

THIS GATOR IS

Landscape architecture alum David Font quiets the competition on HGTV's "Brother versus Brother"

"AMERICA'S TOP RENOVATOR"

BY ALYSSA FISHER

Never underestimate the underdog, especially if he is a Gator. David Font was the quiet landscape architect in a sea of loud interior designers and real estate professionals on "Brother vs. Brother," HGTV's newest design and renovation competition show that premiered this past summer. The dark horse of the competition, he was a silent threat, vying against 11 others for \$50,000 and the title of "America's Top Renovation Expert."

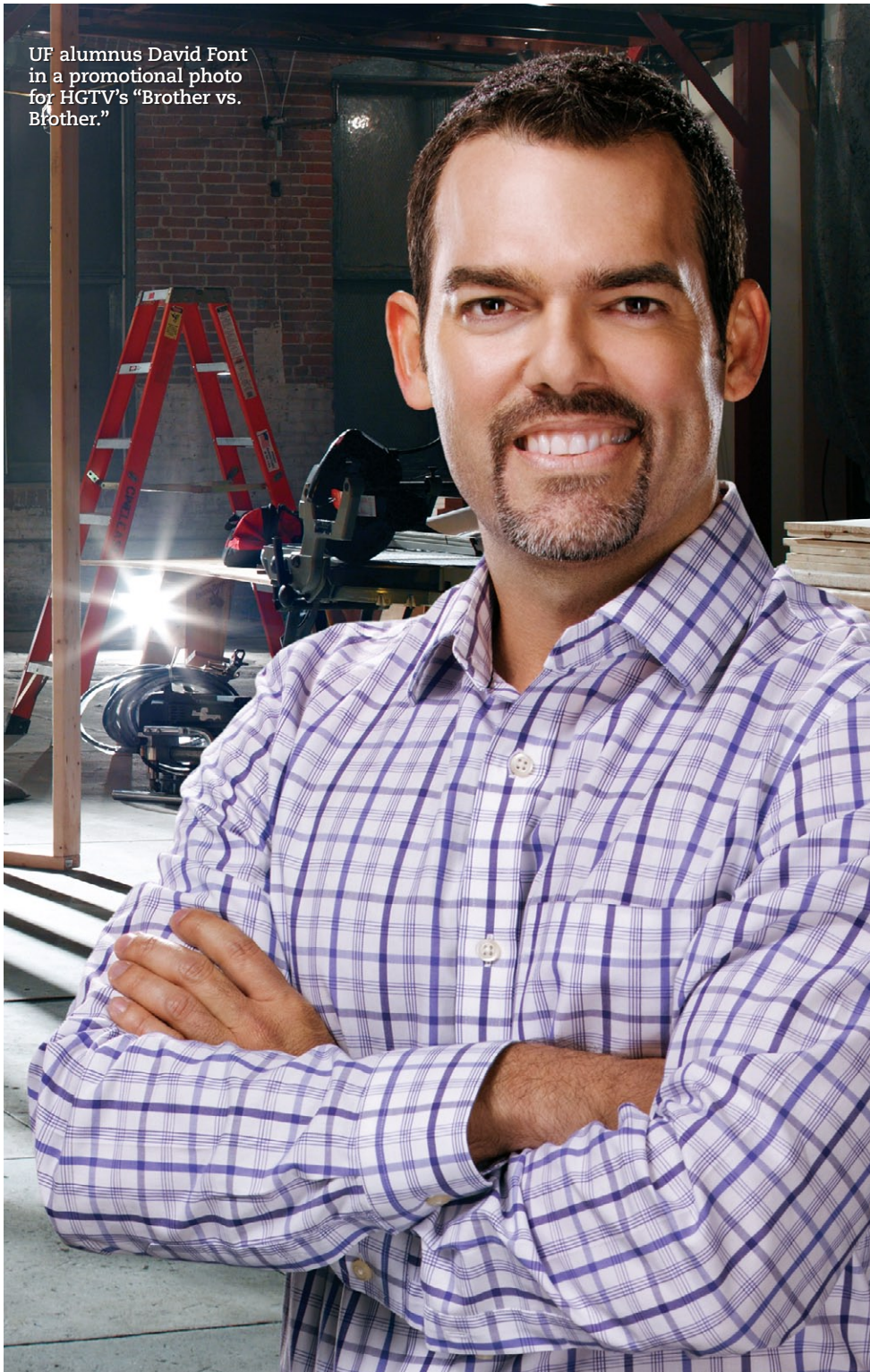
In 30 days, Font, a University of Florida 1998 landscape architecture alum, was part of a team that renovated 12 homes in Los Angeles. He says he was so focused on winning for his family that he usually forgot the cameras were on him.

