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A life renovated

TV home designer Debbie
Travis makes a comeback,
empowering others to
follow their dreams 18

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2019



FOR YOUR HEALTH

Benefits of massage

How to be a
better caregiver

A life redesigned

Debbie Travis, TV's original home design show host, has been away from the public eye. But she's been far from idle. Travis has been reconnecting with her purpose and sharing her joy on a more personal level at her scenic Tuscan villa. She shares her journey with the Connection.

by WENDY HELFENBAUM

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ebbie Travis' commitment to risk-taking and hard work hasn't wavered since age 11. From her first paper route in northern England, where she grew up, to quitting school to model in London, Travis forged her own path, never shying away from challenges. Today, the award-winning international television mogul, best-selling author and serial entrepreneur is living yet another adventure. While her previous nine books mostly cover home décor, fans won't find any decorating tips in Travis' latest; *Design Your Next Chapter* is all about rediscovering joy and pursuing your passion.

"I believe everything's doable and I have walked the walk," says Travis, who has once again reinvented herself, with exclusive Tuscan retreats aimed at helping people follow their dreams, as she continues to do.

Aiming high

In the late 1970s, during one of Travis' modelling shoots, she admired a young female TV producer taking charge on-set. After a crew member suggested the best way to break into television involved hanging out at the pubs where TV people drank, Travis heeded the advice and soon snagged an internship at the BBC, eventually becoming a producer and editor. But Travis' greatest skill proved to be her keen eye and prescient thinking.

Following a whirlwind courtship in 1985, Travis married Canadian TV distributor Hans Rosenstein and moved to Montreal. While painting their Victorian home, she experimented with different effects and materials and soon started a design business, which led to a powerful aha moment: While transforming walls, floors and furniture using sea sponges and rags was hugely popular in the UK, nobody in North America was doing it. In 1995,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

From left: Villa Reniella in Tuscany; it took 27 permits and 80 tradesmen to construct Debbie Travis' Italian villa; a group enjoys making pasta from scratch at a Travis retreat.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEBBIE TRAVIS

Travis and Rosenstein produced their first television series in Canada, *The Painted House*, which helped launch a new genre: DIY lifestyle entertainment.

Travis and Rosenstein's production company, Whalley-Abbey Media, created many successful shows, including *Debbie Travis' Facelift*, *From the Ground Up* and *All for One*. But by the mid-2000s, the grueling pace of running the production company, hosting the shows and raising two sons (Josh is now 31; Max is 30) took its toll on Travis.

"I knew I was too young to feel this exhausted, and I realized the opposite of depression is not happiness—it's vitality, which seeps out of you bit by bit. I needed to find something where I'd wake up in the morning like I did 10 years ago, eager to get on with the day," Travis tells the *Connection*.

Planting the seed of an idea

Travis began reading the book that would ultimately alter the path of her life: *Under the Tuscan Sun*, Frances Mayes' memoir about restoring an Italian villa. "Something kept saying to me, 'I'd like to do that, too,'" says Travis.

"We rented houses [in Italy] with friends and I just felt incredible from the food and wine, the air and Italian way of life... it was Italy that gave me my vitality back."

Travis and Rosenstein began looking for a family vacation property in Tuscany, but in

2009, during a keynote speech in Vancouver, Travis' inner voice burst out.

"The interviewer asked, 'What's next for Debbie Travis?' And I heard myself saying, 'I'm going to be bringing women on a retreat to Italy to walk through lavender fields, picnic in olive groves and exchange dreams about our next chapters,'" recalls Travis. "I talked for five minutes, and then I couldn't hear anything. I thought everyone had left. But then all these arms were shooting up and every woman was saying, 'Take me, take me!'"

And although Travis' villa existed only in her imagination, the retreat sold out the following day, and four months later, in a rented house near Siena, the first Debbie Travis Tuscan Getaway took place. Suddenly, the hunt for her Italian dream home took on a new urgency.

Be careful what you wish for

Close to 10 years after first scouting properties, the couple arrived at the 100-acre Villa Reniella, a 13th-century tower and farm in Tuscany so rundown that Travis initially refused to get out of the car.

"It was exactly what I didn't want to buy: There were dirt floors, no roof and pigs running around. It was raining and muddy, and I slipped in pig poo; I hated it," recalls Travis.

"But when we went back the next day under blue skies, the view brought us to our knees."

The enterprising couple purchased what Travis described as "our pile of Italian stone" and sold it as a TV series: *La Dolce Debbie*, chronicling the five-year transformation of the dilapidated Tuscan farmhouse into a 14-bedroom luxury hotel, aired in 2016. Because the property was adjacent to a UNESCO National Heritage site, it took two years of paperwork and planning before any renovations could begin.

In June 2015, Villa Reniella (tuscantgetaway.com) opened to guests. "This is somewhere women could come and empty their minds for a week. We put them in this spectacular setting, give them copious amounts of wine, massages and life coaching, and you can actually see the wheels ticking: 'I'm going to follow my dream,'" she explains.

Straddling two worlds, and another project

Travis found herself with one foot in Italy as she continued to run her production company and branding businesses in Canada.

"It was hard, because I was going backwards and forwards, and I still am," admits Travis, who runs eight retreats per year between May and October, keeping August for family and friends.

As Travis heard the fascinating stories of like-minded dreamers and doers who were

mostly at a crossroads in their lives, she realized she wanted to share their journeys—and her own. In *Design Your Next Chapter*, her 10th book, Travis weaves in her guests' success stories and offers practical tips about financing, hands-on resources to create an action plan and lots of encouragement.

"This is not your typical how-to book. I wrote this for people who find themselves saying, 'What's next for me? What if I finally turn my dream into a reality?' We all have those what-if seeds of ideas," she says. "Moments of transition can be torture, but they're also a time to soar. I intertwined the motivational stories of others with my own challenges and triumphs in Tuscany, plus oodles of advice and tools."

Travis has hosted more than 1,000 guests and says many of them resemble her once-exhausted self, "started into realizing that they had forgotten what makes them happy," she writes in her latest book.

"There's a hunger out there, and it doesn't matter what you leap into, you have to change your mindset and do what you truly love. I just want to inspire people. That's all," says Travis. ■

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Making dreams a reality

Tips from Debbie Travis' latest book.

Lose your fear. Fear is crippling. Letting it take over means never moving forward. Instead, build a personal tool box—things you are confident about and that bring you energy—that you can draw from when negativity strikes.

Stop making excuses. Making excuses for shortcomings or failures causes you to avoid challenging yourself, and is a path toward regret.

Take a calculated risk. Nothing can happen without taking a risk, but evaluate what you can bear, whether it's figuring out how much money to invest or how much time you can afford to put in.

Adopt an open mindset. A good mindset is open to opportunity, personal growth, new ventures and constructive criticism.

Never lose your excitement. Believe in your idea enough to shout it from the rooftops and not let anyone take that away.—WH



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Members will find Debbie Travis' new book, *Design Your Next Chapter* (Item #2019625; 12/17), in most warehouse locations.