



'Design Star's' First Gay Gal Leslie Ezelle - Exclusive Interview

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A Mom of four, a former Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader and breast cancer survivor Leslie Ezelle is making waves as the first out gay female contestant on HGTV's *Design Star*. An interior designer who hails from Dallas, Ezelle's on-screen personality reflects a down-home sensibility with a big dash of modern chic. Passionate beyond belief about everything from design to her heyday as a professional cheerleader to her fundraising for the Susan G. Komen Foundation Ezelle's energy is infectious.

While the second episode of *Design Star* aired this Monday, Ezelle has already proved she's a force to be reckoned with as a dynamic designer and an intriguing television personality – both are qualities needed to win the competition and land her own design show on HGTV.



Ezelle kickstarted her own design company, Leslie Christine Designs, two and a half years ago, coming to her business with a wide range of design experience from remodels to home staging for real estate agents. She helps clients “tame their domain,” she says, and believes that the happiest, healthiest environments are stress-free, organized homes. Her design style is “simple, traditional elegance,” which bolsters a less-is-more philosophy that’s easy and inexpensive.

After her last breast cancer surgery on December 27, 2010, Ezelle realized her dream of having her own design show. She sent in her designs to HGTV, and in March of 2011 began filming *Design Star*.

SheWired caught up with Ezelle to talk about coming out and being out in Dallas, her time as a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader, surviving breast cancer and finally realizing what you want to be when you grow up, and what it’s like being a competitor on *Design Star*.



Thanks so much for taking time to chat with me. You have been doing well on *Design Star* so far! Congratulations. It's very refreshing to have you representing gay women on the show. It's always expected that there will be a handful of gay men, but no one ever expects a lesbian – especially not one who was a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader!

You know, I'm the first and only – that I know of – woman that's gay out of all six seasons on HGTV's *Design Star*. They've had plenty of men, but I'm the first gal! I actually didn't know that, but one of the guys pretty high up in the network told me "You're the first one that we've ever had!" I was like, "Alright, cool!"

With your background you really don't fit the stereotype middle America might have of gay women.

I think I break America's stereotype. I've got the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader card. Come on, let's face it here. [laughs]

Now that *Design Star* is airing, and you're rocking it, how is business going?

It has been like a whirlwind. It has just been so crazy. The press has been great, and I think a lot of it is because of what we just talked about - how I break the stereotype, and also the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleading thing. The press is kind of fascinated with it.

It's Texas, and anyone living in Texas knows it's huge. Even though I'm an old has-been – it's been 20-something years since I was out there shakin' and bakin' – but it is still a fascinating card.

I'm from Dallas and quite familiar with the Dallas dance scene, including Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders (DCC). It's a tight-knit group.

That's right! It's like a sorority. Inside Edition just did a little special on us – on the "has-beens" [laughs] – and they happened to pick my year as having something like the best alumni of all time.

So, Inside Edition did this little re-cap story of "what they are doing now?" When we did the episode, I knew that I was going to be on *Design Star* but I couldn't say it yet. It was so brutal. He was asking what we do, what's our story, and I blurted out, "I'm gay, I have my own design company, I want to have my own design show, and I went through breast cancer." Sure enough, I got airtime, except they cut out the gay part. Isn't that funny? Why wouldn't they put in the gay part? I don't know what went on with that.

That seems very odd. Was it due to your affiliation with the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders?

You know what? It could have been. I mean, all of this is about to come out. But I know that they are completely fine with it. They have all been very sweet and never tried to censor me.

Are you able to be involved in other projects now or are you too busy with the design work?

Well, I am doing some really cool things for Susan G. Komen right now. I'm kind of in bed with them, and I have to say, couldn't be happier. When I went through breast cancer I was basically just a turd when I went through it. I didn't want to have anything to do with anything pink. I still don't because pink is just not my color palette.

I'm right there with ya!

I was completely fine in denial - didn't want my kids to know. I continued to be the mommy and make Halloween costumes and hide the medicine, hide the IVs when I was in the hospital. After it was all over with, at the end of the day, I found myself asking these soul-searching questions of what I want to be when I grow up. The answer came back loud and clear – that I don't just want to have my own design firm; I want my own design show. So, that's when I got enough motivation and drive to pick myself up and just go with this crazy *Design Star* thing.

It was breast cancer that motivated me to do all this, so now I'm trying to be the Good Samaritan and give back to an organization that was there for me even though I denied them. So I did this private viewing party [for the premiere of *Design Star*] as a fundraiser. I set my sights and said, "Ok, June 6th the press release came out about *Design Star*. By the time the first episode airs July 11th, I want to have \$25,000 raised for Susan G. Komen." By the time the night came, it was \$29,000 that we had hit towards the final goal of \$50,000.

Oh wow! Congrats!

