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An Interview With
*Catherine
Purple Cherry*

A Day Away:
Hyatt Regency
Chesapeake Bay





Harness Creek residence designed
by Purple Cherry Architects

**YELLOWFIN STEAK AND FISH HOUSE
ARUNDEL LODGE | HOSPICE OF THE CHESAPEAKE
OPPORTUNITY BUILDERS | RIGHTTIME MEDICAL CARE
THE BIG FISH GRILLE | ABERDEEN CREEK
DUVALL CREEK | BAY RIDGE | MELVIN ROAD
HARNES CREEK**

The firm of *Purple Cherry Architects* in Annapolis, Maryland is the creative force behind some of the most iconic commercial buildings and luxurious private residences built in the Annapolis area since emboldened merchants transformed the harbor two centuries ago.

Cathy Purple Cherry founded her namesake firm in 1996, when she set up business in a corner of her small Davidsonville home. She had two small children, one recently adopted from Russia and another child on the way. She had no employees and no portfolio, but was driven by natural ambition and an innate desire to be useful.

In the twenty years since then, Purple Cherry has grown into a highly regarded studio with steadily increasing revenues and 13 employees. Recently the firm

broadened client services to include interior design and began an aggressive expansion into new regional and national markets.

Cathy Purple Cherry considers herself above all to be a woman of strong faith and an advocate for families. She and her firm are dedicated to community action, especially through Purposeful Architecture, the signature studio and consultancy that lies at the heart of their efforts to provide architectural and design solutions to buildings that serve children and adults with special needs.

GreenBook recently spoke with Cathy to learn more about her passions, her favorite projects and her future goals.

GB: TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU STARTED AND ABOUT THE ROOTS OF YOUR AESTHETIC.

CPC: I grew up in Falls Church, Virginia. My father was an aeronautical engineer and my mother had a deep passion for fine arts and performance. Often-times architects are strong in just one way of thinking—either the left-brain or the right. I have some of both. From my father I have a very mathematical, logical and strategic mind; from my mother I have an appreciation for color, texture, palette and design.

I went to college to study interior design at University of Colorado. I moved into architecture in my Junior year. Even now, I love the analytics, strategy and building process as much as I love design. Moving over was the perfect match for me. I finished at University of Maryland, College Park.

I come from a family with eight children. I have a brother with Downs Syndrome. I was raised in a home with a child with special needs and I adopted a child with multiple special needs. I am particularly driven to use much of what I learned as a sister and mother, a friend and advocate, in my work to improve the lives and opportunities available to people who live and learn and work differently.

GB: TELL US ABOUT THAT UNUSUAL NAME AND HOW YOU CAME TO ANNAPOLIS.

CPC: My maiden name is Purple. I met my husband, Michael Cherry, when I was in college. Even then I knew I would be entrepreneurial and I knew that Purple Cherry was a name people could remember and recognize.

I picked up my future husband in Ellicott City. I walked right up to him. My mother taught me how to do that stuff. She was a bold woman for her time.

Mike wanted to sell boats, so we moved to Eastport. I worked three jobs to make ends meet. I did catering at Palate Pleasers, drew illustrations for agents and builders and was an architect for a local firm making \$8 per hour. You do what you need to do to make ends meet.

GB: HOW DID YOU WIN THE CONTRACTS FOR SOME OF THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE PROJECTS IN ANNAPOLIS?

CPC: When I decided to go out on my own in business, I was living in a 1000 square foot home in Davidsonville with 10 dogs, 3 cats, 2 children and one in my belly. I was fearless though. It doesn't mean that I didn't have worry or caution. But I didn't let that stop me.

My very first project was a porch in Severna Park. My second was a major renovation for a waterfront home. I landed my first commercial project [Arundel Lodge] before I had any collateral, print or even Power Point. I was a five-person firm and didn't have any large-scale projects in my portfolio. I had a deep passion for the cause though. I was confident I could create an environment that would support those individuals, and it was that deep passion that helped us get that job.

I was hired to design Yellowfin in Edgewater because I was willing to share everything I knew and to be supportive before the project was even off the ground, without demanding compensation. Ultimately, de-

signing Yellowfin led to several other projects and it all began simply because I was helpful.

It is so important to be open and responsive and supportive to others who are trying to accomplish things. It isn't about good deeds. That's not it. But if you take the path of doing the right thing and working hard and working diligently, in whatever form, things will come back to you, whether that is money, or people, or your spouse.

