

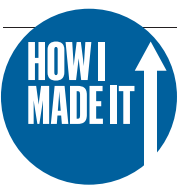


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## BUSINESS

# When I saw my nan's care home it became my mission to redesign them



KERRY SOUTHERN-REASON,  
FOUNDER OF CARE  
HOME INTERIORS



**Hannah Prevett**  
Deputy Editor  
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As an interior designer, Kerry Southern-Reason helped redesign the homes of celebrities and footballers, and partied with pop stars such as Lulu, Donny Osmond and members of the boyband Blue. She also acted as an adviser on television shows including *60 Minute Makeover* and *Britain's Ugliest Rooms*, and at one point had the use of a company helicopter to fly her to meetings.

But she left behind the glitz after her grandmother, Joan Stone, went into a care home in 2016. "It was the most disgusting place I'd ever seen and it was costing at least £1,400 a week," recalled Southern-Reason. "I remember walking in there and the nurse showing me the one room they had left, which was green. I said to her, 'My nan hates green.' The nurse said, 'It doesn't matter; she's got dementia.'"

The exchange galvanised Southern-Reason, 45, into action, and she now designs and refurbishes residential homes through her company Care Home Interiors, established in 2017. It's a neglected area in interior design but one that can have the most impact, she said.

Getting the design of a care home right has a huge influence on the quality of life for its residents. Southern-Reason cited one recent project: "When we went in, it had white walls, a red floor and blue furniture. That was it. The residents were climbing the walls. They were screaming and aggressive, it was horrible. So we turned it into a home ... and the screaming stopped. The whole atmosphere diffused."

Part of the challenge in her work is balancing the need for clinical functionality with

creating a comforting, homely atmosphere. That is all the more important for people with dementia, for whom a hospital-like environment can exacerbate feelings of confusion and fear, Southern-Reason explained.

Her team are involved right from the start of a project, alongside architects and mechanical engineers, with a new care home costing "between £15 million and £20 million" to build. "We'll do the ceiling layouts and then we have to talk to the [engineers] about the sprinklers – does it give the correct coverage if there's a fire? People think that interior design is just picking colours and fabrics, but it's not. It's so complicated in an environment like this."

Southern-Reason and her partners, husband William and manufacturing director Simon Martin, employ 45 staff at the company's Hampshire headquarters. Care home clients include Porthaven, Tanglewood, Macc Care and Coate Water Care. They contributed to sales of £3.5 million last year, which generated pre-tax profits of £270,000.

Most of its staff work in making the soft furnishings used, from cushions and curtains to upholstered furniture, with some larger items being sourced from overseas. The firm even makes "photo furnishings", where cushions, lamps and chair covers incorporate the photographs of loved ones and pets. It was an idea sparked by Southern-Reason's experience of living in a hospice with her mother, Penny, in her final weeks.

"When my mum was dying, she stared at the back of a chair for a week. I don't want someone's last memory to be of the back of a chair."

Her mother was the inspiration for the business in

more ways than one. A talented seamstress, Penny had made curtains when her daughter was little, to supplement the family's income to pay for school fees.

She had been sent to a private convent school in Hampshire after being "dreadfully unhappy" and "failing in the state system", largely as a result of hearing problems caused by bacterial meningitis as a child, along with undiagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia. To cover the fees, her parents worked seven days a week. Chris, her father, was a builder, and his parents ran market stalls selling fabrics – and Penny's curtains.

With money tight, their career advice to her was to be a solicitor or an accountant. "After that, your life's your own ... you always have something to fall back on," Southern-Reason recalled her mother telling her. So she duly trained and qualified as a chartered accountant, working for small practices while helping to care for her

**When Kerry Southern-Reason visited her grandmother's care home she remembers it as "the most disgusting place I'd ever seen"**

mother, who had endured bouts of cancer since before Southern-Reason was born.

Between chemotherapy treatments, Penny was keen to work, but she found it hard to get a job. So the family set up a firm making and fitting curtains, which grew to employ 20 people and turned over about £500,000 a year. Southern-Reason kept her accountancy job – until a chance meeting with Anthea Turner, the TV presenter, in the early 2000s put her life on a new trajectory.

Turner's then husband, Grant Bovey, asked if she would like to help him set up a company to furnish new-build homes as he expanded his buy-to-let property empire. For a while, life was good: she was rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous, living "in a world I never could have imagined". But the financial crisis in 2008 caused the property market to crumble – and with it, Bovey's businesses.

Southern-Reason started again by launching her own company, Vivid Living, in 2008, to sell furniture packs for buy-to-let apartments. She was also refurbishing celebrity homes and advising TV shows, but after nearly a decade she had her light-bulb moment about care homes and pivoted to work on them.

If she wasn't busy enough, Southern-Reason has also just invested £250,000 to open stables to help people suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and dementia through interactions with horses. Southern-Reason has two teenage children, both of whom are neurodiverse.

She said she is at her best when she's busy, partly because of her ADHD. "It's unhealthy for me to only have one thing to do. It's better for my business for me to have other things to think about."

## HIGH FIVE

**My hero ...** Kit Kemp, founder and creative director of Firmdale Hotels. I love what she's created with the hotels. When I go to one, I feel like a different person in a different world.

**My best decision ...** was starting a business to employ my mum and dad, and then they could retire in their 50s. They gave me everything, so it was the least I could do.

**My worst decision ...** is not looking after myself. I only sleep three hours a day; I'm constantly working.

**Funniest moment ...** I started a TikTok channel last year that grew to 17,500 followers. I'm now invited to events as an "influencer" and was signed up by a modelling agency. I've gone from a chief executive to a TikToker. It's hilarious.

**Best business tip ...** is to never give up. It's hard running a business, but if you keep trying, it does work out in the end.