

Sprucing Up America

# *room* by *room*



*By Christopher Evans*





**All in a Day's Work:** Shari Hiller (*top*) applies makeup before she goes on camera, while production assistant Debbie Matheson adds last-minute changes to the script on the TelePrompter. As seen on the monitor, Matt Fox and Hiller (*left*) run through a rehearsal before taping on location. Hiller and producer Jane Temple (*above*) eye the monitor as Fox runs through a solo segment of the show.



T

he mood on the set is light. So when one of the production assistants asks Matt Fox what he's wear-

ing so she can mark it in the production notes, Fox ticks off his list: Cranberry shirt, blue jeans, brown belt, new Wolverines, gray T-shirt, white socks and Jockey shorts with holes.

It is this kind of candor that has made *room by room*, the Home & Garden Television (HGTV) hit, so popular. As the creators and stars of the show, Fox and co-host Shari Hiller draw a devoted do-it-yourself demographic with their mix of goofy humor – “She’s the Skipper and I’m Gilligan,” Fox explains – and clever, inexpensive decorating tips.

They also are making Cleveland television history.

Clevelanders  
Shari Hiller  
and Matt Fox  
created  
and star in  
HGTV's  
popular show  
*room by  
room*.

*room by room* – Hiller thinks the lowercase letters “seem friendlier” – is the only locally produced television program that enjoys a national and international audience. Beachwood Studios, the largest video production firm in Northeast Ohio, handles the technical end. Hiller and Fox provide the talent.

It's a winning combination. *room by room* seems to be on all the time: Six days a week, morning and night. In fact, *room by room* is so popular that HGTV, a 24-hour slice of heaven for home enthusiasts, just bought all the rights to the show and signed Hiller and Fox to a three-year deal for an undisclosed amount of money.

And this is just the beginning. The five-year-old, E.W. Scripps-owned network is growing like an out-of-control houseplant on one of its gardening shows, spreading its tendrils into some 65 million households across the country, as well as Canada, Japan and Australia.



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Hiller and Fox appear at

Hiller's husband isn't threatened by that perception.

Once HGTV bought *room by room*, it brought Beachwood Studios on board to produce the show. The new shows are more glossy and

"As I always say," Hiller tells the camera. "You just never know where an idea's gonna take you." ■

*Christopher Evans considers "room by room" the most insidious threat to ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN Classic and ESPNNews that he has ever encountered. He can be reached at 216/999-6139 or [cevans@plaind.com](mailto:cevans@plaind.com).*



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*Puzzle appears on page 23*

with Fox's determination.

Fox helped Hiller design color systems, and together they wrote the script for a nine-minute pilot called *Home Style*.

"Shari developed the show," Fox says. "It's her baby. She does the design and I implement it. I'm the grunt, the goofy sidekick."

It took three days to film the pilot. Hiller and Fox redecorated the living room in her younger brother's bungalow in

Garfield Heights. Fox ripped out and replaced the carpeting. He also installed track lighting. Hiller made drapes and hunted down accessories. They transformed the room from a dark, gloomy Seventies look to a soft, contemporary one that featured lots of whites and neutrals with a brightly colored accent wall. When they were done, the room literally glowed.

"It was like, 'All right! We can do this!'" Fox remembers.

They excitedly prepared for the pilot's screening. They invited 10 Sherwin-Williams executives. They drew up a 100-page business plan that envisioned *Home Style* stores. And Hiller, Fox's mother and his aunt cross-stitched *Home Style* logos onto T-shirts for the invitees.

Only one executive showed up, but he was the man with the checkbook. T. Scott King liked the pilot and agreed to fund the show. He knew the president of North Coast Cable and worked out a deal in which Sherwin-Williams would underwrite a one-hour, live call-in studio show every Thursday night on the local cable-access channel.

The show was renamed *The Look of Home*, and it debuted quite inauspiciously in December 1992.

"We came on after a test pattern," Fox remembers.

"I would talk about color and putting patterns together," Hiller says. "We brought furniture in and created little living room and dining room setups."

