

# INSIDER



Q&A

## *Frankly Speaking*

*An acclaimed designer brings his eponymous firm to Naples*

**Frank Ponterio** has a relaxed kind of confidence that puts you at ease during a conversation, despite 27 years' worth of accomplishments, fancy clients, and projects in the design world. Naples has been on his radar as a perfect place to make his stylish mark for a few years now, and he finally made a bold move and set up an official office in downtown Naples to welcome clients, showcase finishes, and draw out plans. While waiting and searching for the ideal home in Naples, he crashes in boutique hotels and then drives back to his wife in Anna Maria Island, where they have refurbished a chilled-out beach bungalow. He has fought hard to keep his business manageable and team tight, only taking on clients that fit with his company's core values and mission. Read on to learn about this renaissance man. ([frankponterio.com](http://frankponterio.com))  
—Christina Cush

## Frankly Speaking

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**NI:** Tell us about starting out in Chicago, as many Naples residents are also from Midwestern cities.

**Ponterio:** I grew up outside Chicago in Lake Zurich, and my family still lives there. I went to school at the Harrington College of Design, which was in the top three for interiors at the time. I was immersed in architecture and interiors, graduated in a recession, and got a job in project management of high-end construction for three years. Then I started my own firm, which I knew I wanted to do.

**How do you define your design style?**

I have an authentic take on design that's still super approachable. I don't just do one style. I started doing residential legacy or heirloom homes, then an über-contemporary Nashville penthouse. We have architects on staff to complete interior architecture and we really understand that historical precedent doesn't just mean 1920s, but 1970s as well. We understand design from an interior's perspective and work

with project architects to get a backdrop for all our soft goods and decorating.

**What are some of your more unexpected projects and business expansions?**

We've done boutique hotels, country clubs, and private aviation. Additionally, we have a line of products, including furniture, lighting, and accessories that's licensed in more than 100 countries. Most recently, we launched a fabric collection for Clarence House, an iconic brand repped by Holly Hunt that has a nice following. I'm the first guest designer to do a collection for Clarence House.

**Can you share some details about your family?**

I met my wife, Becky, when I had an internship and she was a rep selling high-end floor coverings. I told my project manager, "I'm going to marry her." Six months later, we bought a house together



and have been married 26 years. Becky is still in the industry and does fun, custom projects. Our daughter, Isabella, graduated from Elon University in 2020 and works for Wintrust Bank. She lives in Chicago in the West Loop in a cool loft in the heart of it all. Isabella loves Naples and stayed with us here for six months during COVID-19.

**How are you settling into Naples?**

My office is on Pettit Square on the corner of Third Street South and 14th Avenue South—a great location. You'll find me eating at Campiello or at Andre's Steak House. I start my day at Bad Ass Coffee. When I have time for lunch, I'm at Ridgeway's eating outside before I walk back to work.

## SHOP LOCAL

### SILK FLORALS AND SUCCULENTS BLOOM

Norine Fuller had a long career working with the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising before buying the 20-year-old, locally owned **Sweetgrass Galleries** in Naples a year ago. Her new endeavor collided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced people stuck at home to reevaluate their outdoor living spaces, and Fuller to expand her offerings.

Sweetgrass Galleries in Trade Center Way specializes in sophisticated silk florals, trees, and natural greenery for commercial and residential interiors and exteriors.



Fuller handily adapted to customer demand. "Obviously, people have been spending more time on their patios, so we have a whole section of UV-protected florals that can go in the sunshine and not fade. They can withstand Naples' strong elements," she says. "Another area that we have found a great kind of new market for is our grasses. They're seen throughout South Florida."

She says the care-free beauty of silk arrangements for outdoor walkways and porch corners is trending. "We get a few customers almost every month who are switching from the real to the silk," she notes. Succulents are also enjoying a wave of popularity, and they "seem to be a winner for everyone," says Fuller.

Sweetgrass recently ventured into the realm of wedding design. The company has made wedding bouquets, soap flower arrangements, and boutonnieres. ([sweetgrassnaples.com](http://sweetgrassnaples.com)) —Alexis Carson

## Naples in Neon Lights

Looking for a way to energize your restaurant, boutique, salon, or even your wedding venue? Simone Schmitt, owner of **Naples Neon**, has a suggestion: a customizable, colorful neon sign that conveys a word, phrase, or logo exactly as you'd like it. Her signs come in solid neon colors, as well as remote-operated, LED, color-changing lights.

Originally from Germany, Schmitt worked for a Florida sign company for several years before moving to Naples and starting her business in 2019. At first, Schmitt's signs were being ordered for weddings; she worked closely with wedding planners and brides to create the perfect sign. However, the pandemic stalled weddings and inspired many people to build in-home gyms. As a result, Schmitt is receiving an uptick in requests for motivational signs to enhance the aesthetic of her clients' new workout spaces.

She points out that the signs are durable, so they're suitable for on-the-go travel for influencers, podcasters, or if they simply need to be moved. ([naplesneon.com](http://naplesneon.com)) —Mackenzie Griffith

