



michele mullen

Embracing eccentricity

Company: Mullen Heller Architects Inc.
Previous positions: Architect, Dallas (1985-1992); architect, Holmes Sabatini and Associates (1992-1999); private consultant (1999-2001)

Accomplishments/awards: American Institute of Architects design awards (2001 and 2007)

Community involvement: Served on City of Albuquerque's committee to select architects and engineers for public works projects

What is your favorite quote?

"My head is bloodied, but unbowed."
 (William Earnest Henley)

What mistakes did you learn the most from?

Being hesitant — when I second-guess my gut on a design or on taking on a particular project. If I'm hesitant and don't trust my instincts, I do live to regret it.

If you could go on a one-year sabbatical, what would you do?

Dress in black, drink coffee, paint a lot and explore my artistic side.

Maybe, some day, Michele Mullen will get to one of her dreams.

And then again, maybe not, because this one-time art history student has kind of a doozy.

"I think it was in 1987 that I came across New Mexico and was driving across the state through places like Vaughn, and you could drive for 90 miles and not see anyone," Mullen recalls of that long ago, lonely drive. "And then I studied Georgia O'Keeffe and I had this idea that I would come to the desert, become an isolated old lady, paint and wear black."

Mullen did indeed come to the desert, but she is far from being an estranged, eccentric artiste. Maybe that's because she's too busy running Mullen Heller Architects Inc. with her husband, Doug Heller.

The two started the small Albuquerque firm in 2001 and are also busy raising a 3-year-old daughter.

They don't ever want the firm to grow larger than 10 or 15 people because they like being architects and not people managers. And Mullen herself isn't a fan of the corporate world.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska in

1985, Mullen went to work for a large Dallas architectural firm.

"It was in Dallas that I decided that I didn't want to be part of the corporate world," she says. "It was a 100-plus person firm, and I saw that as you got older, you would get into management instead of doing the art of architecture."

"I don't like a lot of rules, and that's probably where the seeds were planted that I wanted to be a partner in my own firm."

Mullen moved to Albuquerque in April 1992 and went to work at the Holmes Sabatini architectural firm (now Dekker/Perich/Sabatini). Doug — then her boyfriend — followed her from Dallas. They were married in 1998.

Mullen Heller does 50 projects a year — everything from a 3,000 square-foot dentist office to the 26,000 square-foot Farm Credit Bureau building — and counts Mark Pardo Salons as a steady client. The firm also designed the Anasazi Downtown building.

So what rules does Mullen not like?

"I don't like the rigor of doing the same thing," she says, "and of being pigeon-holed."