They had no idea if anyone was watching. They had studio staff call in with questions. The TelePrompTer didn't work. Fox built elaborate sets that always seemed to collapse on camera, and once Hiller got locked out of the studio during a show.

This was not how they imagined their career in television. They didn't want to be trapped in a studio. They wanted to go on location. Real people, real rooms, real decorating. That was their mantra.

King was not sympathetic. He reminded them that Sherwin-Williams was interested in selling paint, not producing television shows. Worse, Hiller and Fox were still spending most of their time designing Sherwin-Williams color systems.

"They didn't take us off our projects because who knew what was going to happen with the show," Hiller says.

Over the next two years, they filmed 18 episodes of *The Look of Home*. They slowly discovered that people were watching. "By the end, we were getting 15, 20 calls a

show," Fox says.

But they were ready to move on. Unfortunately, King didn't have the connections, or the interest, to take them to the next level. Hiller and Fox felt as if they were at a dead end.

And then one day, while reading *The Wall Street Journal*—something Fox rarely did—a short article caught his eye. It talked about a new 24-hour cable network that was about to go on the air. It was soliciting program ideas. It was called *Home & Garden Television*.

"He comes running into my office," Hiller says.

"I literally dove across her desk," Fox adds modestly.

They couldn't believe their good fortune. This was exactly the break they needed. It was another sign the show was meant to be.

**F**ox sent their nine-minute *Home Style* pilot to Kenneth Lowe, HGTV founder and president-CEO of E.W. Scripps Company. He loved it as much as T. Scott King loved HGTV's demographics. It was one of those win-win situations.

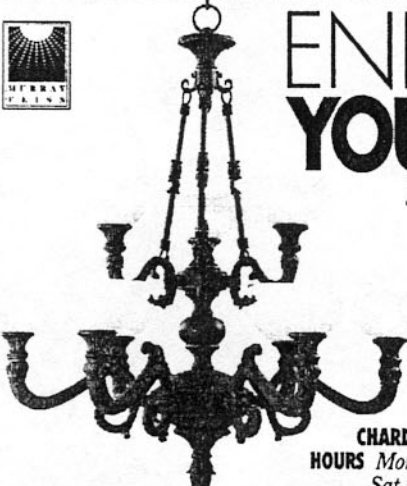
"Sherwin-Williams licensed the show to HGTV and HGTV paid us a fee that covered our production costs," King says.

HGTV went on the air the morning of December 30, 1994. The first show it broadcast was *room by room*. It was an immediate success. Hiller and Fox had achieved their dream: A 30-minute show that documented the decorative process in a real room in a real house for real people.

"We're not developing a cure for heart disease," admits Hiller, who along with Fox quit Sherwin-Williams last year. "But we're helping people feel proud of their homes."

They added the latest notch to their tool belts last April when HGTV bought the show lock, stock and barrel. Today, they are bona fide television personalities, and not simply a surreptitious marketing ploy for Sherwin-Williams.

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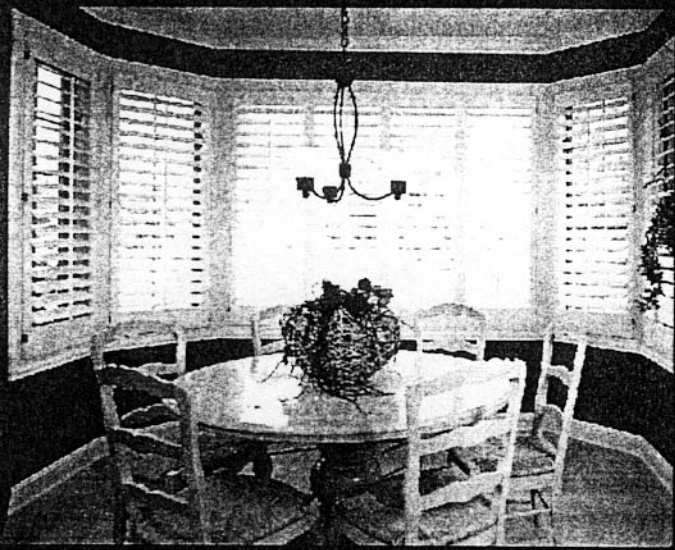
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sity of California-Berkeley and climb the corporate ladder. He began, after he graduated, at the bottom as a sales rep for Martin Senour, a small paint company that had just been bought by Sherwin-Williams.