"Brother vs. Brother" features twin brothers Jonathan and Drew Scott, the stars of HGTV's "Property Brothers." The show pits Jonathan's skills as a licensed contractor against Drew's skills as an experienced real estate agent as they and their teams renovate homes with an eye toward achieving the largest property-value increase. As a member of Drew's team, Font strategized about how to make it to the end.

"I played it like a chess match or a game of 'Survivor,'" he recalls. "I was very quiet on purpose. I let everyone else talk and sized them up to see what skills they had so that I wouldn't get kicked off the first episode. Then just kind of priming so I could do my own thing at the right time."

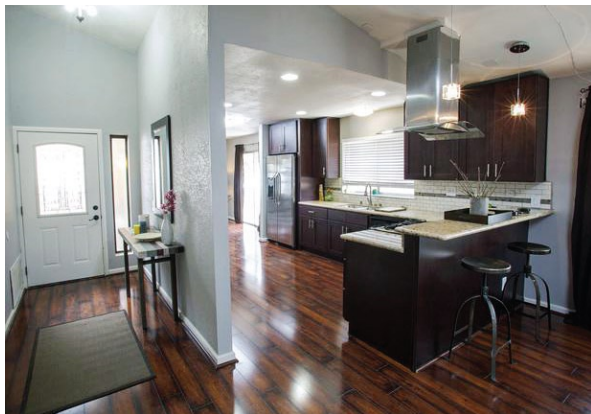
Font's edge was his training as a landscape architect. Nobody expected him to compete with professionals in interior design.

UF alumnus David Font in a promotional photo for HGTV's "Brother vs. Brother."





PHOTOS COURTESY OF HGTV



One of Font's winning designs.

He didn't always plan to work in landscape architecture. Font, now 39, was a member of a not-so-successful boy band when he was 24.

"It's been a wild ride how I've gotten everything in my life," he says. "I've never taken a direct path."

Font has proven that taking the road less traveled can lead to success. He went from a high school jock at Brad-dock Senior High in Miami about to join the Marines to a music major at Florida International University with a full scholarship for singing. After a few years hanging out with friends in the landscape architecture and architecture programs at FIU, Font decided to switch paths and become an architect. Unable to double major at FIU, he dropped his music scholarship and headed for Gainesville at age 19.

After deciding to focus on landscape architecture, he

was declined admission to UF. Undeterred, Font had an interview with the chair of the department, who admitted him.

"When I graduated, he said, 'I knew you would make it,'" Font recalls.

Font says he had a great education at UF, but became the designer he is today while studying abroad at the Vicenza Institute of Architecture, a satellite-learning program of UF in Vicenza, Italy.

"That's where I draw my design influences from, that trip," he says. "I formulated my design style. I realize that a lot of the influences I got on that trip are what separate me, what drives me as a designer now."

After graduating from UF, Font worked at EcoPlan, an international landscape architectural firm, and went through what he calls a "pre-mid life crisis." Twenty-four years old and unsure if he was happy with what he was doing, he turned back to music.

He successfully auditioned for a "boy band" in Miami, but with no immediate success after a music video and three singles, he knew it wasn't going anywhere.

"I had a serious girlfriend who is now my wife," he recalls. "I quickly switched gears and went back to landscape architecture because it's what I was trained in."

Font opened David Font Design in South Florida in October 2001 with his wife, Rachel Boutet-Font, a UF public relations graduate. After 13 years, his work, which is based in Miami-Dade and Broward counties, is 60 percent residential, and the rest is a mixture of commercial

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2013 recipient of the Sudler Trophy from the John Philip Sousa Foundation, an award bestowed to one university marching band every other year.

Also this year, UF's College of Fine Arts named Watkins as its Teacher of the Year.

"It's one of the things we talk about with the students. To whom much is given, much is expected," he says. "We have opportunities that a lot of people don't have, and we can't feel entitled about it. We need to go out and help other people."

A former high school teacher, Watkins still works with public schools throughout the region. By working with schools such as Gainesville High, Buchholz High and Fort Clarke Middle School, he cultivates a nationally-recognized talent pool in

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definition of 'entrepreneur' and discovered that's what I am."

