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## INSIDER'S STATEMENT By Sarah Harris

Top-of-the-line interior design is just the beginning for green queen Kari Whitman.

KARI WHITMAN, NICKNAMED THE “DUCHESS OF DESIGN,” PROVIDES HER CLIENTS WITH THE HOMES OF THEIR DREAMS WHILE STAYING TRUE TO HER GREEN DESIGN AESTHETIC. If she can't take your call right away, please cut her some slack. In addition to her interior design business—which includes such celebrity clients as Jessica Alba, Kristen Bell, Virginia Madsen, Don Johnson, Emilio Estevez and Don Henley—Whitman runs the animal rescue organization Ace of Hearts, is in negotiations for a new television show, recently launched a paint line and is writing a book on pet-friendly design.

***You started off as an actress. What made you turn to interior design?***

Acting was never very challenging or rewarding for me, and I'm certainly not one to sit and wait around for the phone to ring. I like to make things happen!

I've always had a passion and affinity for design. As a little girl, I was constantly rearranging my bedroom, and on vacations with my parents, I'd actually move all the furniture around in our hotel rooms. It's something I've been drawn to for as long as I can remember, and something for which I seem to have a natural ability. I'm completely self-taught, and never went to school to be a designer...I don't think you can teach good taste.

***When did your career really start to flourish?***

I have a lot of high-profile friends in the entertainment business and they'd see my living spaces and ask for help and advice for their own homes. Eventually they just started hiring me and paying for my advice.

I'd say my career was always flourishing, because I was happy with what I was doing. But once the work I did for Emilio Estevez's home was featured in *In Style* magazine, I'd say my reputation grew tremendously and I began to receive more recognition for my work.

***When looking for home furnishings, do you like to incorporate new and old pieces?***

Yes! Absolutely! I think it's a must. I love to incorporate antiques and vintage pieces, not only for the “green” element of recycling existing furniture, but also for the wisdom, character and history that these pieces add to a

home. I'm an eclectic person, and my designs reflect that—enriching and complementing fresh, contemporary elements with treasures of old.

***How has the green movement, which has been increasingly popular in Hollywood, affected your business?***

The green movement has definitely helped my business. I'm a Colorado native and consider myself innately green—I was practically born recycling, and have always been a real tree-hugger. The green movement is completely in line with my personal values and the passion I have for the environment. My clients used to think I was a little bit nuts, but people now seek me out for my reputation as an eco-friendly designer and innovative use of green elements.

***You're currently working on Jessica Alba's new home. What look and feel is she trying to achieve?***

Jessica is also very environmentally conscientious, and we are making the home as eco-friendly as possible. The look is modern and eclectic, with green elements—mixing recycled furniture, antiques and architectural elements with modernism. Jessica has impeccable taste, and it's going to be a beautiful home.

***In addition to designing homes for big-name celebrities, you work on large-scale commercial projects. How do they differ, and what is your approach to each?***

As a designer, I always feel it's essential to take my own ego out of the equation and really listen to my client's wants and needs, whether it's a big-name celebrity or a commercial office.

Working with celebrities can be challenging, particularly trying to find time to shop together, or get fabric, furniture, paint color and other approvals while accommodating hectic film schedules. Artists are also very passionate, so their opinions about their surroundings can be strong, and unyielding at times. I always have the same goal, though—to create an environment in which they feel comfortable and happy.

Working on a commercial project is less about dealing with an artist's temperament and more about dealing with individuals who make the financial decisions. There can be more artistic freedom when working on a commercial project, but at the same time, I have to keep my creative vision in line with more commercial expectations.

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Kari Whitman

## INSIDER'S STATEMENT

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### **What has been your most exciting design project to date?**

That's a tough one, but I have to say working on Emilio Estevez's wine room was an amazing experience. Virtually everything in that space is recycled—I transformed the iron grate from an old train station in Portugal into the door to the cellar, all of the furniture is antique or vintage and, coolest of all, the wood was actually recycled from Stanford University's old basketball court. Aside from the fun I had with the green elements, Emilio is so elegant, gracious and kind, he was a delight to work with. He has class and lots of savvy, as well as amazing taste.