"It was an obvious choice," Fox says. "I could talk paint."

That was in 1988. Three years later, Fox was getting tired of selling paint. He was also getting a divorce. The time seemed right for a change.

Hiller couldn't have found a more receptive audience for her "what-to-do" interior design show. In fact, Fox was so enthusiastic, Hiller realized she couldn't do the show without him. He was the missing piece.

"I'm thinking, 'He'd be great,'" Hiller says. "He has the personality, the skills. I can come up with the designs, but I need help executing them."

Fox was perfect. He wasn't an intimidating master carpenter like Norm Abram on *This Old House*. He was Everyguy, the reluctant but amiable do-it-yourselfer who secretly relished odd jobs that involved portable chop saws and cordless drills.

"My parents divorced when I was 10," Fox says. "I had nobody to show me how to use tools, so I kind of learned on my

own. One day, I remember I was real little, and my mom was trying to fix a lamp. The wiring was frayed. I told her, 'I think I can do that.' And I did, using a butter knife as a screwdriver."

It was the classic do-it-yourselfer experience and it convinced Fox, much to the delight of his mother and two older brothers, that he was a Mr. Fix-It. He welcomed the challenge of replacing a broken runner on a dresser drawer, or fixing a leaky faucet in the bathroom. There was no end to his resourcefulness. He even built a replica of the *Gemini* space capsule out of a huge cardboard box.

As Fox waxed poetic about his early toolbox days, Hiller heard an echo of her own childhood. She, too, was raised by her mother. Her father died when she was 12. And she, too, was precocious when it came to playing house.

"I totally destroyed my mother's hardwood floors," Hiller remembers. "I had a canopy bed. Why we never put any little soft pads on the bottom of it I don't know, but I scraped the floor up horribly because I rearranged my room all the time."

Hiller didn't just play with Barbie. She designed and built furniture for her. Her proudest childhood achievement was a

"super cool swivel chair" with "a little blue velvet cushion" she made for her Barbie.

The more Hiller and Fox talked, the more they felt their meeting was not a chance encounter.

"It was fate," Hiller says emphatically. "We were meant to do this show."

The next morning, Fox flew back to San Francisco and Hiller headed home to Cleveland, where she pitched the idea of a television show to her boss, T. Scott King, then president of the Consumer Brands Division of Sherwin-Williams.

King had the reputation of being a renegade at Sherwin-Williams. He knew the truth and wasn't afraid to speak it. "We sell products people hate" was his most famous and controversial insight. As a result, King realized he needed to develop a new marketing strategy. "We needed to make the whole painting experience much more enjoyable and creative," he remembers.

Enter Hiller with her concept for a television show that made home decorating fun and affordable. King was a pushover. "I saw it as a great opportunity to get our name out in a different way," he recalls. He agreed to give Hiller \$10,000 to shoot a pilot. But he wouldn't bring Fox to Cleveland. He was making too much money for Martin Senour out on the West Coast.

Hiller called Fox with the good – and bad – news. Fox didn't hesitate.