This faith in doing good and doing right was instilled by my mother, a compassionate person, a loving individual and a loving woman. I always saw in her an openness and willingness to share anything in her own environment. I carry those lessons with me and I know absolutely they have contributed to our success.

GB: DESCRIBE FOR US WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BUILD YOUR COMPANY FROM THE GROUND UP.

CPC: Keep in mind that I am fearless, and I believe in my work ethic. I have the same thing that drives the Emergency Room physician, that thing that allows you to go without stopping. I was banking on myself. I knew that to grow I had to have a level of scale. To be a com-





Barrel Vault Room designed by Purple Cherry Architects for a residential design on Melvin Road in Annapolis

pany that is a little bit bigger, you have to be willing to let go and to collaborate with other people. My first hires were all young people and I felt like I was building a team, a business. I wasn't scared at all until the day I hired someone with twenty years experience!

My second hire was a part time office manager. I am a big believer in systems and in hiring people to work within their gifts. To have an architect do invoicing is not to use their gift. When I am surrounded by talented people who are each using their gifts, then I have the space to do my very best work. I have always been entrepreneurial, so I just put the right team in place and worked hard and did a good job and used my gifts.

GB: WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE PROJECTS FROM YOUR CAREER?

CPC: When clients allow you to be creative, when somebody allows you to just go for it: that is the epitome of architecture for me. It doesn't mean you don't limit yourself, but that you are being asked to do your best. Those times when my clients allow me to express my skills and passion through

design are my favorite.

I am especially proud of our work for non-profits. We just finished Hospice of the Chesapeake. Hospice is on a whole new journey to educate the public on palliative care. They are pioneering ways to help patients before the end of life. We made a very warm, welcoming, comforting and inspirational building and met the budget goals of the organization. It is not easy to make a beautiful building when you have a tight budget. I take a lot of pride in that. We also had to find ways to build deeply spiritual places without overtly mentioning any deity. Two artists were able to articulate my vision in the chapel, or meditation room, which is truly beautiful.

Opportunity Builders is a 42,000 square foot rehabilitation and vocational day facility for adults with disabilities. Non-profits have a real challenge in establishing a presence and therefore in raising money. Having an actual headquarters and a building is the number one thing for public recognition that a non-profit organization can do. Opportunity Builders used to be housed in a warehouse. They had been providing amazing services in Anne Arundel

County for thirty to forty years, but nobody knew about them. It was the same for Arundel Lodge. Both of these projects helped put important community organizations on the map, literally, and in a better position to serve clients.

I am just finishing up one of my all time favorite projects. We were hired as consultants to design The Pilot School, a K-8 progressive, green private school in Delaware that will be completed in early 2017. Every non-profit is challenged by budget, but this particular project had the desire and willingness to create the best space for the children. It was close to my heart.

GB: WHAT ABOUT YOUR FAVORITE RESIDENTIAL DESIGNS?

CPC: In particular I recall designing a 14,000 square foot home on Melvin Road. The first thing we built on the property was a large detached structure to house a collection of automobiles and motorcycles. Behind that we were honored and blessed to design a magnificent home. The clients allowed us to explore and integrate our creativity on every single level of three floors and that is very unusual. In custom residen-

tial, the budget is often spent on the main floor and exterior. When you get the opportunity to touch the house wholly it really is an amazing thing. You get to tell a story. With a fully integrated design, the experience in the home is very different.

There have been two clients in my career in which I was the consigliere of their project—what I liked, they liked. What they liked, I liked. They trusted me. Those were ideal projects, obviously. One of them was on Harness Creek.

GB: WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?

CPC: I take very seriously the people I employ. In order for me to ensure their employment, and their future and their future beyond me, means finding projects we can complete from beginning to end. So we are expanding into interior design and furnishing. We've hired a professional decorator to work with us full-time. I recently achieved my National Council for Interior Design Qualification designation and am proud we can offer this elite level of expertise.

When you get older what you know is that you do eventually retire. I am a woman of the mountains. If I could move a mountain here, I would have the best of all worlds. The mountains are my absolute place of peace. I am considering a launch in Charlottesville, Virginia, in order to work and enjoy the mountains. I do quite a bit of work remotely. We design; we don't do the construction, so we can work from anywhere. I am looking forward to a new location and to achieving even greater things.

*Interview by Diana Love
Photos courtesy:
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Harness Creek Staircase

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