

HGTV's David Bromstad: Destined for Décor

The much-loved face of the cable giant went from hard times to 'design star' and is now regularly welcomed into style-starved homes across the country



In high school, **David Bromstad** and his sister fell in love with a French Country store in suburban Minneapolis called Billy Lilly. Now 42, as a kid he had grown up around design. His parents, a “very spiritual” couple that embody Minnesota nice, involved the kids whenever they painted their house, redid the floors or picked out wallpaper. “I grew up thinking that was normal,” he says.

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Always an imaginative kid, Bromstad knew he wanted to create, so he and his sibling painted flowerpots to sell at the store. “I loved French Country—the bric-a-brac, the roosters, the colors and patterns,” says Bromstad. This first foray into interior design made him certain he wanted to find a career in home décor. “I love being a part of someone’s home.”

That love of living spaces has carried Bromstad throughout his career—guiding him through a stint working for Disney, taking him near insolvency, eventually landing at the first season of HGTV’s *Design Star*, where he learned, on-air, how to rework his specialty—creating kids’ rooms—into a colorful and expressive take on modern design. The trial-by-fire of that reality TV competition series launched his spectacular career and ever-growing roster of TV shows, making Bromstad one of HGTV’s—cable television’s clear leader when it comes to home improvement, gardening and remodeling—most popular and visible stars.

Bromstad believes that Cokato—the Minneapolis suburb where he grew up—is where he learned to take risks. “We would be out all day, and our mom didn’t know where we were. It wasn’t like today,” he says.

The youngest of four, Bromstad was the “good kid,” learning from the mistakes and indiscretions of his older siblings. His parents also noticed his budding interest in design and encouraged his artistic side. They once gave him a font book for his birthday, which was, according to Bromstad, “the coolest thing in the world.”

By the time he graduated high school, Bromstad knew he wanted to work for Disney. He attended the Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida, a well-known recruiting location for the Mickey empire. After graduating, he went to work for the company. Bromstad landed in visual marketing, specializing in the sculptures that populate Disney’s various theme parks.

“You know those statues of Minnie and Mickey all around Main Street? My team used to make those, by hand,” Bromstad says. He was part of the last generation of designers that created intricate and detailed statues by hand before computers took over the hard work. “Everything we made had to be perfect,” he says, recalling Disney’s exacting standards and specific aesthetic.

After a few years, Bromstad was burned out. While he found the work fulfilling, it wasn't very creative. His moment of frustration also coincided with 9/11 and a downturn in park attendance, which, accompanied by the growing role computers played in fashioning art pieces, meant Bromstad's job was in jeopardy. A boss noticed the toll the work was taking on him, and suggested Bromstad work with an outside group to whom the parks outsourced design tasks. The change meant he would be given a wider variety of projects—murals, store windows and woodworking among them.

"I remember a designer asking me, 'Do you know how to do woodworking?' and of course I said, 'Yes, I can do that.' Which was a lie. I called my dad on the way home freaking out because I didn't know what I had gotten myself into, and he told me, 'Calm down, David. Just remember what I would do in the studio,'" says Bromstad. So he bought a jigsaw and soon picked up the craft. Wooden knick-knacks—small little ornaments that adorn different installations throughout the parks—became his specialty.



Still, Bromstad was working within the confines of Disney's design, and the restrictions again grew tiresome. Looking for a change, he teamed up with an old friend who designed model houses. This friend had no eye for children's quarters, but Bromstad's work at Disney meant he was uniquely suited to create fantasy rooms, complete with the sort of murals and whimsical touches that had become his specialty.

"I began fashioning headboards, painting walls, picking out bright, happy colors," says Bromstad, who loved the freedom a blank room provided. Since they were model homes, he could dream up a theme and bring it into reality. He soon found a niche, and began working with a rotation of designers in Florida.

The artistic fulfillment came at a cost, though, and Bromstad wasn't making enough money to get by. "I was on the brink of bankruptcy; I was barely paying my bills," he says.

One of the designers Bromstad had teamed up with suggested that he audition for a brand-new cable show, HGTV's *Design Star*. The series, which premiered in July 2006, would pit 10 designers against each other in head-to-head interior design challenges, with one designer sent packing each week, the prize being a personalized show on the network. Bromstad didn't know anything about HGTV or the show, as he couldn't afford cable, but still, the opportunity intrigued him, appealing to his competitive side. Soon enough, Bromstad was vying for the chance to host his very own show.



That first season of *Design Star* tested Bromstad's full capabilities. While he had previously dabbled in adult interior design—coordinating his rooms with other designers' overall aesthetic, having input on ideas like color schemes—he had never put together, say, a living room or a kitchen. Bromstad went into the show with limited experience and learned how to translate his intuition for color and his lively approach to children's furniture into something refined and striking. While tackling all-new territory, Bromstad dominated the competition, becoming a fan-favorite and a clear front-runner on the new show, taking home the big prize.

"My life changed 180 degrees, that's for certain," he says. Bromstad went from barely making a living to becoming one of the most visible personalities on the popular cable channel.

At first, Bromstad wanted to go back to his roots and create a show about children's design. The brass at HGTV, however, felt the idea was too limited—it didn't rate well. Unsure of what else he could tackle with confidence and experience, the network suggested he do a show about incorporating color into home design.

"I thought, well, I know the color wheel. I studied illustration in college. Yeah, I could do that," he says. Bromstad became HGTV's first openly gay host, and now, nine years after his debut stint on *Design Star*, he remains a mainstay of the network.



Bromstad's warm and friendly demeanor have made him an audience favorite, and *Color Splash with David Bromstad*, which debuted in March 2007, has been one of HGTV's most popular shows. His ability to take the helm—and learn along the way—has expanded his repertoire as a designer. “I've learned so much about color, about how it affects someone on a day-to-day basis,” says Bromstad. “You have to think, What does living in a blue world do to a person? How does color influence your mood? I've picked up so much.”

Bromstad has hosted *Color Splash* for nearly nine years—and debuted *Color Splash Miami* in 2010—eventually moving production from his home in south Florida to San Francisco. He has also continued to be involved with the show that started it all, acting as a mentor to *Design Star*'s sixth season contestants and actually taking over hosting duties for the series' most recent three seasons. In addition to those series, Bromstad guides homebuyers on the show *Beach Flip*, in which he renovates and spruces up coastal properties around the country.

As far as his favorite locales to work in—from the Gulf Coast to Northern California—Bromstad is truly happy anywhere. “Put me in a cabin in the middle of the woods, and I'll figure out what to do,” he says.

Bromstad is currently filming a new show called *My Lottery Dream House* that premiered back in March. Like an outsized version of *House Hunters*, in the new series he guides lottery winners through three properties and shows them just how luxurious their new life can be. “I have people saying, ‘How can I take care of a house this big?’” he says. “I tell them, ‘Well, you've won the lottery. You can afford this!’”

Bromstad finds strands of his own story in that of the lottery winners he's been working with. “*Design Star* was like winning the lottery,” he says. “Before that, I had nothing. My life has changed completely.”