

“He is very happy, and we have a really balanced life now,” she said.

After roughly a year in Lake Forest, she speaks of local clients as being, “down to earth.”

“We like to work with people who are busy, kind and value design,” Collander said. “We are hustlers and we are solution-oriented, and we like to find solutions around everything.”