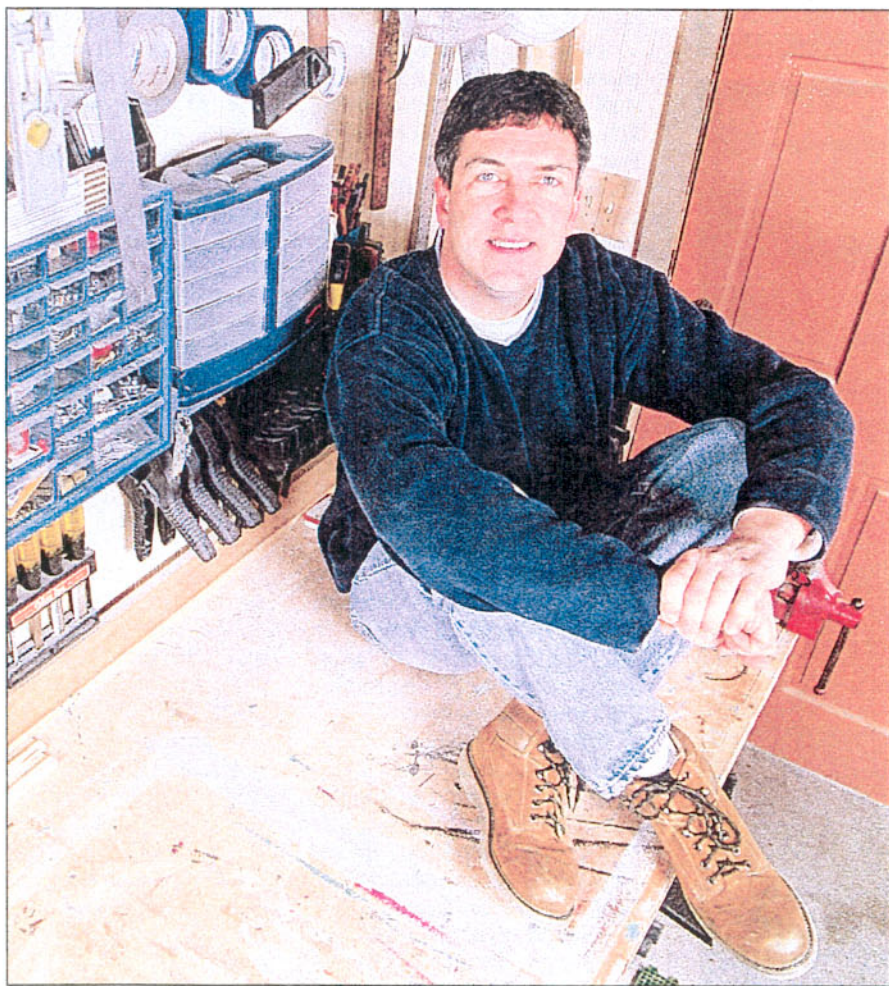
He quit his job and told Hiller he was moving back to Ohio.

"I really wanted to do the show," Fox says. "I had nothing to lose. I lost everything in the divorce. My life was in the dumpster."

That spontaneous and foolhardy leap of faith both wowed and worried Hiller, who begged her supervisors in the color lab to hire Fox as her part-time assistant. They agreed and Fox rejoined the company in Cleveland. King was impressed

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- Matt Fox





“We’re not developing a cure for heart disease. But we’re helping people feel proud of their homes.”

– Shari Hiller

what to do to decorate their rooms,” Hiller explains. “Lots of times they know how to paint, or how to hang wallpaper. But they don’t know *what* to do.”

Hiller envisioned a program that would not only tell viewers but show them step by step how to integrate eye appeal with function and mood. A few easy, inexpensive decorating projects that included some paint from Sherwin-Williams, and – *voila!* – a dreary basement becomes a great place to work out or just watch television.

Hiller wasn’t ready to discuss the idea with her boss. It felt incomplete. The last night of the business conference in Orlando, there was a dinner. The mood was festive. Hiller sat at a table, talking and laughing with her peers. Suddenly, a skinny, baby-faced guy crouched down beside her.

“He said, ‘OK, Al Godfrey is retiring, so we’re gonna sing this song for him.’ And he handed me a sheet of paper,” Hiller remembers. “Then he went to the next table. Next thing I know he’s up at the podium shouting, ‘All right, I’ve worked with Al for so many years. Al, stand up. OK, everybody!’ And they all start singing this song he had written for Al.”

It was set to the tune of *Happy Anniversary*. Hiller doesn’t remember the words, but she remembers all those salesmen singing. It impressed her because Sherwin-Williams wasn’t known for its wild and crazy employees. These were people who liked to watch paint dry.

