

# Just Curious...

And so a few quick questions and answers.

By Breanna Zambinski

## Tracy Davis



*Preparing to meet Tracy Davis, business owner, Oriental rug connoisseur, community advocate, pod-cast host, not to mention dedicated mother, I was curious about this Northfield "Superwoman." Halfway through our interview she pointed to the rug on the coffee shop floor, commented, "This one here is a relatively inexpensive Northeast Persian rug*

*probably made in the 1950s," and then carried on with conversation as if this fact was common-day knowledge.*

**BZ:** What do you do for a living?

**Davis:** I'm a rug dealer, and when I say that I have to make sure that people understand there is no "d" before "rug." My company, GuildCraft Carpets, designs, manufactures and imports hand-knotted Oriental rugs.

**BZ:** How did you get started in that business?

**Davis:** Back in the nineties I was a collector of Oriental carpets. I focused my collecting on antique tribal pieces, and I eventually had to start dealing to support my habit. I developed relationships with many people who were involved in importing Oriental carpets, old and new. Sometime around 2001 I had the idea to open a retail rug store in Northfield. Retail isn't really my thing, but it seemed like a good opportunity to support the community, make good use of my connections in the industry, and get rid of the stack of carpets in my living room. So I opened my Oriental Rug Gallery in 2002. My retail business was about 35 percent Northfield and 65 percent other places in the country.

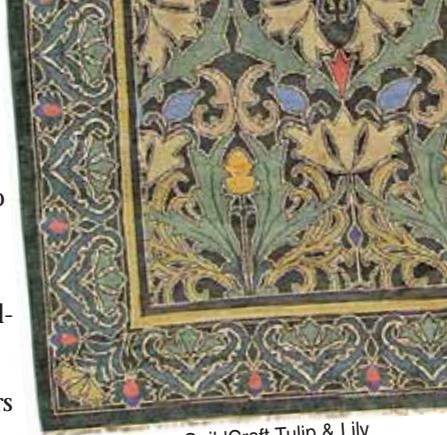
**BZ:** How did your business change over the years?

**Davis:** I started out simply sourcing and buying rugs to sell at retail, but in the course of business, I began doing more custom orders for people. Eventually I began to commission pieces directly rather than working with importers. One thing just naturally seemed to lead to another. In 2004 I began producing English and American Arts & Crafts designs, using weavers in India and Nepal. That part of the business became more interesting and more demanding than the retail side, so in 2006 I closed the retail store and concentrated on our manufacturing and wholesale business.

**BZ:** What made you take the step from buying to manufacturing rugs?

**Davis:** I've always been much more interested in the production end of the business than the buying and selling. Our culture has gotten so far away from real craftsmanship, from anything handmade. Everything is mass-produced and almost

all of it's done by machine. To me, being a part of producing something beautiful was significant. Our goal is to create things which have a high level of artistry, that embody the spirit of craftsmanship. My technical knowledge in the field is very high, so I am able to communicate very accurately to our workers what we are looking for.



GuildCraft Tulip & Lily

**BZ:** What do you find intriguing about Oriental rugs?

**Davis:** First of all, it's such an ancient art. The earliest known use of the technique is from about 600 BCE, and even at that time demonstrated a high degree of technical sophistication, so the art form is much older than 2,500 years. It's very multi-disciplinary – there's the agricultural part, learning about sheep breeds and the different qualities of their wools; and the use of plants, insects and even modern chemistry to create a particular range of colors. Then there are the different geographical areas and people groups which developed certain characteristic designs and weaving techniques, which reflected their respective cultures. There are a lot of intriguing components.

**BZ:** What is the process for making a rug?

**Davis:** They are very labor-intensive pieces consisting of individual pieces of yarn tied by hand to the foundation – hence, "hand-knotted." Hand-knotted carpets are usually referred to as Oriental because that's where the technique originated: In Western and Central Asia, east of Europe. It's a highly skilled craft and the hand-knotted structure has never been duplicated by a machine process.

**BZ:** Do you design all of your rugs?

**Davis:** The carpets we produce for wholesale are designs that were originally created by people like William Morris, Frank Lloyd Wright and C.F.A. Voysey 100 years ago. We sell these through specialty decorative arts stores and a few Oriental rug retailers. Our carpets are not mass-produced items; people who buy them are looking for something unique made in the original fashion. Our market niche is with English and American Arts & Crafts designs, but we also do a lot of custom work. Our custom carpets are designed in-house, usually to the client's specifications.

**BZ:** How long does it take to make a rug?

**Davis:** Usually about four or five months. The actual weaving time does not take that long, but it takes time to dye the wool, let it dry, tie on all the knots, cut the carpet from the loom, shear the carpet, and give it a final wash before shipping. For the average 8x10 rug, the actual weaving time is about 40 days, with four weavers working side by side.

