

# Today's Chicago Woman

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## HOW TO LOVE YOUR JOB

DESIGNING THE PERFECT WORK ENVIRONMENT

**BOTOX** THE SHAR-PEI SOLUTION

BE USED FOR

**LASERS** ZIP ZAP GONE

**HIGH TEA?** HIGH TIME!

When Oprah's producers put on a show about chasing your passion, they handpicked home-grown custom furniture maker Walter E. Smithe to showcase as an example for the entire nation. Because despite the bombardment of pink slips and bottom lines waging war on today's pockets, Walter E. Smithe stands alone as the single biggest jumper in terms of furniture retailers nationwide.

"We thought ... in the whole US!" exclaims Timothy Smithe, one of three brothers reigning over the \$70-million family empire founded by his grandfather in 1945. Namesake and shrewd businessman Walter E. Smithe, Sr. anticipated the pent-up demand for household products at the end of World War II and opened shop with a partner, who was later bought out by another Smithe. The company has been family-run since. Coming on board in the '60s was Walter E. Smithe Jr., who pioneered the concept of custom-order upholstery in Chicago, and was later joined by his three sons, Walt III, Timothy and Mark, and daughter, Margie. Although "Grandpa" Smithe has been gone for almost a generation, the family follows his two key commitments essential to success: take good care of your employees, and do the same for your clients.

So it seems no wonder that the company earned a spot on this year's list of top 100 furniture retailers nationwide. "We were the single biggest jumper, which is pretty cool! Last year we moved from number 96 to 80 in the country, and we're pretty proud of that," Timothy Smithe says. But exactly HOW do you accomplish such a feat despite all the turbulence of a soft economy? "Truly? Because of our designers," is Timothy's earnest reply.

The company dedicates its ad campaign to the slogan, "Smithe makes the furniture ... our designers make the difference." And at a time when virtually no one else is offering home consultations, Smithe still deploys designers armed with draft paper and pencils to do everything from measure and sketch custom-made floor plans of your living quarters, to pour over research regarding what will and won't work in your home, complete with computer-aided technology. All that's missing is the couple-hundred-dollars-an-hour fees associated with personal home decorating, because Smithe design fees are included with customer purchases. The designers themselves are paid to train at Smithe University, where they're submerged in a curriculum of interior design, product knowledge and sales. They reportedly earn above industry rates. If they're really good, they can actually hit the six-figure mark. Add to that medical, dental, a 401K and a generous employee discount program, and you're talking virtual Pleasantville.

As Vice President of Marketing, Smithe whispers, "I have the two best jobs in Chicago! I spend half the day overseeing advertising, and half the day recruiting, training and managing our designers—200 of Chicago's best designers." And if it's true that when you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life, you'll find classic examples of men and women who've traded in boring or non-lucrative dead-end jobs to follow their dreams ... and are now reaping rewards, despite the ten-month recession.

Take designer and associate manager Diane House, of Walter E. Smithe's 14th store, which

recently opened in Old Orchard. Diane left a teaching job to raise her three daughters, now 29, 27 and 22. "I was totally domesticated and completely immersed in raising my daughters and doing all the volunteer activities attendant to that—their schools, outside organizations, that sort of thing. And I was a budding Martha Stewart. It was such a wonderful part of my life that it was almost an adjustment later on knowing that that was going to come to a screeching halt sometime. But I sort of saw it

charming, while here on post-graduation holiday. With a marriage proposal, she flew back home to Poland to get things in order, then returned. Of the year spent as a draftsman at a Polish architectural firm, she says, "I didn't like it very much. It was cut and dry—all lines and dots and ink and no true art." But she'd left high school with no clue about what she wanted to do. Barbara simply fell into civil engineering when she went to a school chosen by her best friend.

Once in Chicago in the mid '80s, she found a job at a boutique on State and Division. She went from sales to management in one year. Had she mastered English at the time? "I thought I did, but no; barely! I was proved wrong quite quickly," she says, chuckling. Still, she overcame the language barrier, but quickly found the job "too repetitive." Barbara then got her real estate license and poured money into the new business. She gave it a go, selling two condos in six months, but just didn't like it.

Then, she stumbled upon, voilà, a Walter E. Smithe ad. She remembered being enamored by the atmosphere of the store and the gentle approach of a designer months before, when she'd gone with a friend to buy a sofa. So she marched right into the Lincoln Park showroom and introduced herself to the manager. Today, she's one of the company's top designers.

"It works out very well for me. In fact, like three years into my job, I decided to go to college in America. It was something that I thought I'd never do. Having to learn a new language and a new culture were things I thought that I'd never be able to do. But once I started working for this company, I liked what I was doing because it had all the components for me. It had a wonderful working environment, the challenge that I was looking for and the creative side that I sort of discovered within myself."

Barbara pitched the idea to Timothy Smithe. During a four-and-a-half-year period she cut down her store hours, yet met her full-time sales goals to go to school and assemble what we're told is an "impressive" portfolio. We're told you can watch her projects with "great progression" and she'll be "done in a few minutes."

Done in a few minutes – is that a translation of a Polish phrase? "Ha, ha ... no. It's just how it feels, because it's been hard work. My goal at that time was to work less hours and get the same result. Within three years, I achieved that, increasing my skills and being more productive at my work. That gave me more time at home, doing various things. But I had a little too much time on my hands, and I think that's where the idea of going to college and adding to my experience and expertise came from."

"Now I'm happy. And having all that knowledge and expertise under my belt, I feel very confident and that makes me enjoy my job even more than I did before because it's challenging work. But feeling confident and having all of that behind me, I do feel very much at ease also."

I'm at the point where I want to be. I mean, I'm happy with the situation right now. Does it feel like a job? Very seldom."

by Carmen Velez



Cover Feature

Left to right, Barbara Óral, Timothy Smithe and Diane House in the Lincoln Park store.

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coming, and because I was young enough, I knew there was going to be a whole other part of my life out there. I needed something else once the children were gone. The first one was traumatic. By the time the third one was going, I was thinking, 'Oh my Gosh!' It's like postpartum depression! They don't tell you that this might happen."

So Diane followed her passion: an interest in design work, fanned by friends always asking for help. At first, she attended night class at The Apparel Center, then found a program at

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a day in your life."**

Harper College in Palatine and "loved being in school. But during that course of time, I started my own business, kind of like a word-of-mouth through friends and relatives, doing it on a consultation basis."

That's until she saw a Walter E. Smithe ad, went to work at the Winnetka store and "just loved it. My big revelation was that I was very much design-oriented. I had no clue about selling. The environment was fortunately low-key enough that I think it was a good way to get started. Though I will say, I had a few nervous moments," she recalls, laughing.

The one thing Diane wasn't apprehensive about? Working on straight commission. Says boss Timothy Smith, "We spend a couple million dollars in advertising; that's what drives someone working on commission. If the advertising is bringing in qualified shoppers, designers on commission can make a good living."

While new designers have the option of taking a draw against commission, hotshot designer Barbara Óral makes as much today on a part-time basis as she did when she launched her career full-time. But for Barbara, who has woven her way through several jobs that left her feeling empty, it's all about gratification.

"It's not about when you get paid for what you sell and how you sell it; it's about an instant good feeling after accomplishing a goal. Once the process is complete, it's a great feeling."

Barbara's story has fairytale written all over it. She met her husband, a Turkish prince