

> FABULOUS BABES



BY DUSTIN SMITH | PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATTHEW GUILLORY

You know Denise Korn. She's part of the reason you eat where you eat, sleep where you sleep and shop where you shop. She entertains your eyes, tames your sense of style and impacts how you interact with the city of Boston. And chances are, you don't even know it. Until now.

Meet graphic designer Denise Korn, founder and principle of Korn Design and master of all things aesthetic. This issue's fabulous babe works the city's leading developers, hoteliers, chefs, and retail leaders to set the look and feel, even the entire character, of a brand. In a world of endless marketing hype and non-stop demand for the attention of your senses Denise helps map the ways people interact with products and places, creating an experience that is as powerful as the item they are purchasing, be it food, accommodations, or something to put on a shelf.

I met Denise in her office/studio, a small space tucked inside a townhouse on a quiet street in the St. Botolph area of Boston's Back Bay. A former stained-glass manufacturing space, the exterior—a pseudo-chalet

motif—masks the boutique-style dwelling inside. I'm a few minutes early, and she answers the door talking on her cell phone and asking for a few more moments. I'm happy to oblige, as it affords me the opportunity to observe her creative space. It is understated, but to the point—much like Denise and her work. With a history of writing, photography, design, and a passion for the arts and the non profit world behind her, Denise uses her experiences to speak the multiple languages of her clients. In Boston alone, she has worked with the Celebrity Series, the Charles Hotel, and the restaurants Flux and Summer Shack. Korn has also worked with a bevy of nonprofits in the city, ranging from the Pine Street Inn and Rosie's Place to powerhouses like MIT and Harvard University. In fact, the work Korn Design did for the MIT capital campaign, which happened to launch right before September 11th, ended up becoming one of the most successful capital campaigns in the area.

While most of her firm's clientele fall into the entertainment and lifestyle realm, I found quickly that Denise's affiliations with non profits fuel much of her passion. She explains



Denise poses in her MINI Cooper for Scene Boston

that they complement each other well—the same people who invest in MIT are often the same people who eat in a restaurant or sleep in a hotel branded by Korn Design. Denise strives to understand her clients, their behavior, passions and commitment to the community.

Korn has a very clear goal: to increase the value on both the consumer side and on the non profit side by using a clear, strategic marketing approach to tell a client's "story." Denise sums it up in her own words. "We work with lots of different hospitality companies and with developers and owner to bring their vision or ideas to life. That touches upon everything from their visual identity and brand positioning, extending all the way through to the guest experience."

From Lawrence Academy to the hectic streets of New York City, across the world and back to Boston, Denise culls together a life's worth of experiences to create some of the most inspiring and flat-out-fun branding exercises ever seen. And she does all of this while married to Ari Nachmanoff, a principle of his

own company, Green Capital, as well as raising their two children, Malcolm (10) and Lucy (8), in a South End brownstone she renovated and re-designed.

We chat about a wide range of topics: her work, family, commitments to the community and the tenuous balance of a busy private and professional life. Join me as we explore this month's fabulous babe, the talented Denise Korn.

Dustin Smith: So you're a Boston native?

Denise Korn: I was born in Boston. My father is first generation Hungarian and grew up in Chelsea, but I grew up near Groton. I knew early on that I wanted to go to New York, to pursue what I thought was going to be photography and fine arts but I ended up more on the design side of things.

DS: Did you go to college here?

DK: No, I studied at Cornell. I was in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning and got a degree in photography. I spent my junior year at Parson's [School of Design] in an intensive photography program there, and I ended up working at a lot of magazines in the city, doing picture editing, art direction and photography—linking the commercial world to my photography degree. When I graduated from Cornell I went right back to New York to work at The New York Times. My photography migrated into editorial design pretty quickly; I worked in editorial design both at the Times and at the Boston Globe, when I was back in Boston for one summer.

DS: What brought you back to Boston?

DK: I went to Australia for two years in the middle of all of this to work for a publishing company and as a journalist and a photographer for Australian Airlines. I was also a staff photographer for the Melbourne Herald. I just did my thing, and found really amazing freelance assignments for two years. I returned to New York for another couple of years after Australia and then got engaged to Ari. He's a

New Yorker, and I thought "Great! I'm marrying a New Yorker; we're in New York, we have these great jobs. Everything is great." And then he got recruited up to Boston to start a company. I never thought we'd move to Boston, but of course, my family was thrilled. We moved back in 1991, and Ari started a clean power energy consultancy and I started Korn Design.

DS: What was your goal with the company?

DK: To save the world (she laughs). It was the pit of the recession. I received lots of job offers here in Boston with no staff and no money, and I thought hmm...I can do this really well on my own. So I started my own thing. My business partner is Javier Cortes—he began as my intern, and now he's a partner in the firm. We just took on another partner in New York, and she's spearheading our fashion and retail aspects of the business.

DS: Pick a favorite project and explain the process from contact to execution.