**BZ:** How many hand-tied knots would you say are in the average rug?

**Davis:** In the average 8x10 rug, there are somewhere between 60,000 and 90,000 hand-tied knots. So they are very labor-intensive and expensive to make.

**BZ:** How much does a rug like this cost?

Just Curious *continued on next page*

Just Curious *continued from previous page*

**Davis:** In general, a wool rug of that size and quality retails between \$2,500 and \$7,500, but there are a lot of variables and many are higher. Rugs with silk, or rugs very finely knotted and thus more labor-intensive, can cost more. Our Arts & Crafts carpets are about \$3,500 for an 8x10, which is relatively affordable in this industry.

**BZ:** Where are your factories located?

**Davis:** We have one in Pakistan, two in India and one in Nepal. Depending upon the technical requirements of the job or product – the details of the type of wool and the variables of the weaving technique – we would choose one location over the others. With our current product lines, we're doing very little in Pakistan right now, and the political situation in Nepal is less stable so I've been trying to shift production to India. But I like to keep as many options open as possible.

**BZ:** How do you go about finding weavers?

**Davis:** In total we have about 60 weavers working in any given month. We don't own the facilities; we lease them and hire individuals to manage and supervise the weaving. We are Rugmark certified, which means that our facilities use no child labor. Everyone involved in our facilities must sign contracts guaranteeing that they will not use child labor. To ensure this, the Rugmark organization conducts surprise inspections. They also have schools for children. It is a really wonderful organization and we're pleased to be a part of it.

**BZ:** Have you gone to visit any of your factories?

**Davis:** Not yet; we're doing it all remotely. Thank God for the Internet or we couldn't do what we're doing. I still have kids at home, and between family and other commitments I'm not yet able to take the extended time I'd need for a personal visit.

**BZ:** Do you weave at all?

**Davis:** No [laughs]. If you could see these rugs, it would be clear that they aren't things my partner and I could make in our basements and sell on eBay. We run a manufacturing and import business focused on a really specialized craft.

**BZ:** How do most of the weavers learn to weave?

**Davis:** It depends. In countries like Turkey and Iran, where rug-weaving is a deep cultural tradition, it is a skill passed from mother to daughter. In other places it can be a purely commercial skill learned because there is a demand.

**BZ:** How did you meet your business partner?

**Davis:** Her name is **Danielle Freudenthal**. We met at the Goodbye Blue Monday coffee shop, and I always say that we bonded over wool. Danielle was vice president of sales for Faribault Woolen Mills at the time I was operating my retail business. We got to know each other, became friends and decided to become partners and do the manufacturing and importing full-time.

**BZ:** What percentage of your sales are stock versus custom-made?

**Davis:** It's about half stock and half custom. We are doing more and more with private clients. We work with a couple of architects out of New York and designers in other

parts of the country. The custom designing is the part I really enjoy doing; I like working with people to help them translate their ideas into texture and color.

**BZ:** How do you go about making a custom-made piece?

**Davis:** Sometimes we simply customize an existing design by changing color or design details, but other times we draw things up from scratch. Right now we're working on a project for the Pabst Mansion in Milwaukee; they're restoring the bedroom of the daughter of the house. We were given an old black-and-white photograph from 1898 and asked to reproduce the carpet. In this case, there is not a lot of detail to work with, so we're consulting with them every step of the way: "What color should the field be? Is this an egg-and-dart motif or something else? Did we interpret the ribbon shape correctly?" These custom commissions, and the people we meet are one of the most enjoyable parts of the business for me.

**BZ:** How have you learned so much about rug-making?

**Davis:** There's no formal education program for "rug scholar." Learning about the history of the craft, anthropological studies of the peoples who've made them, and getting my hands on as many examples as possible – that's mostly how I've learned. Over the past 15 years I've worked with museum curators, decorative arts specialists, historic preservation experts, collectors and dealers specializing in a particular technique or ethnographic group. So with research, exposure and attentiveness, coupled with our manufacturing experience, I've developed a certain expertise. I've written articles, given presentations on aspects of the subject, and get called upon to authenticate certain carpets at auction. We've become a good resource for people who want lots of details about stuff that no one cares about [laughs].

**BZ:** How do you determine the color scheme in your rugs?

**Davis:** For our stock Arts & Crafts collections, we use a historic color palette that's authentic to the period. Like Benjamin Moore has researched their "historical colors" for paint, we've developed a historically accurate color palette for the Arts & Crafts era, roughly 1880 to 1914. We've taken some liberties with the individual color placement in the rugs, since we don't always know for sure what the original colors were if there are no surviving examples of the design.

**BZ:** How do you go about finding clients?

**Davis:** Much of the custom work is by word-of-mouth. We go to New York to meet with people once or twice a year since that's where a lot of the action is. We also advertise in specialty publications like *American Bungalow* or *Style 1900*, and we exhibit at two or three trade shows a year. We could do more, but I hate trade shows. And, of course, we have a website and a list of our retailers.

