

by Matthew Porter

# Kuhlmann Leavitt

The comment was accurate: a player on the national design scene for more than a decade, Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt had a good reputation but no broad name recognition outside her own circle of friends and clients. This was due to a variety of reasons, not the least of which being her own reluctance to toot her own horn—even over drinks in a bar with friends.

The Kuhlmann Leavitt, Inc. (KLI) story, then, is not so much about the sophistication and quality of the work (that has long been established), but about why a woman who has filled annuals and award shelves for many years has been so invisible to the industry. And it is a story about how loyalty, dedication, patience and kindness can be, in time, rewarded, even in today's me-first, kiss-my-ass world.

Before revisiting the past any further, a look at KLI today shows us where this is heading. The firm is situated in the business district of Clayton, Missouri, the seat of St. Louis County. It is a bustling place with ample street life, fine restaurants and upscale chains side-by-side locally-owned gown shops, tailors, florists and gift shops. It has a scale, tidiness and charm that reminds you of the place where Ward Cleaver went everyday after corn flakes, white toast and a quick peck from June.

A few years ago, Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt sat in a New York City bar and relaxed with some new friends who had been co-judges at a design competition. One of the judges had enjoyed a few and decided to offer her perspective on Kuhlmann-Leavitt's standing in American design. "You know Deanna," she said, "I think you are the most underrated designer in America."

The KLI office is a tasteful, understated affair, a story above street-level. The 2,500-square-foot studio is open plan, filled with natural light, dressed in quiet gray, white and black hues. Soft screens divide space. On this morning, staff members sit behind perfectly matching titanium Macs, tap-tapping away, dressed in coordinated tones of gray and black slacks and sweaters. This is not a place where you'll hear The Flaming Lips or White Stripes peeling the paint off the wall, nor a place where you might see giant gumball machines, tapped kegs, skateboards, free-running ferrets or hemp shirts. Here, you'll discover great things getting done for companies such as CitiGroup Private Bank, Formica Corporation, Smart Papers, Ameristar Casinos, Eddie Bauer, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and many others. Here you'll find clients and staff who like to stay put.

## The whole ball of wax

Deanna Kuhlmann grew up in St. Louis among a family of six with deep Midwestern roots. The Kuhlmanns prized hard work and education: they were of the kind who did it themselves but expected to help those who could not. After finishing night school while Deanna was still a child, her father took an engineering degree and co-founded an engineering

Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt, design director on all the projects, provided the caption information.

Right: "The Forum for Contemporary Art in St. Louis had come of age and needed an identity to match. KLI served on the advisory board to develop the new name: **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis**. KLI then took the new name and designed and implemented a

program for business papers, exhibition and membership materials, in-museum retail and architectural signage. The new identity reflects their commitment to accessibility, community and emerging contemporary art. The design resolves itself in typographic exquisiteness and proportional exactness. Architectural signage complements the space and plays out in thoughtful, discreet sign locations. A delicate

balance of functionality, seamless with architecture, without distracting from the exhibitions was the essence of the minimal solution. The museum shop, MUSE, and the café, TEMPT, create viable, exciting destinations that enhance the Museum's sense of place and in time, their bottom line." Deborah Beckett/Monica King Goldsbury/Michael Thede, designers; Will Sillman/The Designery, fabricators.



© Michael Jacob

© Elyn Marton

## Kuhlmann Leavitt

and architectural firm that specialized in suburban commercial space. Over the years, through hard work and client satisfaction, the firm grew very successful. Early on, Deanna helped around the office, running the blueprint machine, cleaning the office, filing, whatever she could do to make herself useful and earn pocket money. There, she also learned how a business was run, an education she'd apply much later.

After beginning college at Washington University in St. Louis, Deanna decided she wanted to pursue her interest in design. It was in high school where she first exhibited the potential for the design business. Mrs. (Lauren) Davis, now retired but a legend among many working designers and artists who went to Parkway Central High School in St. Louis, was Kuhlmann's art teacher for three years. She knew back then that Kuhlmann had the ability to become a graphic artist. "I knew talent when I saw it," she explains in a rapid-fire cadence that suggests a skilled and inexhaustible advocate. "And Deanna *had* it; the flair, the skills, the confidence, the charm, *the whole ball of wax*. Every year, it seemed, I had to save at least one talented kid among my students from the horror of running the family dry cleaning business. Deanna was that kind of kid. Not only was she a talented artist, but you could tell she had a sound business head, too."

Having already been accepted at Rhode Island School of Design, Deanna instead opted for Art Center, at Mrs. Davis's suggestion. She entered the school in 1987, leaving behind a supportive but skeptical father, who kept sending law and architecture school brochures just in case she changed her mind. "I think he only quit after I moved back to St. Louis," says Kuhlmann with a smile. At Art Center, Kuhlmann shined bright, even amidst the glossy talent that went there. Says illustrator Joel Nakamura, one instructor then, "Even as a



© Mark Kazman

student, Deanna was radiant, like a light in a dark room that attracts people to it. She had an easy confidence, but was never cocky; people wanted to be around her. And her charisma was evenly matched by great work and an ability to do virtually anything asked."

