



Kevin Manning | Post-Dispatch

Amy Gill is half of the powerful husband-and-wife duo that has made Restoration St. Louis a major player in the renewal of historic buildings.

The company turned the long-abandoned former Coronado Hotel near St. Louis University into a successful apartment building, and converted the Moolah Temple into a movie theater and bowling alley. It turned the Cloisters, a former home for retired nuns in Soulard, into apartments.

All told, the couple has bought and restored more than 200 properties. Now, they are buying and restoring houses in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood, known informally as the Grove.

Amy is a Kentucky native who now defends St. Louis fiercely.

She is informal – she showed up for this interview with wet hair and barefoot – and whipsawed by priorities, including her four children. But she also is a taskmaster, driving to get her projects done quickly and without the subsidies that have become an addiction for other developers.

We spoke in her office at the Coronado Building. Next week, I will talk to her husband, Amrit.

Amy Gill is rehabbing the city she loves, property by property

How did you get started?

We bought a building right next to where we lived. It was 760 Syracuse in University City. We call it the building of many mistakes. We've rehabbed that building four times.

First time we ever put in a vinyl floor... our shoes stick to the floor. Amrit pulls and he separates the top part of his shoe from the sole, which is then stuck to the floor. The next day we had to get it off the floor with a roofing spade.

What sort of work were you doing at the time?

I was working at Southwestern Bell as an account rep for the Yellow Pages.

Were you bored?

I had a great job. I was making (about) \$150,000 a year...

I got to work with all these different kinds of businesses. I had a lot of different contacts and I've been able to use that. Plus, most business people in St. Louis are really nice, and they share.

I used to buy all of our tools at pawn shops, because they would call me and say, "Hey, we got this drill in and it's only \$25."

How do you and Amrit divide your responsibilities?

I run the architectural side and the construction management side. That... is the part that I love, and that's the part that I think I'm pretty good at.

Amrit does things that I'm not good at, like meet with lawyers. I don't have the patience for that.

Both of us are out looking at property and trying to find new things, and we trade off with each other. He'll say, "OK, I've got this idea. I want you to come look at it." And I'll say, "Wow, that's a great idea." Or we'll disagree.

I turned down the (Union Pacific Building downtown). He really wanted to buy it. And I turned it down because I feel like architecturally it's wrong for us. And he was really disappointed, but he went with it because either one of us has ultimate veto power.

What do you say to people who wonder, "Could I start like they did?"

I think there's tons of opportunity for anybody who's willing to really work.

Make sure your numbers work, and if you're going to



Amy Gill

Co-owner, Restoration St. Louis, A&A Contracting, and Checkmate Design

Age: 42

Education: Bachelor's degree in political science, University of Kentucky

Personal: Lives in Skinker/DeBaliviere neighborhood with husband, Amrit; sons Wyatt, 11, and Dylan, 9; daughters Katie, 4, and Annie, 2.

Career: Worked odd jobs after college, including a stint as a bartender at Blueberry Hill in University City; 1986, started at Southwestern Bell in telemarketing, worked her way up to account representative for the Yellow Pages; 2002, went to work with Amrit at Restoration St. Louis.

start the way we started, you have to know that you can't go on vacation. OK? This will be your whole life.

To me, where the line is drawn is at about 100 units. Until you own 100 units, in my opinion, you can never go on vacation and you can never have dinner with your spouse and know that you're not going to get a phone call. You can never have a Saturday afternoon during rental season because you're showing apartments. That's all we did. We mowed lawns and showed apartments, we fixed toilets. We did everything that we could possibly do, every weekend, all weekend.

What's the magic of owning 100 units?

Once you get to 100, you can afford one maintenance guy and a part-time bookkeeper. Our part-time bookkeeper, who was our first employee, worked out of our house and he showed apartments and collected rent. It was as if manna had fallen from heaven to have that off our plate.

Do you have any secrets about how you separate your marriage from your business?

Part of it is that we don't see each other a lot during the day. We meet maybe once a day and chit-chat about whatever it is that's going on, but that's it.

I love him so much. I think he's the smartest person I've ever met, I think he's the coolest person I've ever met. I respect his judgment on everything.

How do you choose the projects you are going to work on?

Neither one of us wants to be Donald Trump. We thought, what do we really

want to do in life? Well, we like working in neighborhoods. We felt like our work in the (University City) Loop kind of made it a neighborhood. And then we worked in Skinker/DeBaliviere and, along with a lot of other people, made that a neighborhood.

So that's why we ended up doing the Grove. If the Grove works, and we are betting everything we've got basically on that project, it will be kind of a model hopefully for other developers to say, "If you go in and buy the lowest 10 percent of a neighborhood and bring it around, then the neighborhood will turn around."

You have never used tax increment financing. Why not?

We got a TIF on the Cloisters. We have never cashed it in.

We feel like we are going to take projects that we know we can do without taking their money. We do ask for tax abatement, which is pretty standard, and we've asked the city to do some stuff, like fix sidewalks or plant street trees.

If we ever get to a point where we're doing something in a completely depressed area, where the finances totally don't work, then I guess the possibility (of requesting TIF) is there. The thing about TIF is it's brain damage.

Why?

Because you've got lawyers involved. Then you've got politics involved.

I want to get stuff done. I'm not hanging out for three years, waiting for somebody to figure out if they are going to give us money or not. Then your costs mount. Every year construction costs in the last five years have gone up 10 percent. I don't wait. There's no profit in waiting.

What frustrates you about St. Louis?

I hate the fact that people always say, "Oh, my God, you work in the city."... I want to erect a wall at (Interstate) 170, and say anybody who goes past here has to pay a toll. Because what the hell would you people do out there? Are you going to go to your high school plays?

Everything is here. We've got the ballpark, we've got the football team. We've got the Powell Symphony Hall, we've got the whole schlamoola. I'm saying, "Yeah, I work where all the good stuff is."