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MIDWEST

## NOT JUST KITCHENS

GERI HIGGINS' PORTFOLIO KITCHEN & HOME IS STAKING  
A CLAIM IN THE COMMERCIAL DESIGN WORLD

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JE DUNN CONSTRUCTION'S NEW HQ UNITES A  
STAFF THAT WAS LONG DIVIDED

AGRICULTURED ENVIRONS  
SFP'S NEW DIGS REFLECT THE COMPANY'S  
MODERN MENTALITY AND ITS AG ROOTS

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## AN IMPRESSIVE PORTFOLIO

words KATHLEEN LEIGHTON photography JENNY WHEAT PHOTOGRAPHY

**1.1:** Geri Higgins, owner of Portfolio Kitchen & Home, is always looking for ways to take her business to the next level. Recently that means a foray into the world of commercial design.

What started five years ago as a homegrown Kansas City design firm that specialized in kitchens has morphed into the kind of success story entrepreneurs dream about. Geri Higgins opened **Portfolio Kitchen & Home**, a premier kitchen, bath and home design resource, with a small Kansas City-focused staff and has steadily grown her business to the point it now serves clients not only in Kansas City but also in faraway places like Baltimore; St. Louis; Denver; Des Moines, Iowa; Omaha, Nebraska; Dallas; Chicago; and San Francisco.

"We have always had the strategic plan of adhering to our standards of excellence, superior design approach, diverse and quality products, and outrageous customer service," Higgins says. "And we execute that plan every day."

"Our brand is very specific," Higgins continues. "When people think of Portfolio they think of fabulous design, either residential or commercial. We kept building on that framework and expanded it to meet other target markets and populations."

When she started Portfolio, Higgins says, she wanted to break the mold of what people traditionally thought of as a "kitchen showroom". She took a unique approach to virtually every aspect of Portfolio's operation — from the products offered to the client-driven nature of the

design process. Higgins assembled a “dream team” of individuals with specialized skill sets. No matter what project the staff is confronted with, there is a design specialist with the expertise to lead the effort and a supporting cast that offers a number of diverse and unique design points of view.

“Everyone here is a rock star,” Higgins says. “I look for passion and loyalty, and obviously they need to be extremely talented. I also look for someone who really likes a challenge.”

That said, Higgins hasn’t had to do much prospecting. The designer says her core team members are the same today as they were the day she opened her business, with a few additions. This continuity is something Higgins says she is proud of because it has allowed her team to build a reputation and to forge strong relationships with top developers, architects, builders, remodelers and independent designers.

“Our culture is sound, and our team is very proud of this business that we’ve built together,” Higgins says. “We have evolved personally and professionally through this journey.”

The Connecticut-born Higgins utilizes her extensive business acumen to create a progressive, client-driven business. Portfolio specializes in residential and commercial design both on remodeling and new-construction projects. Also familiar with condominium and multi-unit projects, Portfolio’s staff has a knowledge of European products and design trends that make it ideally suited for specialty projects such as penthouses and hospitality suites. And, of course, the company still does extensive work in the kitchen and bath sector.

Higgins dreams big and dreams far: She has reached all the way to Italy to develop a relationship with a top European custom cabinetmaker in Milan. And she builds new connections every other year by attending the International Design Show in the same city.

Portfolio has also developed important relationships closer to home, recently creating an alliance with **Nebraska Furniture Mart** that involved Portfolio designing and coordinating the kitchen design studio at Nebraska Furniture Mart’s Kansas City, Kansas, store. At first blush the pairing seems odd: a successful boutique business linking arms with a corporate giant? But it makes perfect sense to Higgins and proves once again how her outside-the-box thinking has propelled Portfolio into the design stratosphere.

“Nebraska Furniture Mart is one of the largest suppliers of appliances in the United States,” she explains. “They serve all different types of clients — entry level, moderate and luxury. Portfolio understands all of these different populations and their needs. Nebraska Furniture Mart and Portfolio products and services fit together as a whole, and that’s where the magic was for us.”

But even with all the recent growth, Higgins says she is taking things slowly.

“Our brand is so diverse that we have a great foundation and our prospects are limitless,” she says. “But I realize that it’s very important to control growth. I look at this business as a huge matrix, and I always stay true to our brand and our service level. If you remain true to those things, you won’t allow yourself to grow too fast, which can lead you to stray from your standards of excellence.”

Strategic alliances, relationships and high-profile clients have been keys to Portfolio’s long-term growth, as evidenced by a number of recent projects. Portfolio was tasked with designing the hip hospitality kitchen for **Studio Dan Meiners’** new downtown Kansas City project, designing and providing the sleek and sophisticated **Pedini** Italian cabinetry throughout a Country Club Plaza high-rise, outfitting the fabulous and luxurious first-floor residential amenities at **One Park Place**, and designing the show kitchen that takes center stage at the new **Function Junction** in Crown Center.

Higgins says she has noticed her clients are becoming better educated about what they want their spaces to look like. While she loves that they’re taking ownership of their projects, Higgins stresses the importance of consulting with a design professional rather than going it alone.

“Design is a powerful thing, and in the past people thought if you hired a design professional it was very expensive,” she says. “But everything stems from design; it’s your road map. Design is well worth it because it is critical to your project’s success. It’s the strategy that makes all things work. Everyone deserves great design. We say that here a lot.”

When asked about her most-memorable project, Higgins can’t decide.

“I love all my clients,” she says. “Whenever I meet with a client, I walk away with the essence of that person. If another designer was asked that question, they would probably default to their biggest or coolest job. But every job is cool, special and unique to me. I feel the same sense of gratitude walking away from every project.”

When it comes to her favorite type of project, Higgins clearly leans toward her original passion: the kitchen. One of the designer’s guiding philosophies is that the kitchen reaches far beyond its four walls. She says it is a special gathering place for family and friends, a place that touches people’s emotions and stirs their passions.

And Higgins, a woman of many passions, should know. Beyond sublime design, the entrepreneur is passionate about making a difference in the community and has supported numerous charitable causes with sponsorships and direct donations. She also regularly hosts events and fundraisers.

“I never give my energy to things I don’t believe in,” she says. “And my clients feel that passion. We have a genuine regard for everyone who walks through our door. I feel very fortunate.” □