

Getting creative and taking the mystery out of floral arranging

By Emmanuel Touhey - 02/13/13 11:08 PM EST
The Hill

It might be surprising for some to find words like “flower” and “empower” in the same sentence. But that combination is at the root of everything Sarah von Pollaro — the Whole Foods “Flower Chef” — does every day.

At 34, von Pollaro is both the brains and the hands behind D.C.-based floral design businesses Urban Petals and Flower Empowered. Launched in 2004, Urban Petals caters to the large-scale events Washington is known for.

Her floral designs have adorned the Kennedy Center, embassies, museums and other grand buildings across the nation’s capital. Flowers from her events are usually donated to nonprofit organizations through her “Brighten Lives” initiative.

“Food nourishes your body and flowers nourish your soul. When people have flowers in their home they start feeling happier. Flowers are intrinsically beautiful,” von Pollaro added.

Her mission is simple: to inspire people to have flowers in their lives on any budget.

The other half of the business, Flower Empowered, challenges people to discover their inner floral artistry and make their own floral arrangements for those special occasions in life, especially weddings.

Von Pollaro loves her craft, and her do-it-yourself website www.flowerempowered.com provides tool kits with all the tips and tricks of the trade that she has learned from her 14 years in the business, along with step-by-step instructional videos.

“I love flowers. I always have been passionate about flowers. I started at age three with my grandmother in St. Louis, picking wild flowers and arranging them. It started that early. I was the one who did flowers for family events,” von Pollaro said.

Her passion stayed with her through college. While studying history at Yale in the late '90s, an opportunity to crash at a friend's apartment in Manhattan for free and do a summer internship at a high-end florist seemed too good to turn down.

But it was no picnic, either.

The hours were long and the work was hard, with von Pollaro often rising well before dawn to make purchases at the wholesale flower market.

“I spent my time sweeping floors, doing delivery, cleaning greens — the grunt work, which is totally fair,” recalled von Pollaro. “Most importantly, it opened my eyes to how the flower industry works.”

And what she saw wasn't exactly pretty.

“The flower business is a dirty business. It's an ego-driven industry. ‘How much money can we get out of people?’ It wasn't me,” said von Pollaro.

After graduating from Yale in 2000, she moved to D.C. to work in the nonprofit sector. Although she loved her work, she continued to work with flowers on the side for family, friends and colleagues. Eventually the desire to make her flower hobby a full-time career on her own terms finally bloomed with the creation of Urban Petals.

Von Pollaro said she draws inspiration from her surroundings, whether it be on her daily run through Rock Creek Park or a visit to an art museum — and naturally she pays close attention to what's in season.

Her creations soon caught the eye of Whole Foods, and in 2011 a relationship was born. They needed help with their flowers and she was looking for a creative outlet to share her ideas. She now makes a couple of instructional videos a month and posts them on her website so shoppers can experiment, with the goal of demystifying the art of floral arranging.

The public television station WETA has compared her to Julia Child, suggesting she is doing for flowers what America's French Chef did for cooking. Indeed, WETA liked her style and approach so much it invited her to make an hour-long special on the subject last summer. The public response was so great that plans are in the works for another special — this time on weddings. Meanwhile, “Flower Empowered” will be rebroadcast next month on the Virginia station as part of its fundraising line-up on “Pledge Week.”

“I think people really want to know how to do it. The good thing is there was an audience for it. There’s a lot to take in, but the response has been overwhelming,” von Pollaro said.

It’s no secret that weddings cost a lot of money and that flowers, while an important feature, can add to the financial anxiety couples feel when planning the big day. Von Pollaro offers a way out for those on a limited budget, promising a joyful, bonding experience for family and friends alike.

“It needs to feel fun. It’s actually a fun activity and it’s fun for kids.”

For her own wedding, von Pollaro gathered 30 of her closest female family members and friends and taught them all how to make handheld arrangements.

“I wanted every woman to have flowers and feel beautiful,” she said.

At the reception, the women placed their bouquets in empty vases on the tables for all the guests to enjoy. Not only did everyone have a good time making the floral arrangements, but their dual purpose also helped keep the costs down. Von Pollaro admits this is not for everyone, but that’s what florists are for.

“There are ways to empower your florist to help them with your vision. If there’s a flower you love, tell them what it is and if it’s not in season, ask them what is comparable.”

Von Pollaro also cautions against insisting on one look. The key is to share your vision and then step back and let the florist work their magic.

If you’re working within a limited budget, von Pollaro recommends skipping ceremony flowers.

“The guests have just arrived, are excited to see you get married (with flowers in your hands) and often don’t notice altar arrangements or pew flowers,” she explained.

Now that she’s also a busy mom to an energetic 2-year-old, von Pollaro has, for the short term, at least, dialed back the number of weddings she does, choosing instead to focus her time on teaching technique through her website.

“With limited time it’s more important to reach thousands of people, and I feel strongly about showing people how to do it themselves,” von Pollaro said.