DK: Great Bay is a good example. We worked with Christopher Myers and Michael Schlow—they had a very very clear vision for the space. Elkus Manfredi was the architect and interior designer, and we were a really good tri-part kind of team. They have a great vision on food, and Korn Design helped them bring it all together. We developed custom uniforms and the uniforming presentation; we did all the menus, the press kit...all of the signage is really integrated throughout the space.

We created a visual system that works, so now they can carry that through all of their external planning and marketing for the restaurant. It's become a part of the experience as opposed to something that was just stuck on at the end.

DS: All your projects are very different from each other. They each have a unique style.

DK: (nodding) Well, working with Christopher and Michael is a little different than working at MIT, for example. The personalities and the culture of the institutions are totally different.

DS: Tell me more about your philosophy around design. What jumps out to you?

DK: I really am drawn by passion and energy and new ideas. It's not just to make something look "cool." We try to puncture holes in all the preconceived ideas about what the client is trying to do and to think about the best way to deliver their message—the best way to package it—the best way to say "it."

DS: How do you mine different aspects of your experience in the industry in order to bring them to the table?

DK: Those who are here feel very committed to the community. You walk into MIT and you just feel like the people there are solving the problems of the universe, and you feel really good about doing everything you can to support these missions. So whether we're working with Rosie's Place or we're selling cashmere sweaters, we try to get under the skin of what the mission is, and then design needs to be true to that.

DS: I know you are passionate about your non profit work. Tell me more about that.

DK: I sat on the board for AIGA (Professional Association for Design) Boston for many years and created a whole channel for New England that's called Business Outreach—it's all about the liaison between design and business. I rolled off that board last year to become a co-chair of the Creative Economy Council, which is a New England-wide council of business and arts leaders. I'm really excited about awareness around New England for what's going on in the creative sector and the impact the creative economy has on New England. It's a very powerful story.

We did this piece for Rosie's Place that was really exciting. They have a women's craft collaborative, where the residents actually produce these beautiful crafts and sell them to fund the shelter. We helped them launch a print catalog and got Francine Zaslou, an amazing photographer, to shoot all the products and Susy Pilgrim-Waters to do the

illustrations—all donated. They now use the catalogue to sell their products nationally. It's actually driven business and awareness to the shelter. I also sit on the board of Kids Can Cook.

DS: Tell me more about Kids Can Cook.

DK: It rocks. Kids Can Cook is an after-school program started by Dan Mathieu and Donna Montgomery. I was the third person that worked with them to start it. It's for middle school kids and is an after-school cooking program where they use cooking and culinary arts to teach life lessons. We just hired a director last year and built our commissary. (To find out more about Kids Can Cook, check out the May/June issue of Scene in our profile of Dan Mathieu, the program's founder.)

DS: How do you split your time between the for profit and non profit?

DK: We really simplified all of the volunteer stuff. Just last year, Javier and I decided to focus our energy, so we're doing all of the work for Kids Can Cook...we do their branding and their website. We feel that if we can focus, we can make a bigger impact than if we're spread thin everywhere.

DS: How do you find the balance between work and family?

DK: The balance can be tough because it's a deadline-driven business. The kids are great, they're a little older and they're excited for what I'm doing. I take them with me when I can—we go to New York a lot together. I'm not going to lie, it's not easy, but the family and the kids come first. My husband is really hands-on with the family so we tend to tag team. We try not to be away at the same time, and we don't have non-stop nannies. We have dinner as a family together every night when there's not baseball, and I feel like a lot of good happens around the dinner table...that's part of what Kids Can Cook is all about. And we drive the kids to school...you just have to try to have the things you feel are really important.

DS: In your opinion, what are some of the most beautiful places in Boston?

DK: Well, I love the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum. The Esplanade—I run on the river four or five times a week. I love the Cyclo-rama. I think there are some amazing new boutiques that opened in the South End and on Newbury Street. They are giving me hope that we can attract that new kind of edgy funkiness. I love when my son plays baseball in the North End, looking out over the Constitution...

DS: What do you do for cultural inspiration?

DK: I'm a huge fan of the Boston Ballet. The new theater in the South End is amazing. We do all that when we have time, and I wish we did more. And I love movies. When we get a date night, we do the movies.

We conclude our interview by taking a tour of her studio space. It's like a New York City loft transplanted—exposed brick, large industrial windows, open working spaces. She points out some current works in progress, and I comment on the diversity of the clients and their individual needs. She replies that sometimes clients come to Korn not fully knowing what they need, just that they need their help.

The studio is a three-dimensional illustration of how Denise Korn is always on the lookout for ways to stay ahead of the curve, in work, social responsibility, and personal fulfillment. She exhibits a common theme for many of Boston's fabulous babes: "Women here in Boston can live this kind of sophisticated, engaged life while raising a family." And then Denise pauses, cocks her head and with a brilliant smile says, "You know, it's not only doable, it's actually very doable."