I know! It was like "Wham, Bam, thank you ma'am!" Even though it was hard as h-e-double-hockey-sticks to ask people for money – like, oh my God, if I had to do that for a living... It's so hard!

So now, me and this gal who works for Susan G. Komen, are doing some really great things. I'm trying to reach out to those women who are younger that are going through it and don't feel like a woman anymore, and let them know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

You do get your sexuality back; you do start to feel empowered.

It's awesome to be able to give back to an organization that you feel connected to.

You know, I didn't while I was going through it. I just kicked them to the curb. It was not on my to-do list.

Breast cancer was not an option, neither was the hospital. I just kept getting handed these cards that were just not on my list of things to do. But I did, and I finished – my last surgery was December 27, 2010, and then March of 2011 I was doing *Design Star*. Woo hoo! [laughs]

That is a fast turn-around!

I know. It was kind of grueling. I could see I was going to be scarred, and I have my four little radiation tattoos – anybody that has been through it knows about the tattoos – and I know it's not perfect, but it's me, and I am alive. It did end up taking its toll on my spirit but toward the end when I could see, "It is going to be ok, I am going to live, I gotta get busy living," I set my sights on what it is I wanted to do. Then poof, it happened. It was really cool.



Sometimes it just takes being forced to step out of whatever part of your life to be able to find those amazing opportunities that are there for you.

That's exactly right! You can't see it when you're going through it. So, now I am connected to the pink.

I do have a little thing I did today, actually, for Susan G. Komen that is exactly about this very thing – about getting back in touch with your sexuality. I call it "Bringing Sexy Back After Breast Cancer." So I have a little pink ribbon around my radiation tattoo. I do feel connected to it now, whereas before – oh my God, you would never catch me running around in a pink boa! [laughs]

Now I have come full-circle to help. I want to make a difference to these women who are really feeling down in the dumps. There is hope.

It's great that you are so empowered by the whole experience – especially since you were so adamantly in denial at first.

It definitely has empowered me. I don't wish it on anyone. You shouldn't have to go through breast cancer to figure out what you want to be when you grow up [laughs] – you know, there's another way to skin a cat – but this is the way it landed for me, and I'm a better person because of it.

In my twenties I started having indications that there were problems with the little girls – and they were very little at the time. When I cheered, I had no boobies. I waited until I was in my late thirties to get boobies [laughs], and then they had to cut them off.

As a matter of fact I have a really funny story from when I was cheering... Because I had no boobs, I had shoulder pads in my bra to make it look like I had boobs.

Do tell...

We go out in the beginning of the game, and do our little dance. Well, we come in and the choreographer starts yelling, "Whose shoulder pad is on the field? They had to bring a referee out there to get the shoulder pad off the field!" I was sitting there thinking, "How could

that possibly happen? How could someone's shoulder pad have fallen out?" So, I go to the bathroom, and realize it's my shoulder pad - definitely my shoulder pad. Of course I didn't tell them, and they still don't know. I guess they will now!

I think it's been long enough, they won't be mad.

It was so funny. At the time I was like, "Oh my God, its me! I need to hide, and get another shoulder pad quickly so they won't know its me!" [laughs]

Anyway, I have kind of known there were issues since my twenties, and for women who are going through breast cancer in their twenties it can really feel like you'll be maimed for life, or never feel like a sexual being again, or a woman again. But you do get there – it's a process, but I definitely feel like I can relate to those young women who are going through it.

You got started in the design business a little bit later on in life. You were a performer for a while and a professional cheerleader...

And I did Spirit cruises in New York City! [laughs] It's a cruise ship that goes around the Statue of Liberty. As a performer, you sing and you dance for the short cruise, and then you schlep drinks the rest of the time. Its like what every actor does when they go to New York.

Sounds like it turned out to be good training.

It was great training. It made realize I didn't want to do that forever! [laughs]

Have art and design always been a part of your life?

Art has always been in my back pocket. I painted for my own pleasure. As far as design is concerned, I have always helped people with houses – all my friends, my relatives. I built houses for my mom and my dad from the ground up... I've done it for quite a while.

It's just for the past about two and a half years now that I have had my company and started going out and pursuing all those bachelors out there. My male clients that are bachelors are my favorites. They love everything I do, they're super easy to work with and they have deep pockets – love that about them

You have a full house with you, your wife, four kids and your pets. Are you the designer and organizer at home, especially when it comes to kids' spaces?

Oh yeah! I mean, forget the kids' rooms! My God! My mom let me do whatever I wanted to when I was in high school, to the extent of letting me draw this gigantic mural that was like a cover of Vanity Fair magazine that was painted on my wall in my bedroom.

