

Origin Stories: K. Tyler's Winding Road To Interior Design Helped Her Become A Jack Of All Trades

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This series (<http://www.bisnow.com/tags/origin-stories>) delves into the myriad ways people enter the commercial real estate industry and what contributes to their success.

The ranks of commercial real estate are filled with accomplished professionals who left successful careers in entirely different industries. Katawna Tyler is one of them. Today she is an interior designer and principal with Evanston-based Morgante Wilson Architects, but her roundabout experiences include time spent as a certified public accountant and then a decade as a high-end furnishings buyer.

When Tyler (who typically goes by K. due to the difficulty many have in spelling her first name) decided on a more creative lifestyle, she found each professional stop along the way armed her with useful tools. Accounting provided a deep understanding of how businesses operate, and from the world of furnishings she learned how to negotiate and who the industry's big players are.

After getting a degree in interior design and joining Morgante Wilson, Tyler said all that background helped her handle clients and explain the business aspects of design, not simply how a certain room would look. That makes all the years spent sampling other professions time well spent.



Bisnow: How did you get introduced to CRE?

Tyler: I had quite a few stepping stones to get to CRE. After studying accounting and taking a job out of college as a CPA, I ultimately shifted gears and started pursuing a career related to my longtime love of interior design, first working in furniture merchandising before going back to school for a degree in interior design.

My initial involvement in CRE was an extension of my work with Morgante Wilson Architects, where I'm now a partner and principal of our interior design division. Although Morgante Wilson Architects is best known for residential architecture and interiors, we've always had a fair amount of commercial real estate projects come our way through relationships with our residential clients — many of them entrepreneurs or executives who call us to do work on their businesses or office spaces after partnering with us on a design project for their personal homes. Over the years we've had more and more of those opportunities, particularly for our interior design division, and they've gotten larger in scale. Now our interiors team does a lot of work with multifamily developers, creating interiors and amenity spaces for new luxury properties.

Bisnow: What was your first job in CRE?

Tyler: I have very fond memories of one of Morgante Wilson's earliest multifamily interiors projects, which was with Fifield Cos. My dear friend Randy Fifield brought us in to do a showcase model apartment for the firm's K2 high-rise luxury apartment building in downtown Chicago. As good business would have it, that first project was the start of a terrific partnership and we're now up to half a dozen gorgeous projects with Fifield Cos., and counting — including our current collaboration creating the interiors and amenities for The Westerly in Chicago's River West neighborhood. Thank you, Fifield Cos., we love working with you!



Bisnow: What kind of education, certification or official training do you have in CRE? How critical was it to landing your first big role?

Tyler: Absolutely zero! Is that allowed? When it comes to creating beautiful CRE interiors, specific CRE training is less of a must than overall training and experience in principles of good design. And ironically, it's our roots in residential design that we think sets us apart in CRE. Our signature aesthetic is warm and inviting, personable and tactile, and we understand how to select and source the best materials for our projects, keeping in mind the client's budget and aspirations. All that works to our advantage in designing standout interiors for commercial projects.

Bisnow: What is the one skill you wish you had coming into CRE?

Tyler: In college, I almost pursued a degree in finance rather than accounting — it was a toss-up choice, and accounting won by a paper-thin margin. Both accounting and finance are a little unusual for someone who ended up in design, but in terms of CRE, finance would have given me additional insights into the structure of deals and the how and why behind them, which can be very helpful in building strong networks and relationships with industry partners.



Bisnow: What were you doing before you got into CRE? If you changed careers, did you bring anything with you from your past career that has helped you thrive in CRE, or, on the flip side, anything you had to unlearn in order to succeed here?

