

Geoffrey Davenport has produced more than 16,000 custom-made closets, cabinets and tie racks over the years for his discerning Washington-area clientele.

Let's see, there were the His and Hers mahogany-laid walk-ins that he and his team of 40 skilled carpenters produced for James Carville and Mary Matalan for their Ford's Landing townhouse in Old Town, and, oh yes, the \$20,000 custom job for Redskin running back Clinton Portis for his McLean manse.



Photo by John Arundel / whgmag.com

**THE CLOSET KING:** Geoffrey Davenport, the owner and president of the DC-area franchise of Closets by Design. "We're riding a trend...Custom closets and offices are hot," Davenport said

Davenport remembers that job well. After being painstakingly built, Portis' agent ordered the whole thing moved to another room, piece by piece.

Former White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Meyers and Vanity Fair writer Todd Purdum ordered up some custom his and hers to house the power suits at their Georgetown pad, while Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor had Davenport's team enlarge her closets at her Connecticut Ave. apartment, ostensibly to fit her growing audience of judicial robes.

But none of Davenport's jobs were more special or unusual than the endless suite of specially-designed, eight-foot-high closets that a 23-year-old Saudi Arabian princess ordered from his Manassas-based Closets by Design franchise recently for her sprawling mansion off Georgetown Pike in Great Falls.

"The place was like a department store," Davenport chuckled. "We had to install whole rooms of closets for her, with rows and rows of shelving. Then she called us back, to build out more closet space in the basement."



Photo by John Arundel / whgmag.com

A girl must have her shoes! We can only imagine how many designer shoes must fit in that Saudi princess' closet...

Think Dior couture. Yves Saint Laurent. Fendi bags by the bushel, Prada and Bottega Veneta. Maybe a few offerings from Diane Von Furstenberg from that long-forgotten trip to Saint Tropez. Or that must-have David Yurman piece from Fifth Avenue, now not looking so must-have with the price tag still hanging from it.

Like many young Saudis, the princess was a serious fan of Walt Disney World, and had ordered up full-length murals of Disney characters painted from floor to ceiling.

Surrounded by the constant presence of Royal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia security guards, Davenport's team installed the entry door leading to the suite of bedroom closets last: An illustrator skilled in all things Disney had to be flown in to paint the Seven Dwarves onto it.

All pink and purple, we are told -- the touchstone of a month-long installation process.

"She still doesn't have enough space for all her stuff," sighed Davenport. "Her people keep calling us back to install more storage."



Photo by John Arundel / whgmag.com

Inside Davenport's sprawling Manassas, Va. custom closet factory.

Such is a day in the life of Geoff Davenport, the quite-spoken owner of the Washington area Closets by Design franchise, which he opened the day after 9/11 with a business partner and grew it to become the nation's largest-volume and most successful Closets outlet, with sales of \$6.5 million last year.

"We're riding a trend...Custom closets and offices are hot," Davenport said. "It gives people a sense of organization. Imagine the feeling of getting up every morning and feeling totally organized. Of having that liberating feeling of totally taking advantage of space."

About 60 percent of his business is in the custom design and construction of closets, while the remainder belongs to home offices, library shelving, basement storage, pantries, garages and entertainment centers.

Much of his shelving is made of less expensive Melamine composite board, produced in Canada, and what he calls a "photo of a wood surface."

"It's really hard to tell from the real stuff," he said. "But it's so much less expensive than real wood."



Photo by John Arundel / whgmag.com  
Davenport, checking quality control with one of his employees.

Davenport was raised in Oak Ridge, TN., where his father was a chemist on the Manhattan Project. He picked up a Bachelor's Degree in Biology from George Mason University before trying out a few careers (a salesman of computers, recycled toner cartridges and other office supplies), before ending up in the closet design business.

"One day I met a guy at church who was looking for a business partner," recalled Davenport, who at the time was divorced and living in Vienna, VA., looking for a new business opportunity after selling his office supply business. "It's sort of how life works out sometimes...I met my wife in a Dewey Beach group house in 1993 and now we have three beautiful children."

After growing the business by \$1 million per year, Davenport bought out his partner in 2006. In 2007, Inc. Magazine named his Closets by Design franchise one of America's 5000 fastest-growing companies. His business, operated out of a large warehouse in a Manassas industrial park, has been ranked #1 in sales over the past four years, out of 30 in the Closets by Design system. "There are only a handful in the country that are our size," he said.

The recession has been un-kind to the custom closet business, which is somewhat of an indulgence for the upwardly-mobile homeowner, a signature you've arrived, and you have the custom closets to prove it.



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Davenport's team mails out 2-3 million coupons per month, mostly of the Val-Pak varietal, and has found that Washingtonians indeed, value a deal. His margins are thinner than his competitors, something he said he makes up for in volume.

"Washington is more recession resistant than the rest of the country," Davenport said. "Places like Arizona, Florida and California have been hit really hard. They've been feeling the recession a year or more."

When the collapse of the financial markets hit last October, the "phones stopped ringing," he recalled. Davenport shedded \$500,000 in revenue from the year before and slimmed down his workforce from 65 to 40. "We've found that our business has leveled off," he said.

The big advantage is that, "We do all our own work here," he said. "Some of our competitors don't even design their own stuff, while others have their stuff shipped in."

Davenport tends to employ highly-skilled, hard-working craftsmen, who he treats fairly with higher-than-usual salaries and benefit packages, staff cookouts and an annual Christmas party to build camaraderie.

"I'm so proud to be a part of helping this company become number one in its industry," said Edo Vilic, an assistant manager originally from Yugoslavia, who participated in the gymnastics team at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. "Mr. Davenport looks after us."

"We have customer service reps, salespeople, carpenters, installers, technicians and drivers," Davenport said. "This business requires a lot of coordination."

The same treatment of employees he extends to his customers, and then some.

"Customer service can be so bad in this business, so we're determined to dominate the market by offering peerless service to our customers," he said. "If they want a free this or a free that, we give it to them. If somebody has a problem, we're sure going to fix it. It's a reputation thing...That's why 30 percent of what we do is repeat business."

Like the Saudi princess, who may never have adequate closet space. At least she'll know who to call.