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A Q&A with Jeff Devlin

From DIY Network's "I Hate My Bath" ▶▶





A Renaissance in Renovation

If you hate your bath or need to spice up your kitchen, Jeff Devlin's your renaissance man. *By Annette Gray*



He arrived at the evening gala, hosted by the NKBA, accompanied by an HGTV executive and another TV personality, host of I Hate my Kitchen, James Young, who was dressed impeccably in a suit complete with vest. He wore appropriately faded jeans, a plaid shirt, with another layered beneath, and work boots bearing a patina that could only have been achieved with a consistent rub of drywall powder and sawdust. He appeared to be entirely comfortable socializing with ladies in sequined dress and men in tuxes, and they appeared not to care or notice. It seemed accepted, as if, well yes, "What else would a carpenter wear?"

This particular carpenter happens to be Jeff Devlin, carpenter and host/television personality appearing on numerous HGTV and DIY network hits. His home-centric line-up of shows includes: DIY Network's Good, Better....Best; I Hate my Bath, and Hot Lists: Baths, filmed at KBIS, along with HGTV's 10 Ultimate Kitchens, Spice up my Kitchen, 25 Biggest Decorating Mistakes, and Drill Team on A&E. You can also spot him on the HGTV hit Design Star.

NKBA: Where did you grow up? **JD:** I grew up in Bucks County, which is where I still live today.

NKBA: And how did you first find your way into remodeling and carpentry? **JD:** I basically started as a housepainter when I was about 15 years old. I was helping my brother, and the approach was like, here's a brush, let's see what you can do, and if you don't destroy anything, then here's a hammer and then maybe a drill.

NKBA: Did you receive any formal training at that point? **JD:** Education really wasn't where my head was at, after high school. My parents really wanted me to go to college and I really wanted to go to a college where I could learn about skiing. I was interested mostly in sports. I was sort of this aimless child, but I found solace in building things.

NKBA: Where did the historic restoration aspect come into place for you? **JD:** Someone needed a painter, and I got this job working on an historic house. The renovators were a couple and they wanted to make the house like it had been before, in its time. And I really believe you learn on-the-job, the first time around. You learn by screwing up. But they started to instill in me an excitement for quality and craftsmanship, where you begin to understand that what you give the project is what you get back. That's what kept me going. I began to see that even though it took me three times as long, it was the right way, it



was true craftsmanship. Teaching me to slow down is what really began instilling passion in me. It's really a creative sport, contracting. You take what's in the homeowner's head and what's in your own head, and turn it into something they can live in and live with.

NKBA: Would you credit this couple as being your mentors? **JD:** Oh definitely, it wasn't until I met Bill and Tammy and they explained, "This is how you hold a brush and this is why you do it this way," that I came to understand that there was a pay-off. ►►

They were there pushing me a little in the back. They took so much extra time to give me that nudge to do things better. They would say, "Are you sure you want to leave it like that? Take as long as you need." My Dad always said, "Surround yourself with good people." And for whatever reason, I just got lucky. I get so excited thinking back to that time. First I was lugging bricks, but then I was setting bricks and I was like, what's next? I was driven by nothing else before that.

Bucks County; an historic area of Pennsylvania founded by William Penn in 1682, and named after the Penn family home in England, called Buckinghamshire seems to have provided just the backdrop for a future craftsman and carpenter. It appears no wonder that Devlin developed an eye for detail and a talent for putting hand to task in historical restoration and woodworking. Such notable influences as Fonthill Castle, home of Henry Chapman Mercer, a structure he built entirely from concrete; Pennsbury Manor, a 17th century country estate situated on a 43-acre plantation; Andalusia, a prominent example of Greek Revival architecture in America, and the former home of Pearl S. Buck, Pulitzer award-winning author for her novel, *The Good Earth*, and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, are situated within the relatively compact and scenic 608 square miles that borders the Delaware River.

NKBA: How did you go from a kid growing up in Bucks County to a licensed contractor, owner of Schoolhouse Woodworking, and host of multiple television hits on DIY and HGTV?

JD: I had been doing construction, and I was tired of doing it for other people. I had the inspiration, but it was tough to get the homeowners to share my vision. I was also not a very good at the business aspect. Television was a complete fluke. I never wanted to be on-camera at this point. I actually began behind the camera. I had a friend who gave me an opportunity. I operated the camera at music events and sporting events. I got a gig with CNN covering the Olympic trials. They needed someone to lug equipment to the top of a mountain, and so I was doing that, and I was operating the camera. For six months, I traveled to every ski resort in the Western States, and I was like, I'm getting paid for this? And then the snow would be too deep, and we would get the day off, and just go skiing. It was kind of amazing! All the while, I was still doing some of the construction jobs, when I could fit it in.

