



Beauty and Elegance in Colorado Springs for 35 Years

Bittersweet Endings to New Beginnings

Even though I first met Rich Schell nearly a decade ago, I still remember the day well. He's that kind of person, who leaves that kind of impression. I was on a flight from Denver to Atlanta for a girls' weekend where I planned to drink lots of wine. He was on his way to the Atlanta Home Show where he planned to drink in lots of ideas.

What I remember most about Rich was how polished he looked. Tweed jacket, fashionable jeans, and impeccably shined shoes. He had a deep baritone and smelled like leather and sophistication. You wouldn't have thought we would have had much, if anything, in common. But, as we chatted, we realized we both lived in Colorado Springs. We both grew up in hometowns that we knew we'd one day need to leave for something different if we wanted to fully become who we were

destined to be. We were both creative -- he as an interior designer and florist, and me as a writer.

And, if that wasn't enough, we had the same birthday, exactly 20 years apart! That was the part that delighted us, for some reason. As we landed in Atlanta, he asked if we could take a selfie for him to send to his partner, Greg Wragge.

"He isn't going to believe this!" he said. We put our heads together and he snapped the photo. He invited me to his store, Rich Designs Home, and the annual Christmas Open House, and I put him in my phone as "Rich the Birthday Twin."

That's the name that popped up on my phone in September of 2020 when Rich and I were catching up and I interviewed him for this article. At this point, I have been to the spectacular Christmas Open House

several times, and I've been welcomed into Rich and Greg's gorgeous home. I have loved on their precious dogs, and I occasionally run into Rich around town. And on a snowy afternoon, Rich and I Facetimed and he told me more of their story than I could have ever learned on that short flight to Atlanta. It is a journey from the oilfields of Wyoming to the homes of Colorado Springs. It is a story that is still being written today.

From Steel Toed Boots to Floral Designs

One of the first things I asked Rich was, how did you get from the oil fields of Wyoming to Rich Designs Home?

"I had an oil field father, so that was always what I knew," says Rich. "I started working at a flower shop when I was 13 years old, and a few years later I traveled with the international touring group Up With People. We traveled across the country and I got to perform at the halftime show of Super Bowl XIV in 1980, a personal life highlight!"

When Rich returned home at age 20, he did what he knew. "I went to the oil fields. I had the steel-toed boots and the hard hat. But when that industry went bust, I went back to flowers. I was voted 'Most Likely in High School to Own an Interior Design Firm,' so this was definitely something I knew and enjoyed."

In 1985, Rich was directing a Junior Miss Scholarship pageant in Casper, Wyoming when a friend introduced him to Greg Wragge. Greg was born in Colorado and

was raised in Sheridan, Wyoming. The oldest of five, Greg was from a family of educators and musicians, and studied clarinet and piano in high school and majored in voice at Casper College. He was an accomplished actor as well, playing Jesus in a production of *Godspell*. Rich and Greg could have thrived in Wyoming. They were both successful and accomplished. But one wonders -- did they both feel a call to something different? Away from steel-toed boots and into something more beautiful and fulfilling?

Whatever it was that propelled them, Rich and Greg arrived in Colorado Springs in 1985. Rich worked with his uncle, John Schell, at his flower shop while he got his feet under him, and was soon hired as a designer at the Broadmoor Hotel. Greg worked at Equity Realty and The Red Lion Hotel.

It didn't take long, though, for Rich to set out on his own. His ideas were big, and he needed the space to grow and expand. He opened a freelance studio in 1987 and began offering floral design classes, teaching as many as 90 students. The studio, located at 104 East Cheyenne Road, was owned by Equity Realty and the Mientka family, some of the first people Greg and Rich met upon their move to Colorado Springs. The Mientka's happened to be friends of Rich's uncle as well. File this name away, it will be important later in our story.

The Beginnings of a Legacy in Colorado Springs

Eventually, the studio space flourished into a retail space and florist with the encouragement of Danny Mientka. Soon Rich Designs Florist and Antiques opened its doors and thrived, offering fabulous fresh flowers, sensational gifts, home decor, and incredible antiques. They also hosted special events including art openings and the aforementioned Christmas Open House.

“It’s really kind of amazing,” says Rich. “Country design style was very popular and dried flowers were the rage. Yet, people responded to what we were doing -- we have always tried to be on point with what the current trend and remain ahead of the curve. The rest is history!”

In 1991, Greg was able to leave his job at the hotel and begin working full time at Rich Designs. Living and working together may not work for some but has suited Rich and Greg perfectly.