The museum will be built in Depot Park, across South Main Street from its current temporary headquarters. It is scheduled to open in 2015. It already offers a busy schedule of classes, camps and outreach programs.

According to Miles, thousands of kids have come through the novel programs, under the direction of Patty Lipka.

"Muse' is the hidden word in 'museum,' and we want to stimulate visitors' creative muses and connect them with ideas, history and philosophies that would stimulate their own creativity," Miles explains. "We are not a collection-based museum. It is more about an experience and discovering your own creative potential."

In Miles' view, the Cade Prize

Gainesville. In fact, Gainesville is the only city in the country to have won all four Sudler awards, which go to selective middle school bands, high school concert and marching bands, as well as collegiate marching bands.

Watkins says the UF bands office fields around 40 or 50 requests for pep band performances each week. Although he has to protect students' time, the Gator Marching Band frequently partners with charitable organizations such as the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, March for Babies and Children's Miracle Network. When the band travels to road games or special events, the students do a service project near where they're staying.

"A lot of what we do, it's about entertaining other people," Watkins says. "It's not about what we do for us. It's about what we can do to make everybody else's life a little better." 🍀

is a natural extension of the museum's purpose.

"It complements the innovation that is going on here in Gainesville and draws more attention to it," she explains. There were more than 100 entrants the first year the cash grant was offered. (Entries for the 2014 prize are being accepted after December 1.)

Not surprisingly, Miles' definition of the spirit of Gainesville also incorporates creativity and innovation.

"From the beginning we were a crossroads for exports, routing the produce and products from all of Florida to destinations throughout the country," she muses. "The new iteration is also about exports, but now we are exporting ideas, inventions and innovations. To share our innovative spirit with others so that their lives are improved is truly what it means to embody the spirit of Gainesville." 🍀

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and hotel jobs.

Three years ago, he and Rachel sat in the studio, planning how to overcome the recession and stay afloat. Self-proclaimed aggressive, eager go-getters, the duo was ready to make a full brand of the name.

"We want David Font Design to be synonymous with pretty much all things design," he says. "We thought, 'well I guess we need to get on TV.' That's the best exposure."

About a week later and still unsure how to make that happen, "things got kinda trippy," he recalls. A casting company in Los Angeles called Font and asked if he wanted to showcase one of his projects on "The Outdoor Room," a TV show starring Jamie Durie, a leading landscape designer.

"I own a few of his books," Font says. "I just laughed. I thought one of my friends was playing a joke on me."

He agreed and was on TV for "all of 20 seconds." But he caught the Hollywood bug.

In 2011, Font auditioned for HGTV's "Design Star," a design competition where the prize is winning your own show. He made it to the final round of auditions in New York, but was instead asked to compete in a spin-off show called the "White Room Challenge." He was tasked to design a room using 1,500 flowers and came out victorious, beating out three interior designers.

Whenever he thought of himself as the underdog on "Brother vs. Brother," he thought of the "White Room Challenge."

"I kept hearing, 'but you're a landscape architect. What do you know about interior design?'" he recalls. "A good designer is a good designer. If you have a good eye, you're going to come out with a good product."

He brought his own edge to "Brother vs. Brother," translating his outdoor experience into an indoor success. But he wasn't always cool, calm and collected. Being on set was stressful, as everyone was hyper-focused on winning.

During one episode, when all the anxiety built up while renovating a bathroom, Font calmed himself down by thinking about Emily, his 6-year-old daughter and "future Gator." When the cameras weren't around, he took a marker and wrote, "love you, Emily" on his forearm just to remind himself why he was doing this.

"It's for my family, so we can get ahead and I can provide for her."

When Font was announced the winner, he lost his cool again – but in the best way.

"It was amazing," he says. "I let loose and yelled and screamed after Bret left the room. I was finally able to be myself." (Brett Karns was the other finalist.)

Since the show aired, Font's life has been "a little bit of a whirlwind." He's been doing speaking engagements, where he says he feels humbled and as if he's on a Disney ride when people stand in line to take pictures with him.

He has a contract with HGTV, and though he's not guaranteed his own show, he is talking about different project options. Following demand for interior design after the show, he opened up an interior side to the business. He's currently developing product ideas, working on a book and enjoying the opportunities that are arising.

"I'm literally on the front door step of this whole other world opening up to me," he says. "Hopefully I'm on my way to becoming a well-known designer and architect. We're on the cusp of creating a great brand. I know there's a lot more to come right now." 🍀