“Afterwards, I thought, ‘I have to find out who that goofy guy was,’” Hiller says. “He had guts, and there was a charisma to him.”

She introduced herself and shook hands with Matt Fox. He knew who Hiller was. He had taken “color classes” from her.

“She was, like, the color god of Sherwin-Williams paint,” Fox says.



As they talked, they discovered they were both Buckeyes. Fox grew up in Findlay, Hiller in Avon Lake. Amazingly, they both had attended Kent State University in the mid-Seventies and hung out at the same bar there, the Crazy Horse. Fox was a theater major who took a lot of shop classes.

“I wanted to learn how to build sets,” he explains. “I figured if you were an actor, you’d get more work if you knew how to do more things.”

Hiller studied interior design. Fox graduated in 1979, a couple of years before she did, and moved to Los Angeles.

“I go to my first audition,” Fox remembers. “I see 400 Brad Pitts. Then there’s me. I look like Dobie Gillis.”

He bagged the acting career.

“You realize right away that you don’t have it,” Fox says. “It wasn’t awful. I didn’t want to deal with rejection all my life.”

He married and moved to San Francisco, where he worked in a store called Puppets on the Pier, selling hand puppets called “Furry Folks” to the tourists on Pier 39. Then he was hired as

a drama teacher at South San Francisco High School. Fox loved teaching. It not only provided a captive audience for his bad jokes, but also a wonderful feeling of accomplishment. During the summer, Fox and a friend painted houses. He made more money in two months than he did for his work all year in the classroom.

Life was good, but Fox was restless. “I knew I wanted to do better,” he says.

He formed his own company: “Mathew’s Painting (For A Quality Job Which Lasts).” Fox also continued to teach until three years later, in 1983, when school budget cuts cost him his job. He became a full-time house painter-handyman.

“It was just me and my friend for a while,” he remembers. “Then we got bigger and we had to hire crews. I hired a lot of seminarians who were studying to be priests. I figured I could trust them.”

Soon, Fox was a bona fide contractor, brokering residential and commercial jobs. The money was good, but Fox was tired of painting. It was dirty, hard, physically demanding work. He decided to get his business degree from the Univer-



"Guys come up to me all the time at trade shows and tell me, 'I hate you,'" Fox says with pride. He understands their anger. He likes to build shelves and tables and headboards, and talk about how easy and rewarding it is. "I'm a reminder to women that men can build things."

What distinguishes *room by room*, though, is it also reminds women they don't need men.

"We're doing this so they can do it themselves," Fox says. "We're trying to inspire them. We are a teaching show."

Hiller, 41, and Fox, 43, tackle such chores as replacing the knobs on kitchen cabinets with the alacrity and joy of aerobic instructors. Worse, they are as charming as their window treatments.

"We're wholesome, middle-class Americans," says Fox proudly.

That gets Hiller thinking about their arch-rival, Martha Stewart. "Look where she is, this billionaireess," Hiller fumes. "She's on *Larry King*. And she's mean and crotchety. We're friendly. Why can't we be on *Oprah*?"

That day may come. Meanwhile, they have a job to do. Fox pulls his Ford Explorer into the driveway of Amy Novotny's South Euclid bungalow.

"This is how it begins," Fox explains. Novotny has agreed to let them redecorate her basement for one of their shows. "We meet the homeowner, get some of her ideas, scope out the room and then go home and brainstorm."

They call this technique "guerrilla decorating."

"We have to do it fast," Fox says. "We have a week to transform the room."

Novotny, a local video producer, heard about *room by room* from a female friend. Women are the show's biggest fans. They also make up the largest segment of the HGTV viewership. When another friend of Novotny, Jane Temple, was hired recently as the show's producer, she recommended Novotny's house for a *room by room* episode.

"We try to do friends' houses if we can," Fox says. "It's a little easier to work with people we know."