“I have been able to do wedding flowers for multiple generations in the same family,” says Rich. “I will have a mother of the bride say to me ‘You did the flowers for my wedding, and now you’re doing the flowers for my daughter!’ It’s humbling.”

But what Rich Designs is possibly best known for is their Christmas Open House events. That was my first taste of Rich Designs, and I’ll truly never forget it. There was a wall made of peppermints. A Santa and Mrs. Claus that seemed to come straight from the North Pole. I sipped hot cider as my friend and I wandered the rooms, past trees laden with delicate ornaments, down halls

lined with reindeer, each room thick with the scent of pine and gingerbread. It became an annual tradition for me and hundreds of others. It didn’t feel like Christmas until I purchased a new Christmas ornament from the open house!

The Christmas events that I attended all occurred at Rich Designs’ 1731 Mt Washington Avenue location, where Rich and Greg moved the business in 2001, after having purchased the building. At that time, they expanded the business and renamed it Rich Designs Home. Meanwhile, Greg and Rich decided to spin off a sister store, I Saw It First Consignments, at their original Cheyenne Road location. Later, in 2012, the two stores would merge into the same space.

Their ability to pivot and adapt is part of the success of Rich Designs Home. They have been honored with numerous awards throughout the years and were selected three times in the 50 Retail Stars in Home Accent Today Magazine. Rich also cites his amazing staff, which included Marcia Wurm, who ran the floral department for over 20 years (which was closed as part of their plan to focus on interior design and furnishings); Beth Martin, who has spent 20 years running the showroom; and Shane Richard, Design Operations for the past eight years. However, without the faithful partnership of Greg, none of this would have ever been possible.

Rich Designs Home has been blessed with much -- and they do what they can to pay it forward and leave a legacy in Colorado Springs. For several years

they hosted an event for Pikes Peak Hospice called “The Art of Living,” an art opening for 350 under a tent in the parking lot. They designed and donated all of the floral decor for the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center’s 75th Anniversary Celebration. In addition, Rich and Greg have opened their homes to provide concerts and cocktail parties to benefit several charities including the Colorado Springs Conservatory, Southern Colorado AIDS Project, the Fine Arts Center, as well as other numerous worthwhile causes.

“We can’t always write the big checks, but opening our home and gardens allows us to host many events, and we enjoy every moment!” says Rich.

The Journey Continues

Anyone who has been near Rich Designs Home in the last few years can see that the area is changing around it. Buildings are coming down as Danny Mientka, their first landlord moves forward with revitalizing the area, now called Creekwalk. Rich Designs Home has a new address, 1731 Creekwalk Court. But their time at this location is winding down, as the building, the last one standing will be removed in the next 24 to 30 months to make room for the expansion of Creekwalk North.

“It’s certainly bittersweet,” says Rich, “leaving this space and not knowing exactly what is on the horizon.” But Rich says he is incredibly excited about the many future possibilities.

Rich says he and Greg certainly plan to do more traveling, especially since the two haven’t been on a vacation longer than 10 days in decades. They kicked off that trend in January of 2020 when the two traveled to New York City to ring in the new year -- and to tie the knot in a small ceremony in Central Park, one day before Rich’s 60th (and my 40th, for those keeping track).

For now, Rich and Greg work on designing their home office. From there, he will, without a doubt, continue to create and inspire -- with his two dogs,



Bandit and Finn at his side. He and Greg will soon begin searching for a location where they can continue to provide a setting for those in Colorado Springs to find beautiful things for their home.

“It might be more of a pop-up space, but we’re not done with providing an ‘open for the public’ venue to share with those in our community,” says Rich.

For the past 35 years, Rich’s passion and interest have been all things interior designs -- everything from art and antiques to gardening. His life has evolved, but he has never wavered from his desire for creating artistry.

Maybe that’s what I saw in Rich the day I met him on that flight to Atlanta. A passion for beauty. The simple elegance in a tweed jacket and polished shoes. And the more complicated beauty of a friendship

Rich and Greg will continue their friendship with Colorado Springs. Even though they can’t say exactly what it will look like, the two will continue to bring elegance and style into this world. By merely existing in it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To keep up with the beauty Rich and Greg will continue to create, be sure to follow them on Instagram at @RichSchell and @ISawItFirst.

Brandy Lovelace is a writer in Colorado Springs. You can learn more about her, and read her work, at brandylovelace.com