### **Tell me a little about your organization, Ace of Hearts.**

When my beloved dog Ace, whom I rescued from a shelter from euthanization, died, I couldn't even go into my own home. I missed the love and energy that he filled my space and my life with. So I channeled my grief, anger and frustration from the loss of my cherished companion into starting my own nonprofit dog rescue, Ace of Hearts. We're a 501(c)(3) organization, dedicated to rescuing dogs from various Los Angeles County Shelters the day they are scheduled to be put to death and finding them loving adoptive homes. We've saved over 2,000 dogs to date. Saving lives through Ace of Hearts is truly my passion, but fighting red tape, bureaucracy and the inhumane treatment of animals can be debilitating.

### **Besides being an animal activist and interior designer, what do you do in your free time?**

What free time? As a Colorado native, I'm a huge hockey fan, and I absolutely love watching Colorado Avalanche games. I like to get back to nature—skiing and hiking and visiting home. But most of all, I love to cuddle up with Madison and Lucille, my gorgeous rescue dogs and the loves of my life.

### **You've said that you're inspired by fashion, and you always look so stylish. Who are some of your favorite designers?**

Konstantino Treasures Jewelry is a *must* in my wardrobe. I'm a jeans-and-T-shirt girl, but the unique, elegant and extraordinary jewelry—both male and female—from Konstantino is my favorite way to accessorize and accentuate any outfit. The prices are amazing, and I always give it as gifts—especially to the men in my life. I do like getting dressed up for special occasions, and also love Marc Jacobs, Alice + Olivia and L.A.M.B.

### **Is there anything exciting on the horizon for you?**

I'm in negotiations right now for a television show that focuses on green design. I'm also starting a book about pet-friendly design, and I recently launched Wall Makeup—a simple, fun and eco-friendly, do-it-yourself paint line that allows you to mix custom colors for your home ([www.wallmakeup.com](http://www.wallmakeup.com)). I'm also just about to start doing more work on the home of Virginia Madsen, who has been extremely patient with me while I've been finishing up Jessica Alba's house in time for her new baby's arrival.

### **What are some of the common decorating mistakes made by homeowners?**

That everything has to match. This is your home, and it should be representative of your specific tastes and experiences—things that truly move you and appeal to your personal aesthetic. Don't be afraid to take risks and create your own style. Your home shouldn't look like the display window of a department store or a page out of a home furnishings catalogue. If you have a modern light fixture that you love and a turn-of-the-century table that you also love, you can make them work together. Mixing pieces and styles that represent who you are is a wonderful way to create a living space that makes you truly happy to be home.

### **How can you decorate on a budget?**

Easily! Look on Craigslist, eBay or 1stdibs.com for great prices on great finds. Shop at swap meets and thrift stores, scour junk and architectural salvage yards for unique and cool pieces that suit your tastes. I've even picked up old couches and chairs by the side of the road, had them stripped and fumigated, then re-upholstered. There is a level of craftsmanship in older furniture that doesn't always exist in new furniture, so it's built to last. This kind of design really appeals to the environmentalist in me, as well—reusing and recycling reduces waste in landfills.

### **Who would you love to work with?**

I'd love to work with Leonardo DiCaprio, Drew Barrymore and Cameron Diaz—and not only because they're all environmentalists. Leonardo has educated and inspired this generation to think *and* act on the effect we all have on the environment. He is a passionate advocate and gives so much back—he's fantastic. Drew is so hip and cool. She also loves dogs, like I do, and seems to take such joy in living her life—I'd love to work with her. And Cameron always has a huge smile on her face. I'm sure she'd enjoy the design process and have great fun collaborating on a home.