### Paid interns

To support herself in school, Deanna took part-time work hand-lettering signs for Jurgensen's, a local upscale

grocer. What she needed was experience in a real design firm. Hearing of an internship program with Morava & Oliver Design Office in Santa Monica, she applied. After reviewing her work, Doug Oliver offered her a paid internship. Naïve, precocious, fearful, or all of the above, 21-year-old Deanna Kuhlmann told the design star Doug Oliver that she'd "think it over," a story he told with amusement and relish for years.

The "little girl" who made Oliver wait ended up working for him for fourteen years at the firm producing award-winning, attention-grabbing design and, for her age, an amazing comfort level with clients and vendors. The relationship brought great benefit to mentor and protégé, both financially and professionally. "Simply put, I would not be here today without the opportunities Doug gave me when I was so young," she says. As she had at Art Center, Kuhlmann stood out in the design-rich world of Los Angeles. Photographer and friend Everard Williams, Jr. was a classmate of Kuhlmann's at Art Center whose career benefited early when Kuhlmann hired him for a Gilbert Papers promotion. Williams explains: "When the Gilbert piece came along, I was doing these photos of people cutting bizarre designs into their hair. I showed them to Deanna and we brainstormed on how to use that effect in other ways. I tried projecting images onto heads and other body parts, then did a test, and, boom! Deanna loved what was happening. No one was doing that projection stuff then. No one. It was way out there—but she

Right: "The **4,000 square-foot exhibit** emphasizes the naturalistic appearance of **Formica Corporation's** wood, stone and tile laminate flooring. Narrow, sheer fabric banners with tree and rock images stretched 26' high. The banner forest created layers of semi-transparent dividers defining and directing traffic. A flower bed displayed non-flooring Formica products, 445 samples were affixed to

stems and planted in a gravel covered bed. A flat screen presenting video rested on natural tree stump tables. Antique furniture was upholstered in dye-sublimated fabric with nature imagery. An eight-foot diameter 'moon' glowed overhead. Flooring collections were featured on product paddlewheels rotating and reading from either direction. A conference room and four vignettes were constructed of

simple wood slats combined with frosted, ribbed-plastic multi-wall material conjuring a contemporary notion of a forest cabin, while highlighting a multitude of product. Built structures were made of light, durable and economical materials." Deborah Beckett/Monica King Goldsbury, designers; Scott Dorrance/Gary Faye/Nicholas Pavloff, photographers.



## Kuhlmann Leavitt

championed it and convinced the client to do it—and she was only 24. She’s done that her whole career.”

After nine years working with Oliver in California, Kuhlmann felt the lure of home or more accurately, the lure of Rob Leavitt, her high-school sweetheart and long-distance significant other for the nine years she had been in L.A. Shrewdly, Oliver realized Kuhlmann needed to go home and so facilitated the transition by asking her to open an office for him in St. Louis where he could better service his client Mead Paper of Dayton, Ohio. Oliver’s decision was a win-win-win for everyone concerned. In 1995, Douglas Oliver Design Office opened a St. Louis location, with Deanna Kuhlmann at its helm. In 1996, Kuhlmann married Rob Leavitt. By 1997, the firm changed its name to Oliver Kuhlmann.

Beginning with Mead as its principal client, Kuhlmann-Leavitt slowly grew the business. By 1998, Mead remained the largest client, but no longer occupied the majority of the St. Louis office revenue. The office was very profitable. In 1999, Deanna met Deborah Beckett, the director of graphics at HOK Architects’s St. Louis office. After eighteen years at HOK, Beckett was ready for a change, but did not want the responsibility of operating her own design firm. “From the beginning of our relationship,” explains Kuhlmann, “Deborah was a constant source of affirmation and reinforcement; she had, in essence, the form, the materials and the experience I needed to help push me and my firm to a new level.” For Beckett, Deanna offered a sophisticated and successful design firm to park her talents. For Deanna, Beckett offered a new design discipline with a wide list of contacts to build upon. But Beckett offered her still more: she helped Deanna realize that her untapped reservoirs of talent even exceeded the vast evidence of potential she had already demonstrated.

### Flying solo

Deanna ended her long business relationship with Doug Oliver in June of 2001. With her staff and clients behind her, she signed a lease on a space above a sub shop a quarter-mile from her former office. While it was not a great time to

launch a new business, as the economy was rapidly heading south, Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt’s fortunes have been heading up ever since. Business is thriving and they’ve opened up a second office in Chicago. Husband Rob Leavitt assumes all responsibilities for managing the firm’s assets and investments while splitting his time at home, two miles away, managing the family’s newest and biggest asset: two-year-old Robby.