Tyler: My career path has been a bit of a winding road. As previously mentioned, I graduated from business school at Southern Methodist University with a degree in accounting. My first real job out of college was as a CPA with what was then Price Waterhouse (currently PwC). I quickly learned that I needed to have a creative outlet in my career — although I enjoyed working with numbers, the lack of creativity was killing me. After spending a lot of time doing a job that doesn't fulfill you, your senses are heightened to identify the things that do. So after three years in auditing, I made a quick pivot and landed a position in the Merchant Development Program at Neiman Marcus. Long story short, I spent the next 10 years as a buyer for high-end furnishings for Neiman Marcus Direct, and then Baker Furniture. While at Baker I got my degree in interior design from Chicago's Harrington College of Design. From there, I joined Morgante Wilson Architects to spearhead the creation of our interior design division where I now serve as principal/partner.

In terms of lessons learned, my time at Price Waterhouse as an auditor was invaluable for exposing me to the inner workings of all sorts of businesses and their financials, and giving me the skills to analyze processes for improvement. My time at Neiman Marcus as a buyer was invaluable for teaching me how the furnishings industry works, familiarizing myself with the vendors and learning about negotiating pricing and profitability on the product, which feeds my current profession. My time at Baker Furniture was invaluable for understanding the nuances of product quality and custom design, and getting to know the key players in the industry. It was also an amazing training ground for embracing full immersion into a world of budgets, spreadsheets and projections — a must in managing a happy client.

Bisnow: Can you remember a moment where you felt in over your head or you worried this industry wasn't for you? Did you ever think about quitting? What changed?

Tyler: I am often in awe of some of the amazing work of others in the field. There are incredibly gorgeous projects going up what seems like almost daily, and it can for sure be a bit intimidating. But there is always a new project, a fresh idea, a strike of inspiration that results in a jaw-dropping space of our creation. And then I'm like, yeah ... bring it on guys ...



Bisnow: What were your early impressions of the industry, good and bad? How has your impression changed?

Tyler: Starting out in residential interior design, CRE always seemed like an elusive, exclusive men's club where all these big-dollar deals were made in a private club or on a golf course. But it's refreshing to see so many women in power and in leadership roles that we've had the pleasure to work with, like Lindsey Senn of Fifield Cos., Patty McHugh of McHugh Construction, Vicky Lee at Focus and Erin Spears at Heitman, all striking major deals and supporting one another as they make their mark slowly (but surely) on the changing face of CRE.

Bisnow: Have you had a mentor or sponsor? How did that person shape your future in CRE?

Tyler: I have to give that credit to my friend and partner, Elissa Morgante, the co-founder of Morgante Wilson Architects who brought me on board more than 13 years ago to help establish the firm's interior design division. We have worked closely together over the years at establishing our firm as one of the premier interior design outfits in the country, building a reputation that we hope to rival our company's standing in the world of architecture. As such, we carefully plot each move to advance our presence even further in the CRE conversation, while still staying close to our roots in residential design. Elissa is the conscience and the compass of our forward momentum and has successfully guided us to this point. She is the quintessential jack of all trades in the world of real estate and design and can authoritatively talk on any subject in any circle. I value and trust her instincts completely and so appreciate the opportunity that she gave me to join her on this amazing journey.

Bisnow: What is a key lesson someone taught you, either kindly or the hard way?

Tyler: Without hesitation: not all opportunities are good opportunities. Not all business is good business. I've learned that it is dangerous to be eager, and the cost of taking on a bad client can cost you far more than the benefits of landing them. Don't compromise your worth, your work or your values. If you feel you have to do that, it's best to walk away.

Bisnow: What do you warn people about when they join the industry?

Tyler: As designers, we are often emotional about the outcome of our projects and will work our little fingers to the bone in pursuit of perfection. Be careful not to be taken advantage of in that pursuit. Your business partners should be just that. Make sure they partner with you fairly to achieve the desired outcome on the project and that you aren't bearing the brunt of the sacrifice to make the project successful.

Bisnow: If you could do your career all over again, what would you change?

Tyler: I'd be tempted to make a beeline to my passion and dive straight into design from the outset. But looking back, I respect the fact that serendipity is all-knowing and has prepared me for my current present better than I could have ever planned. I now have a deep appreciation for all the twists and turns and changes I've made in my career, which have made me the unique, well-rounded accountant/retail executive/interior design principal that I am today. So with that said, I wouldn't change a thing.

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