

TV FEATURE

REALITY AT HOME

Lack of remodeling skills nabs Galveston native a plum role on TV show

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How about this for a TV series? Real-life neighbors are given \$1,000, the advice of a designer and the help of a carpenter to redo a room in each other's homes. They have only two days to complete the job, and cameras document everything. As you might expect, sometimes the redo is a hit. Sometimes it's a mighty flop.

Voilà! A reality series you can sink your teeth into — or maybe a nail.

But put aside your dreams of becoming a TV tycoon. The show is already on and has been since September.

Trading Spaces is averaging 1.5 million viewers each Friday it airs on TLC, says the show's host, Alex McLeod. That number is small by broadcast standards but impressive in the world of basic cable — and it's about to grow significantly. As of Monday, the series will be carried five days a week (3 p.m., TLC).

In addition, the show has already been picked up for another season.

"This isn't a do-it-yourself kind of show," said McLeod, a Galveston native and University of Texas graduate. "It's not a sitcom or a how-to show. We do some really bizarre stuff."

How's this for bizarre: On a future show from Round Top, a living room gets a paint job — three walls olive green, one wall deep pink.

It was loud enough for McLeod to step in and question the judgment of designer Frank Bielec. Bielec, of Katy, and other designers and carpenters are used on a rotating basis. (There are two designers and one carpenter per show.)

The one constant for every episode is McLeod, and



Alex McLeod hosts *Trading Spaces*, a TLC series in which neighbors redo a room in each other's homes. Starting Monday the series will air at 3 p.m. Mondays-Fridays.

it's not because of her prowess in the world of home design. In fact, she was hired for being the opposite.

"TLC wanted someone who would have fun," she said. "They wanted someone who could keep it light-hearted, who didn't know anything about home improvement. They figured they would get more comedic moments because I didn't know what I was talking about."

"I'm the voice of the viewer. I ask the questions people at home would ask. When I don't agree with a color scheme or with some of these crazy projects we do, I say so."

She said there are homeowners who flat out disagree with what the designers are doing and fight them the whole way. Usually the designers win them over, but not always.

"There was a man in Philadelphia who referred to his living room as a set from *Beetlejuice*," she said. "His living room was painted entirely in purple, and

the guy flipped out."

When McLeod isn't playing hostess or trying to calm frayed nerves, she helps with the redo, especially as the two-day deadline nears.

And, let's face it, she's also there to add some glamour.

She could be confused for a model, but modeling was never a career goal. She majored at UT in speech communications and tried her hand at broadcast journalism briefly, interning for a summer at KPRC-TV here.

"It wasn't exciting enough for me," she said. "I really was more interested in make-believe at the time."

So she went to UCLA to study acting, worked as a go-fer on a few productions, then started doing commercials and small parts on TV (*Married... With Children*, *Night Stand*).

She soon found her niche, co-hosting a show for Britain's Channel 4. Her work on that helped her land the TLC job. *Trading Spaces* is the American version of the BBC series *Changing Rooms*.

"We didn't even do a pilot," she said. "TLC was so sure that the concept and the casting was right, we went right to air, which is crazy. There's no director, and there's no script. It's wild. We all determine how things go for the two days."

"We" is McLeod, a production crew of 20, the two designers, the carpenter and the neighbors.

"When crew members aren't rolling cameras, they help paint, roll carpet or with other assorted chores," she said.

Sounds like work, and McLeod & Co. are getting their share of it. McLeod said she spends 20 days of every month on the road — a situation that keeps her personal life on hold.

She has a rich personal life, though, in the sense that she comes from a large and supportive family. Alex is one of five girls and one boy born to Sarah and Doug McLeod of Galveston. Dad is an attorney, a former member of the Texas House and a former council member and mayor pro-tem of Galveston.

"Because my dad was in the public eye, I spent a lot of time on the campaign trail with him," she said. "That's how I got hooked on being in the spotlight, I guess. He'd have this huge RV, and we would campaign from the back of it, going from town to town. It was hilarious."

Today, she said, "everywhere I go, people know the show. Kids want my autograph. We've got a lot of *Trading Spaces* groupies. It's weird."

"I've always wanted to see America, and what better way to do it than this?" she said. "I'm racking up the frequent-flyer miles and having a blast."