

# Global Brand, Local Talent

*Farooq Kathwari, Ethan Allen's CEO, president, and chairman discusses his career and the changes he's seen in the interior design industry over three and a half decades.*



**N**ew Rochelle resident Farooq Kathwari vividly remembers his youth in the mountains of Kashmir, where his grandfather brought him into his family's arts-and-crafts business at the age of 13. Honing his keen eye for beautiful design, along with his marketing and business acumen, Kathwari embarked on a long journey that would lead him to become the, CEO, president, and chairman of Ethan Allen Interiors, a position he's held since 1988.

Kathwari, 77, has been the driving force behind Ethan Allen's ascension to one of the top furniture companies in the world, with some 200 design centers located in North America and 100 overseas. Founded in 1932 as a manufacturer of Early American/Colonial-style furnishings, the company has greatly expanded its design styles under Kathwari's leadership while continuing to offer the high-quality craftsmanship it has been known for since its inception.



*Left and below:* Ethan Allen's CEO, president, and chairman Farooq Kathwari with his team at the brand's Hartsdale location. The company celebrates 90 years of innovation this year.

Looking back on his career, Kathwari says, "When I came to New York at age 20, I somehow got a job as a bookkeeper, although I had never seen a calculator in my whole life. My grandfather wanted to help me earn some extra money, so he sent me 12 wicker baskets of Kashmiri arts and crafts and told me to sell them and just send the cost back." This helped Kathwari pay for the business degree in marketing that he received in 1968 from New York University (which he attended at night).

Kathwari then climbed the ranks on Wall Street — starting as an analyst and becoming CFO of Rothschild & Co. by age 27 — all while selling his imported Kashmiri arts and crafts. In the early 1970s, one of his associates introduced him to Ethan Allen cofounder Nathan S. Ancell.

Kathwari says Ancell spoke to him about the company's hand-embroidered Kashmiri crewel fabric for its upholstery fabrics. "[Ancell] said they never came in on time and that there were lots of problems importing them and asked me if I could help. I had no idea, but I said yes. He gave me a sample, and long story short, I got into the fabric business," says Kathwari. A year later, he helped Ethan Allen out again by finding and importing rugs from Romania and India.

In 1973, Kathwari was invited to partner with Ethan Allen in a joint venture called Kathwari Ethan Allen, or KEA. "My offices and warehouse were located in a former bowling alley in



Larchmont," he says. Kathwari traveled the world, including Italy, India, China, and Portugal, importing goods for KEA.

In 1980, Kathwari merged his company with Ethan Allen and became a vice president. He rose to become president in 1985 and CEO in 1988. Kathwari's vision has brought many changes to Ethan Allen, starting with an ongoing expansion and update of the company's offerings in furnishings and accessories. Reflecting today's demands, the company currently has products under three styles: Classic, Country and Coastal, and Modern. "We've given people the opportunity of selecting products with a variety of styles but continue to maintain our focus on great design, great quality, and

something our customers can live with every day," he says.

Kathwari has also made a company commitment to producing more than 75% of its products in North America, in an effort to retain control over quality and craftsmanship. In addition, the company has chosen to promote interior designers from within the company to manage its stores, as a means to run them as all-in-one, whole-home custom-design centers (many Ethan Allen retail stores had been licensed by family businesses before their owners retired and sold their shops to the firm).

Under Kathwari's leadership, the company has also placed a major investment in new technology. "About 10 years



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back, we said we’d help our interior designers by giving them PC tablets, so they could work with the clients in the design centers and in their homes. Then, we installed big touchscreens in the stores so that clients and designers could work together and discuss different design options with our 3D Room Planner technology,” he says. This 3D technology, which has an online version for customers, became even more essential when COVID-19 hit and enabled Ethan Allen designers to continue to do business with clients on a virtual basis.

While Ethan Allen’s headquarters are in Danbury, the company’s 12,000-square-foot Hartsdale store is very close to Kathwari’s heart. “This spring, we will update the building and freshen up the outside and inside. In addition to the furnishings, accessories, and design-technology products (as well as workstations filled with samples of custom fabrics, leathers, and finishes), there will be new lighting, rugs, and outdoor-furnishing studios. We will also have all the new product lines that have been held up for the past year and a half because of COVID,” says Kathwari. “I live here; it’s one of our flagship locations, and over the next few months, you’ll see how we’re going to take it to the next level.”

Looking to the future, Kathwari says he has frequently been inspired while having breakfast or getting coffee at the BLD Diner in Larchmont. “About a year back, I did a plan on a napkin for a 30,000-square-foot design center,” says Kathwari. “People were shocked because technology has enabled us to reduce, not enlarge, the size of our design centers. Then I said, ‘No, I want a virtual design center, so our designers will have the ability to work with clients and take them through a virtual tour of the entire store.’” When launched in the near future, clients will be able to see everything they need to decorate their homes, from bedroom sets to living room lamps, in a virtual space. ■■

*Laura Joseph Mogil is a freelance writer residing in Briarcliff Manor. She has written about art and design for a variety of publications, including Westchester Magazine and Westchester Home.*