That it took so much time to get to this place is of little concern to Deanna. At 37, she looks back on the past without regret or nostalgia. “I made my move when it was appropriate for me. The biggest difference between me then and now is that I am more decisive, efficient and prepared to trust those around me. Their success is my success; I must make them feel valued and independent or we all lose.”

“They” are employees such as Monica King Goldsbury, a print designer transformed by 3-D design under the tutelage of Deborah Beckett. And Mimi Dorsey, new business associate, office manager and mother of newborn twins or Megan Boyer, who job-shares with Mimi so that she can care for those new twins. Also recent hires like Tom Twellman, fresh out of design school, six months on the job. And Emily Pratzel, design student at Washington University—former student of Parkway Central’s Mrs. Davis—who has been a paid intern at KLI for almost two years.

As for the insightful Mrs. Davis, her assessment of Deanna’s rise to prominence is an appropriate close: “I’ve often said,” she says again, “No one ever got rich doing something they hated. There is nothing, *nothing*, lost by allowing a youngster to pursue their dream—at least until they turn 40, by which time they should have done something with their talent or gotten a paying job. Deanna Kuhlmann was a talented young girl who realized her dream of becoming a successful design professional.”

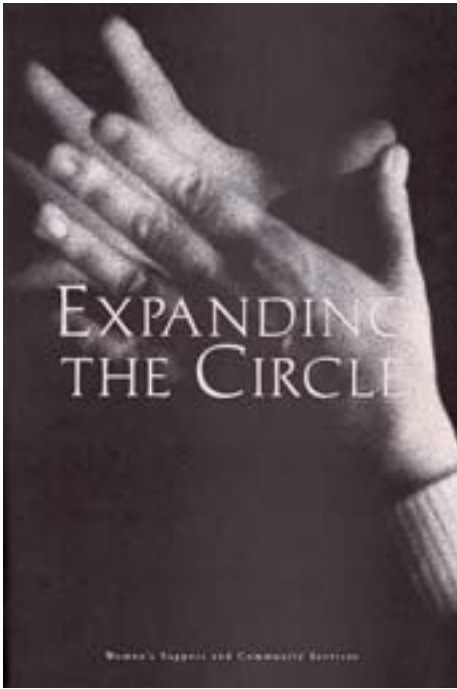
At Kuhlmann Leavitt, Inc., life is rich because they are doing what they love. Is there a better measure of success than that? **CA**

Right: “**Women’s Support and Community Services** offers St. Louis battered women a crisis hotline and vital counseling. It also educates the region’s teens about the dangers of domestic abuse and date rape. To carry out this important work, Women’s Support embarked on a capital campaign to fund expanded programming, a move to a larger facility and additional staff. KLI helped them make their case. The unexpected oversized format lays out the domestic violence problem in our nation, state and region using statistics and quoting respected news sources. It features full-bleed black-and-white infrared

portraits of survivors, counselors and students along with their stories. It talks about the important services they were providing and what they could do with increased funding. Finally, it asks the reader to join in expanding the circle of hope through donation. The campaign ended ahead of schedule beyond its financial goal.” Monica King Goldsbury/Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt, designers; Gregg Goldman, photographer.

“**The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis** provides interest-free student loans to students in need throughout the St. Louis region. Their

annual report both documents the year’s accomplishments and gives them a chance to share recipient stories with the Foundation’s educated and discerning donors. The design delivers the information in an evocative and responsible way. The large self-mailing format, black-and-white portraits, lineal illustrations, clean typography, 2-color printing and lightweight newsprint work together to satisfy the reader’s eye and expectation for thrift.” Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt/Kathy Miller, designers; Gregg Goldman, photographer.







© Elyn Marton

Left: “The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) is the frontline law firm for low-income Los Angeles residents. Since 1929 LAFLA has been committed to promoting access to justice, strengthening communities, combating discrimination and effecting systematic change through representation, advocacy and community education. For twelve consecutive years, KLI has designed LAFLA’s annual report. The goal has been to build upon the rich tradition of visual identity and unique presentation to deliver a powerful fund-raising document. Each report focuses on individuals who benefited from LAFLA’s services during the year. The 1999 report features dreamy imagery, using reflection to visually meld the client with their LAFLA advocate, thus communicating LAFLA’s deep commitment to each case and their overall mission. The typography skips across the spreads offering variety and clarity to the reader. The self-mailing format is both interesting and economical.” Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt/Michael Thede, designers; Anita Bennett, writer; Everard Williams, Jr., photographer.

