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RISING STARS

BY RIKI ALTMAN

PORTRAIT BY MARIA LANKINA

AFFAIRS TO REMEMBER

Karla Dascal Transforms Empty Spaces Into High-Gloss Happenings



Karla Dascal, here in her The Space Miami headquarters in Wynwood, has become one of the most sought-after event planners in Miami.

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY RICO BECKSCH; DRESS BY DIANE VON FURSTENBERG

She cannot turn steel into gold—just yet—but Karla Dascal, the 30something president and founder of Karla Conceptual Event Experiences is an alchemist, nonetheless, having managed to raise glittery bashes worldwide to a new level of luxe.

"I have been working with Karla since 1999 or 2000," says Marsha Soffer, one of Turnberry's corporate officers, who has hosted a number of business and private soirees over the years. "I've done a lot of huge parties, and I've been to her dinner parties, cocktail parties, corporate events. She is an extraordinary talent." Soffer recalls one lavish celebration where Karla installed a particularly astounding turquoise satin tent. "She said she had to go to Japan for [fabric with] the right night sheen. Nothing gets past her. She loves the best, and she's very dis-

cerning."

Just one look at Karla's 12,000-square-foot facility—event warehouse by day, event venue by night—and it becomes obvious that this gal is not

"I have a huge confidence in Miami. It's there on all different levels."

about kitsch. Coily christened "The Space Miami," this monster piece of real estate is a modern artist's dream, from the painted concrete floors to the sky-high ceilings and white walls in between. "I was the first person to put a building of this magnitude in

this area," Dascal says. Rene Gonzalez, principal of Rene Gonzalez Architect, says he planned the space to be an impactful backdrop for Dascal's "clever" designs. But it also serves as a minigallery for her funky art collection, which includes such pieces as a stapled lenticular-lens chandelier by Alyson Shutz, polystyrene-cup globes by Paul Cocksedge and a Tracy Kendall white paper installation. "I'm looking to be a very, very, very big and strong part of the growth of this city and bring really good times to people," she says. "I have a huge confidence in Miami. It's there on all different levels—the arts, performing arts, architecture."

Choosing an abandoned warehouse on the outermost border of the Wynwood art district was a risk. During the day neighbors from the flanking single-family homes with tarpaper roofs wander

KARLA DASCAL



Citigroup



Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden

around aimlessly, and homeless folks still sleep on the sidewalks. Even the converted house across the street, which announces "Electrical Contractors" in big plastic letters, is anything but sexy. But her luxury-brand clients seeking an alternative venue—Louis Vuitton, Ferrari North America, Neiman Marcus, Harry Winston and Bulgari among them—find it to be a hidden treasure. "I wanted to create something that was going to reflect what we did and the way that we did it," she says. But "having events here was not part of the plan."

Nicer digs surrounded her and her sisters in their youth, since their Cuban parents founded the South Motors Group. The middle daughter of Fanny and Charles Dascal, Karla grew up in Miami Beach and still calls the neighborhood home. After studying interior design and visual arts at Pine Manor College in Boston, she returned here in the early '90s and borrowed \$2,500 for her first business venture: selling exotic roses

stage-like setting." The multistoried space will accommodate events exclusively, and a pool, rooftop terrace and garden will add a variety of options for clients who want to make an impact on different levels simultaneously.

"Karla's very bold and very clear about what she wants," he says. "It's a great opportunity when I can work with people who are design-savvy." Dascal says she enjoys working with clients who have design and fashion sense and seeks out people with style who appreciate simplicity and elegance. Her roster features many corporate and celebrity names, including Swarovski, Greg Norman Production Company and Art Basel Miami Beach.

Iran Issa-Khan, chair of this year's annual Wolfsonian gala, gushes about how Karla and her team transformed the Bacardi headquarters into a venue for nearly 800 people by using an outdoor tent stabilized by thousands of pounds of water. "She said she wanted it to feel as if we were going into a rain forest," Issa-Khan says. Architectural elements such as Colombian driftwood with proteas, mirrored columns, Swarovski-crystal chandeliers and flickering candlelight set the mood. "Karla does all the big parties in town, and each one is different. She has an amazing eye and is so astute. And though she is a brilliant design person, Karla also has a heart. She's helped the museum—she donates flowers and centerpieces—and I know she believes in the arts

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Miami Art Central

to homes, hotels and boutiques in Bal Harbour. "My roses were spectacular—beyond long-stem, beautiful salmon color. They would last 10 to 12 days," she remembers. Soon she began depositing all types of imported flowers in one of developer Ugo Colombo's sales offices, and people began noticing that she had a unique flair. "The way I [arranged] the roses was my signature," she explains. "That's when the design process started taking form." Not long after, she was being asked to handle small design jobs and events, and Roses by Karla became RBK Productions. In short order, her talents had outgrown her company name, too.

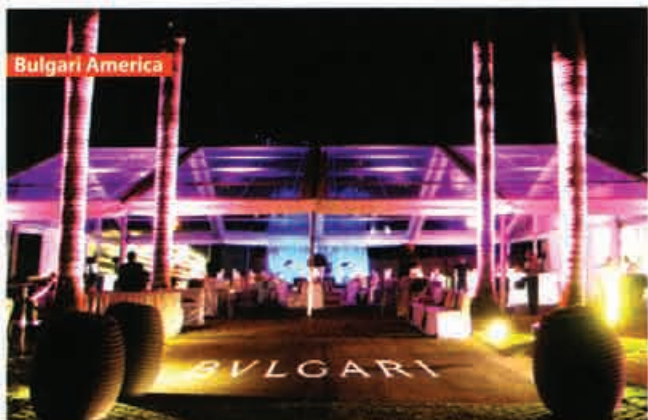
Her clients have seen past the plants, though florals remain her basic medium; she has once again tapped Gonzalez to design a 30,000-square-foot partyplex in nearby lots, which is slated for completion late next year. "It will be decadent, luxurious and interesting in the sense that the buildings are meant to allow people to see other people," Gonzalez explains. "It will offer a dramatic,

and helps charities."

