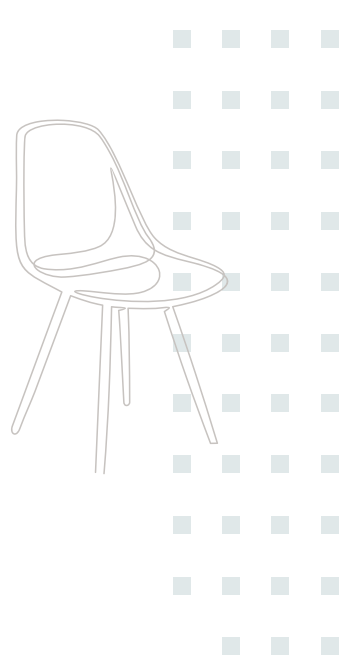


# JAME

# LOES



## Interiors

**W**

ith architectural antecedents including Mead & Requa, Greene & Greene, Wallace Neff, George Washington Smith and Richard Neutra, Ojai has long been a laboratory in the art of living.

The spirit of openness and tolerance included black and female trailblazers Paul Revere Williams' and Julia Morgan's earliest commissions.

STORY BY BRET BRADIGAN  
PHOTOS BY BRANDI CROCKETT



LEFT: JANELLE KANZIORA, PRINCIPAL DESIGNER, RIGHT: ERIN BERNTHAL, LEAD DESIGNER

After years of working amid Palm Springs' Mid-Century Modern masterpieces, the variety and diversity of Ojai's styles enchanted Janelle Kanziora of Janelle's Interiors. Her and lead designer Erin Bernthal recently opened their showroom at 221 East Matilija Street, behind the Arcade and on the second story above Serendipity Toys.

"After working with Janelle for a few years, we partnered to create Ojai at Home, the home decor store and furniture boutique," Bernthal said.

It gives them a place for clients to feel what their lives will be like in their newly designed spaces, to pick up fabrics, flooring and accessories. It is also a chance to balance her and Erin's busy lives with two and three children each respectively.

"Erin's strength is her keen eye for design," Kanziora said. "I manage all our design projects and use her talent for selecting furniture and finishing touches. She's also wonderful with clients." She describes their work as "house therapists. I say someday I'm gonna write a book about that."

The two met at an Ojai bunco groups, a game of chance involving dice and teams of four with three or more teams. They also teamed up on the Ojai Women's Fund and struck up a friendship.

While hiking one day, Erin said "I was expressing how I wanted to start working again, but wanted to do something different. Considering that I loved working on my own home, perhaps something in flipping houses or rental properties would be a possibility? She asked if I had any interest in interior design? I





TOPA MOUNTAIN WINERY BAR



SHELVING



KITCHEN



SETTEE — CORNER SPACE



LIVING ROOM

start to finish.”

Prior to the downtown location, Janelle’s Interiors was located at the old Ford dealership just east of the “Y” intersection. “I was there for five or six years, then I went to my house. And it was great, especially during quarantine, but eventually we found this great space and it was larger than we expected. And we wanted to curate our own home decor place because we had the space to have these vignettes and show off our design skills.”

“The idea for the store was is that when we’re working with design clients, we’re always scrambling at the last moment to do the finishing touches,” said Kandziora. “And with the store, we’ve curated our favorite home decor, and we can pretty much immediately grab from our inventory and finish the home.”

Kandziora grew up in Minnesota, and came into the design business through a circuitous path. “I was always going to be an art professor. Every art teacher I’ve ever had in my life told me ‘You need to be an art teacher.’ It just really came naturally to me.”

Bernthal grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa. Was an ICU/Trauma Nurse and then CRNA (certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist) before moving to ojai, ca.

**After Janelle earned her undergraduate degree, she could not find an internship with a gallery or an established artist anywhere. Her**

**boyfriend at the time, Chris Kandziora, now husband, the sales and operations chief at the Ojai Valley Inn, was working at a hotel in downtown Minneapolis, and asked his employer if they had any openings. It turns out the hotel’s designer needed help. “She asked a couple questions and says ‘I’ll hire her. Can she start tomorrow and I’ll pay her.’ When you’re in your twenties and all of a sudden this opportunity became a paid opportunity. I started working with her and I never looked back.”**

Kandziora has decades in the business and is not bound to any particular style of design. “A lot of people have asked me that. And I’m always like ‘I think that if somebody says, I don’t like calamari, then OK ... just like if you said you didn’t like a certain food. I would say you haven’t met the right chef. Let the client lead with their needs and preferences,” she said.

That had led to interesting places. “I did a house for one client ago who lived out there (Palm Springs) and she hired me to do



her house in Tel Aviv," she said. "I really enjoy having repeat clients like that." One of their clients is the Ojai Valley Inn with its 303 rooms.

Key to their process is close collaboration with the architect. “You have to look at the architecture of a home and see what their (client’s) lifestyle is and figure out what’s right, but I never really instill my design preferences ... just whatever’s right for that house and for that client.” For example, she cites that white kitchens are very popular right now. “There’s nothing wrong with white kitchens, but I like having a natural element with natural woods and a darker stain.”

"I do follow a lot of designers and there's always a lot going on," Kandziora said. "The way Erin and I like to look at design is that we hope there's more conscious selection of furniture and getting more natural materials. Craftsmanship is an important element because a piece (of furniture) you're gonna have for 50 or 60 years or more. You want to have a story to it."

Bernthal said, "Janelle has been a great mentor. She really loves the early stages of projects, such as new construction, floor plans and material selections. I love the process of pulling it all together with moodboards, furniture layouts, furniture selections, rugs, art, lighting and accessories. We make a great team!"

After Erin's third child was born, the family moved to Ojai. Her husband is the prolific actor Jon Bernthal (see Season Two, episode Six of "The Bear.") That was when her interest in a career change was sparked. "We had many projects in our own home and I loved the process of coming up with designs, layouts, color schemes, and material selections," she said.

It definitely keeps them on the go. Kandziora said, “Erin and I are very busy. So we wake up and we’re getting our kids off to school, going into the office running around till literally the very last second, till we pick up our kids ... and then you get those calls from the school.”

For Bernthal, being involved with creative decisions is rewarding. “I have always appreciated beautiful spaces and the little details that make these spaces unique,” she said. “but never imagined this as a career for myself, since I already had a career that I really enjoyed.” She delved deep into design literature, podcasts and online courses, design shows and markets and brings that curiosity into her approach to clients’ needs.

Kandziora incorporates elements of the ancient Chinese practice of Feng Shui in her work, the art of harmonizing people with their space. “Feng Shui brings harmony to your environment, home and most importantly, you!” she said.

Another favorite is Marie Kondo, an erstwhile Ojai resident, whose blockbuster books, “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up,” and “Spark Joy,” made her an international celebrity. “What I’ve learned from her is that sometimes it’s best to start with a clean slate. I think it’s a good approach to read one of her books, declutter things and then start thinking about a renovation,” Kandziora said. “Just let things go and then be a joy for somebody else.”

Speaking of which, living and working in Ojai has proved a joy for both of these Heartland women. “I say a lot to my friends back home that Ojai is a Midwest town in California.” Minus the subzero weather. ☺



KANDZIORA AND BERNTHAL AT WORK ON THEIR SHOWROOM FLOOR

[illegible]



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