This page: “For Ameristar Casinos, Inc., 2002 was an important year, and the annual report needed to deliver that message loud and clear to their shareholders, analysts, employees and communities. They were number one in each of their five markets. KLI embraced that number-one status and featured it at every turn. The eight-page lenticular cover wrap has four ‘lenses’, each lens is a different photo of a number one found in the casino—roulette, keno, slot and black jack. The result is a constant flutter between the four images compelling the reader to pick it up and play. The interior is a cinematic presentation of color architecture and food shots, black-and-white portraits and graphic color detailed shots. The typography is clear, classic and complementary. The text and cover papers shift dramatically from soft, uncoated and tactile to rich, super glossy then back to soft and tactile.” Monica King Goldsbury/Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt, designers; Penny Benda, writer; Gregg Goldman, photographer.







© Gregg Goldman



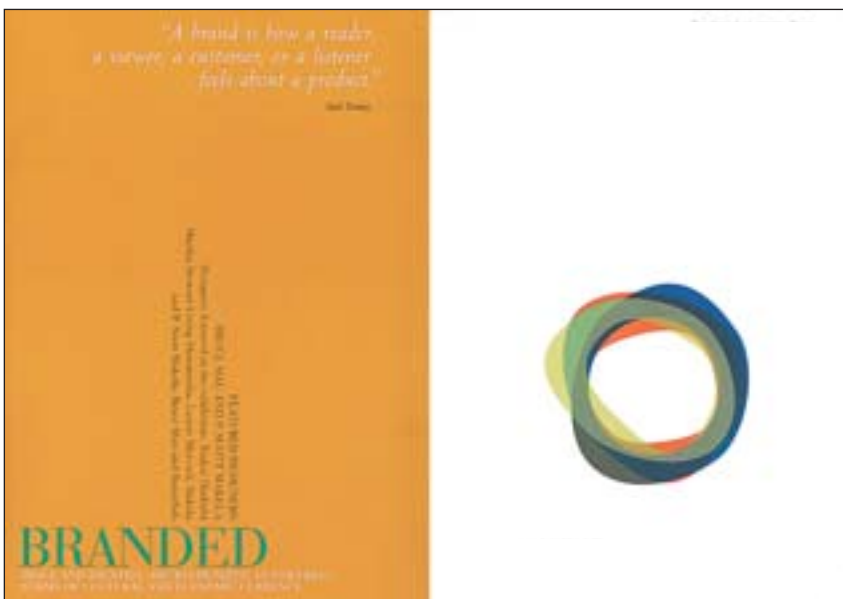
© Gregg Goldman



Left: "The **donor wall** conceptually communicates the essence of the organization and displays the multiple donor levels in a permanent installation. The exterior wall adds interest to an architecturally plain building and attracts attention to the organization's principles. Annually, Women's Support brings a national quilt show to St. Louis. Building on this equity and utilizing its pertinent symbolism, KLI developed a quilt representing the offering of protection, comfort and community to women in need. The finished quilt, 6' 6" square, is suspended near the building's main entry. It is comprised of timeless, durable metals: a brushed stainless steel grid or 'stitching' supports bronze plaques with eight different patinas and eight stainless steel mesh patterns that form the 'patchwork fabric.' Donor names are engraved into the patchwork pieces with patina colors differentiating donation levels. Some materials and services were donated helping this nonprofit achieve a meaningful and distinctive presence in the city." Deborah Beckett/Kathy Miller, designers; Star Sign & Graphics/Bresnahans/GKD Metal Fabrics, fabricators.



"**Eddie Bauer** launched a new line of outdoor gear in Target stores nationwide. The consumers for these sleeping bags, tents, backpacks, etc., are predominantly families that enjoy day hikes or car camping. KLI developed a comprehensive color, naming, fabric design and packaging program. The color palette consisted of two neutrals (asphalt and stainless), four essentials (clay, sand, ice and land) and three accents (lake, leaf and light). Inspired by the paths that travelers take, the colors selected work collectively, in smaller groups and individually. The contemporary yet classic palette supplied fresh multi-way combinations for fabrics, product hardware, graphics and packaging. In-store, the packaging with striking black-and-white nature images, functional color coding, simple product naming and descriptions and clear product photography creates a compelling billboard that lures consumers." Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt/Michael Thede/Deborah Beckett/Monica King Goldsbury, designers; Chip Forelli, photographer.



This page: "Mead Coated Papers with their premium coated paper Prima was a major sponsor of the **Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum's Design Triennial**. To promote the exhibition and sponsorship, KLI designed a compact commemorative book accompanied by eight postcards all housed in a transparent pouch. The book is divided into eight parts, each highlighting a section of the exhibit, showcasing exhibit artifacts. The postcards give the recipient a chance to help spread the word. Both components demonstrate Prima's superb printing capabilities and folding characteristics while providing an exhibition keepsake." Deanna Kuhlmann-Leavitt/Kathy Miller, designers; Penny Benda, writer.