But when we meet, Karla is in the midst of tying up plans for a client's bat mitzvah, set to culminate days later in the Carnival Center's Studio Theater, otherwise known as "The Black Box." It's a venue she really likes, and for good reason—the ebony walls, floor and ceiling are the perfect canvas for creativity and metamorphosis. After eight meetings with the family ("Social clients need that attention," she explains), Karla and her team are putting the finishing touches on items that will become the 13 year old's VIP nightclub, complete with identification cards for the kids. A three-dimensional rendering shows what the finished product will entail, but I suspect it is nothing compared to the real deal.

Dascal gives me a tour of The Space Miami, which she uses to store everything from fresh flowers to caviar and glass cylinders to iron accents. One of her employees hobbles by with a cane and she inquires, "What did you do?" The man explains that he fell while walking and shows a long bloody scar on his forearm. She gasps and quickly solicits, "Are your hands okay?" He nods, then she turns to me and, with an apologetic smile, explains, "I need his hands."

Along with her assistant and various production folks, Dascal also employs ironworkers, carpenters, acrylic workers, floral arrangers and seamstresses, as



Bulgari America

KARLA DASCAL

most of the accessories used at the events are created in-house. The upcoming bat mitzvah is no exception: She and her team have worked tirelessly to create candelabras etched in acrylic, a glowing DJ station with a floral motif, and centerpieces so dense with petals that even a nectar-seeking bumblebee would lose its way.

Employees are easily identifiable by their white or black uniforms. "It's all about image," explains Dascal, who is dressed in a long-sleeve multicolored sweater top, sandals and blue jeans, her blonde hair braided and no trace of makeup on her face. With her freshly tanned forehead and cheeks, compliments of a recent trip to the Turks and Caicos, she gives off an air of confidence. But, she divulges, that was not so just a few years ago.

In her business, as in much of the Miami scene in general, representation is everything. And that has always been a priority for Dascal, even when she was struggling with her weight earlier in her career, a challenge she addressed a few years ago when she underwent gastric-bypass surgery and dropped 75 pounds. "I built my business on my personality," she says. "People knew I was heavy and on the wrong way, but they didn't see me that way. It never stopped me from getting into the right party or being in the right place. People really loved me for me." But, she admits, she was having a very hard time getting her name out there and proving herself. "This business can be very

calmer. I trust. I try to surround myself with people on the same path. I look for good hearts before talent," she explains. "People who have good values, are sensitive, people who put 100 percent in everything they do. I have really excellent people. They're all my friends."

At 6:30 p.m. on Saturday night, dozens of those "excellent people" are at the Studio Theater, set to work. Karla has dashed home to change outfits. On one side of the room, long white seating areas adorned with custom-made pillows await the stylishly covered bottoms of more than 100 children. The seating area is cordoned off with Retractable-Belt crowd-control posts like one would find at any nightclub. A sound guy wearing a blue shirt announcing "I ♥ Mitzvah Moms" attempts to appease a security guard, while a cameraman practices swinging the boom. Caterers set out plates and the audio-visual folks entertain everyone with animation and live video on a 16-foot ring screen suspended high above. The strange thing



"This business can be trying. You only have one shot."

trying. You only have one shot at it. I started realizing I was completely overworked."

It was a diabetes scare that brought everything to a halt. "It was out of control. I had to do something about it," she remembers ruefully. After the surgery, she quickly found that the gym and a drastic change in diet were to become her number-one priorities. She began eating only raw foods, started practicing yoga and found a life coach. Now her perspective on life is different. She befriended "spiritual healers who are very into self-love and a higher state of consciousness," which enabled her to "turn things out in a much calmer and passionate way. Through all of that, my company kept growing and growing."

"She's been undergoing a change, mentally and spiritually," says her younger sister, Liz Dascal, who is one of Karla's project managers and her frequent early-morning exercise buddy. "She's more aware, more conscious, and she's working on her patience. She's a perfectionist and has a passion for her business. But that isn't a downfall—it's a good thing."

Dascal's face lights up when she shows me one of her favorite finds, an enormous Jill Greenberg portrait of a flushed little girl, mid-scream, entitled *Shock*. It seems as though the girl is in pain, but Karla says the photo always brings a smile to her face.

"My life has completely transitioned. I'm much

is, no one is running around or breaking a sweat. There are no cries of, "This better get done before she gets back!" It is as if everything is choreographed down to the minute.

By about eight o'clock, the acrylic boxes are set aglow with blue light. Pink and turquoise daisy platters are in full spin around the room. Twinkling martini glasses are switched on, and dancers are slipping into their super-bling hip-hop gear. Karla returns, decked out in a green leopard-print dress, a fierce gold-horn necklace and black patent-leather peep-toe pumps. "I think it's fantastic!" she says with a smile, as waves of blonde curls distribute themselves randomly over her shoulders. "I'm thrilled."

The DJ dons his headphones and starts filling the air. *Bump-bump-bump*. Madonna's voice spreads forth with, "Hey, mister DJ..." then chants from The Ones' dance hit cut in with a loud cry: "Absolutely flawless!" As if on cue the doors fling open, welcoming surges of sensor-shocked guests. Another Karla event—in its glorious perfection—is underway. 📺