They also redecorate rooms in their own homes. Hiller, who is married with two children, lives in a vast Georgian manor complete with a solarium and an elevator in Lakewood. Fox, who is divorced, lives in a tidy bungalow in Fairview Park. "That's kind of the perk of the job for us," Fox says. "If we're gonna be doing a room, we might as well be doing our own."

Novotny leads them downstairs to a dimly lit, finished basement that she never uses. Fox taps his fingers along the shoulder-high dark pine paneling. "This is beautiful," he says. "We don't want to

do anything to this wood. It looks like they tried to make a pub-like room. I like it. Cozy, rustic."

"We need to lighten it up," Hiller says. She points to the dark brown floor tiles and a faded navy blue carpet remnant. The carpet matches a painted gas fireplace set against the far wall. Sun room furniture – a sofa, a glass table and an ottoman – gathers dust on the carpet. "I don't like the blue," Hiller says. She notices a cable hookup. "You have cable."

"This room can be saved!" Fox shouts. He notices rot on the particleboard around the room's two tiny glass-block windows, and loose trim around the heating vents.

They sit down with Novotny on the sun room furniture.

"What sort of style do you think you are?" Hiller asks.

"I like light rooms, white or off-white

Fox likes to  
listen to  
The Carpenters  
while he works.  
*Rainy Days and  
Mondays* is his  
favorite. "I'm a  
wimp,"  
he says.

walls, light shades of wood," Novotny says. She shows them a clip file marked "Home Tips." As the three of them leaf through it, Fox pretends to throw one of the articles away.

"It's by Martha Stewart," he explains.

Hiller mentions a NordicTrack she saw upstairs. "What if we made this a workout room?" she asks

"That's a direction," Fox says. He points out the washer and dryer in the laundry room next door. "While you're doing the laundry you can work out."

"That sounds as much fun as baking," Novotny replies.

"Hey, we could build a stationary bicycle like that one on *Gilligan's Island*," Fox suggests. He pauses for a moment, a cheery, chipmunk-cheeked guy. "You know, I could never figure out why they wanted to leave that place."

Hiller asks Novotny if water gets in the basement. Novotny says no, not in the two years she has lived in the house. Hiller points to the mantel and the shelves above the fireplace. She suggests Novotny move a television down here. Fox also recommends a CD player-radio with a remote control. They talk about putting in track lighting.

Hiller likes the idea of sewing floral slipcovers for the sun room furniture. As she sketches the floor plan, Fox measures the sofa and ottoman. They decide to break the room into two areas: one for working out, the other for watching television.

Since the wood paneling is so heavy, they discuss clean, bright colors for the walls above it and the ceiling. They'll have the carpet cleaned and they'll add an area rug on top of it to break up the blue. They'll also repaint the fireplace.

Novotny likes it. "I think it's a really creative and beautiful idea."

It's also inexpensive. Hiller and Fox figure it'll cost about \$350.

"We represent the people who can't afford to have designers come into their homes," Hiller says. "We are middle America with families and mortgages."

But they are more than that. They are a former color stylist and a paint salesman who overcame tremendous odds to find their destiny on cable television. They are proof that dreams really *can* come true.

**S**hari Hiller and Matt Fox first met in February 1991 at the annual sales meeting Sherwin-Williams has for the sales reps in its Martin Senour division of paints.

It was at a resort in Orlando, Florida. Fox was a sales rep in San Francisco whose territory included California, Utah and Nevada. Hiller was there because she created the colors the salesmen sold, thousands and thousands of colors, from Academy Blue to Zinnia Orange. But she was sick of the job. Particularly the travel. Hiller had a husband and a 5-year-old back home in Westlake. She felt she never saw them. The guilt was overwhelming, and one day it triggered an idea.

"I remember I was in the family room just lying on the couch, crying, crying, crying," Hiller says. "This is awful! This is wrong! My daughter's growing up and I'm missing everything! Wouldn't it be cool if I was on TV? I could stay here, do the presentation and then just broadcast it."

Hiller thought about her idea constantly. She knew from her work as an interior designer early in her career that there was a need. "People don't know