NKBA: And so how did you foray from behind the camera to on-camera? **JD:** 8 months into the renovation of my second home, a friend of mine stopped by, and saw me working on the house, and he actually had realized the extent of my experi-

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ences in construction. So he came back the next day with his camera, and asked if he could just shoot while I was working, and so they rolled tape and shot this video. He wouldn't give it to me, and I've still never seen it to this day. But I'm sure it was pretty embarrassing. I was drinking coffee and just talking and working. He sent the tape to Nancy Glass Productions, who was doing this show for HGTV, and two weeks later, I was at this audition where I was told they had decided I would be the carpenter and they were looking for another cast member. It was only a month from the time the tape was sent in to when we began shooting.

NKBA: Did your experience behind the camera help you to adjust to being on-camera? **JD:** I knew the camera side of it and I knew the construction side of it. The on-air aspect was new, it made me nervous. The first day of shooting was a blast and I was like this is easy! The second day, I made a mistake in cutting a laminate countertop. I can't describe it, you want to be great at what you do, you want to be the best, and you don't want to show your faults. And you know that everyone is working and maybe they have their kid's birthday party at the end of the day, so you don't want to be the thing that holds people up. If you appreciate everybody's job on-set, it makes it easier. Even though you've operated the camera, as the on-air personality you might forget and turn your back on the camera.

NKBA: You recently became an NKBA member and started down the path of becoming certified. What made you want to focus on education? **JD:** You gain a different perspective, the older you become. You see how the world spins. If you're sitting in a room with eight people having a conversation and you're left out of the discussion, because you lack some bit of know- ▶▶



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ledge and now imagine going on TV, talking about design and how things work together, without having the most amount of information that you can fill your head with. I see the benefit of it now. If I had seen the benefit of education at 17, I think things may have gone differently. The more information and knowledge you can fit into your head, the better off you’re going to be. It does translate, it will somehow, somewhere translate into financial gain, somewhere down the line. Simply reading, learning and acquiring knowledge, if you can turn that into money and be better at your craft, why wouldn’t you do that?

NKBA: When did you make the decision to be certified by the NKBA? **JD:** While I was filming a show at KBIS 2011, I was walking by the NKBA Booth and I said, “I’m doing this, I’m going to do it!” And then someone pulled me away and I got distracted. I had a conversation with someone in the Booth and I took a business card, but then I never got back to it. In 2012, I was committed to moving forward with it. I was working myself up for a month before. When you keep having questions, and asking, “Why does this cabinet deserve to be there?” And when you stare at yourself in the mirror and say, why aren’t I doing this, why don’t I find out the answers? I’d been complacent. So, at 2012, I went to the Booth and I had James Young (Host of I Hate My Kitchen) with me. And he was interested in becoming certified also. So that made it easy, it’s like having a work-out buddy, only you don’t have to wear crazy colored spandex!

NKBA: Are the projects that we see on TV the real deal? Some feel they’re smoke and mirrors and not legitimate design projects. **JD:** We’re not magicians, what you see is what you get. We do have a contractor on the side, waiting to jump in and help if needed. And of course when they offer up the cost of the project, it’s not taking into consideration what my compensation would be as a contractor. There’s time lapse, when the camera

goes off and the camera guys go away, the project still has to be finished. You have to prioritize what’s going to appear on the show. I’d rather demonstrate how to paint, but I don’t think the viewer would want to watch paint dry. So there’s that aspect, but the work is real, and at the end of the day, the homeowner has to love it, or it’s not a success. The design is where it all starts, in any of this process; it’s about having a designer who also knows about the construction aspect. I come from the construction side and I’m now learning more about the design aspect.

Watch Jeff on the DIY Network, Tuesdays at 10:00 pm EST

> Filmed at KBIS 2012, Hot List: Baths Special

Premiere: Tuesday, Oct. 23 at 10 p.m. ET/PT

Host: Jeff Devlin, Licensed Contractor and Carpenter

Host Jeff Devlin explores the latest in bathroom innovation at the 2012 Kitchen & Bath Industry Show (KBIS) in Chicago. From auto lifting toilet seats to surround sound tubs, this convention showcases the latest style and technology in the bathroom. Jeff will take viewers on a backstage pass to see his “hot list” picks for the coolest designs and highest tech gadgets on the market.

> I Hate My Bath Episode 213: New House, New Bath

Aired: Tuesday, Oct. 16 at 10 p.m. ET/PT

Andrea & Mike made an agreement they wouldn’t even move in to their new home until making some improvements. First up is the small, dingy upstairs bathroom. Host and licensed contractor Jeff Devlin helps by ripping out the strange flower soffit lighting, decrepit 1960s vanity & the old white tile that covers the bath. He updates the space with modern double vanities, adds bright & easy to clean shower panels, all new top of the line sensor controlled fixtures and a custom-made fiber optic ceiling light turns the ceiling into ambient art. When he’s done with the space, these homeowners can’t wait to move in. **■**