**BZ:** How many other companies like yours are in the country?

**Davis:** There are really only two other companies that focus on Arts & Crafts carpets, and our carpets are better researched, better drawn and better colored. I initially resisted the idea of Arts & Crafts carpets, because the market is so small and I thought, "Someone else is already doing it – why should we?" But a colleague of

This feature sponsored by

I saw it on...

COMMUNITY NEWS, CITIZEN PRODUCED  
**NORTHFIELD.ORG**

Northfield, Minnesota

Just Curious *continued on page 36*

Just Curious *continued from page 34*

ours, Michael FitzSimmons of Chicago, who's a nationally recognized expert in Arts & Crafts, came and pleaded with us to try it, saying that the others weren't authentic enough or in some way just weren't right. So that's how it took off.

**BZ:** Do you see yourself continuing this?

**Davis:** In some way, yes. The economy is uncertain and I don't know where the industry, or our business, is going to end up. But we're doing really well so far, and we have a new collection coming out this fall that I'm excited about – some William Morris designs that haven't been done before. No matter what, I'll have my hand in the rug business in one way or another.

**BZ:** Do you have a favorite rug that you own?

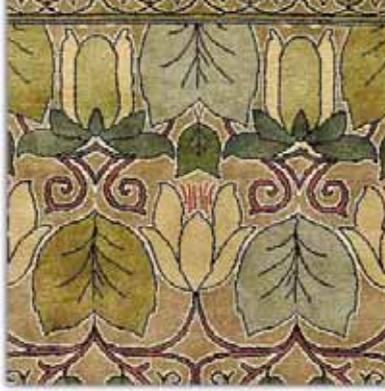
**Davis:** Not really. I rotate them on my floors and my walls because I have so many. If I look at a piece every day, and it still interests me and I don't get bored with it, then I know it has that almost-indefinable quality that elevates a piece of material culture to real art.

**BZ:** Are you from Northfield originally?

**Davis:** I didn't grow up here, but my family roots go deep and I've been visiting here all my life. Two of my great-grandfathers homesteaded in this area in the 1860s, one in Greenvale Township and the other in Eureka Township. My dad grew up here and graduated from Northfield High School in 1954. I moved here in 1991 to take care of my grandfather. I had two little kids at the time and another one a couple of years later. It seemed like a great community for kids, so I thought, "Ok, we'll stay!"

**BZ:** What else are you involved with in Northfield?

**Davis:** People in Northfield probably only know that I'm involved in Locally Grown or my work on the Planning Commission, so I've appreciated this chance to talk about what I do in real life! Right now the Planning Commission is in the middle of revising Northfield's Comprehensive Plan and zoning ordinances. That's been a huge project and it's gone on for a long time, but there's a light at the end of that tunnel and I



GuildCraft Magnolia

hope we'll be done by the end of the year.

**BZ:** What is Locally Grown?

**Davis:** **Griff Wigley, Ross Currier,** and I started [LocallyGrownNorthfield.org](http://LocallyGrownNorthfield.org) a couple of years ago. It's a discussion- and issues-oriented blog that uses the Internet to foster civic engagement. We do a weekly radio show and podcast as well as the weblog. Now Locally Grown is working with the Representative Journalism project to develop a new

operating model that will allow us to provide more depth to our content for Northfield. I love what we're doing on Locally Grown. I'd like to do more, but time constraints and the demands of my business make it difficult to give it more than I already do.

For more on GuildCraft Carpets, go to [www.guildcraftcarpets.com](http://www.guildcraftcarpets.com) and or call 507/664-9500.

**"I don't know where you're taking me, but we should probably stop by Tiny's for a Hot Dog first."**

Specialty tobacco, T-shirts, quality cigars, postcards, convenience items and more!

**BITE ME!**  
**TINY'S**  
DOGS ALL DAY SINCE 1947  
(507) 645-6862  
321 Division Street

**SAVE AMERICA | EAT AT TINY'S**

*Step out of routine, and into cuisine!*

Visit [socialegourmet.com](http://socialegourmet.com) to book your cooking session. Create delicious entrees using fresh, high quality ingredients.

**FREE SIDE DISH** when you register for a cooking session or pick-up order. Present coupon in-store. Valid through 8-15-08.

**SOCIALE**  
MAKE & TAKE GOURMET

Heritage Square in Northfield - 507-664-9443 - [socialegourmet.com](http://socialegourmet.com)

**NORTHFIELD CONSTRUCTION COMPANY, INC.**  
"Quality through Craftsmanship"

**Ray Cox & employees**  
1600 Riverview Lane  
Northfield, MN 55057  
**645-8975**  
Lic. #1093  
[www.northfieldconstruction.net](http://www.northfieldconstruction.net)