Since my mom let me do crazy things like that, with my kids, all bets are off – except for the fact that I always encourage them to edit and delete. My big thing is, "do you want to take it to college? Really think about it, and if not, lets delete it, recycle it or give it to somebody else."



Do you and your wife have similar design aesthetics?

I have this friend Michael, a designer in New York, who came down when Libby and I first joined forces together, because our styles were so different from each other. I definitely lean more toward the modern sort of look with clean lines. I love the 50's period. Lib definitely was traditional - old school traditional. He came down to referee us. Now, finally, she's come on over to the other side. She just said she gave in. It's not good to say no to me - just say yes [laughs].

Well, you're married now, so it definitely turned out just fine!

We're a blended family. She's got three kiddos – twin boys and an older daughter. That's Gregory, Matthew and then Taylor. Then the youngest is Ella, who I adopted from China.

We married in October 2008 in Cape Cod. It's legal there - not so legal in Dallas. But that's okay; we're working on that.

In December of 2008 I found out I had breast cancer. Oh, and the weekend we got married the market crashed, and Lib works in investments, so that was tough. It was a booger-bear. Now we are on to better times, thank God.

How long have you been out?

When I was shakin' and bakin' on the field with the Dallas Cowboys, I was definitely dating a lot of guys. In 1990 I went to a musical theater conservatory here in Dallas and that's when I figured the whole other side out. So, it's been 21 years now.

What was your experience like coming out? I know from experience that the general perception is that Dallas is very anti-gay, but there is this great art scene and a huge gay scene. It's still the south, but it is also a major city with all kinds of people.

Yeah, but you know what? Dallas has put the "big girl" panties on; we have become a big girl! We are like a real city now. The arts district is fantastic! Even since 2006 or 2007, it has completely changed. Downtown is hippity happening.

The nightlife scene is fantastic. The gay community in Dallas - I think it is because it's the Bible belt -- is really strong. We have our strip, whereas in LA and New York - I have lived in both - it is really segregated. It's like this is the girls' team and this is the boys' team. In Dallas it's like one big huge family, a very tight community.

The coming out thing though, with DCC, was a slow, gradual process. Actually, that's not totally true. I went to a reunion like two years after I had cheered, and somehow a gal had found out about it. I was out to my close friends, but not to everyone. So, I was still uncomfortable with the terminology, and I didn't really want those girls to know. This gal comes running from across the football field yelling, "Oh my God, Leslie! I can't believe you're gay!!" Screaming at the top of her lungs. I was dying.

In my inner circle in Dallas, it is so not a big deal. Yes, it's a little bit of a fascination because we are the real Modern Family. It's cool with the kids, like "you got two moms, that's cool." No one looks down upon us, there's no religious sort of stigma attached to it. Fascinated maybe - but not in a negative way.

Moving on to your time on *Design Star*, in the first few episodes that have aired you are doing great things, and in no time at all. It's crazy to watch, and has to be a million times crazier to actually be doing these big projects in these short amounts of time.

I really did think that there was like the magic of TV Land. I would be watching at home going "Okay, this is so ridiculous. Everybody is running, everybody is crying - they look hilarious! I would so not do that if I'm on that show!" And I did, I completely did every bit of that except for the cry part. I was running around in heels like an idiot.

I thought, when I was watching at home, "Yeah, right. They've got hours to do that. You know they stop the cameras and they continue to work. There's no way that was really eight hours." Truth be told, eight hours is really more like four hours because the clock really doesn't stop for anything. It was way more intense...

When I look back and remember judging whoever for making some stupid paint choice, I get it now. When you're under pressure, and have to do something and make a snap decision.



The second episode was the white box challenge. That's always a crazy one.

Yeah, they give you a white space, and then drop you somewhere random - one year it was like a pet store. Then you go into the pet store or wherever and buy hamster stuff and kitty litter and make magic in this white box. It's crazy. When I did get accepted [to *Design Star*] I started thinking what could be the different places that they would drop me. You can try to strategize, but then you get there and it's a whole different ball game.

They dropped us off outside a graffiti covered building. I couldn't have seen that one coming. There is no preparing for *Design Star*. Design boot camp is what it is.

You have to react to these wild scenarios they put you in, not just design-wise, but you are competing to have your own show so you also have TV personality challenges. How were those for you?

Writing my own script, and having to do it in 30 seconds, and pull it out of my boo-tay was challenging! I didn't like that game. I really did think they would give me cue cards or something.

My whole platform is that I'm the real *Modern Family*. I'm not so much into staged or planned anything. I like the whole "real" aspect of it, including my life. I think my life is intriguing and part of my whole design concept for a show. Very little talking straight on to the camera sort of deal, it would be something different and edgy. That's my dream.



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Which of the contestants on *Design Star* would you hire to do a job?

Let's see what kind of a politician response we can get. [laughs] You know, the deal is, when I was in my little bubble of *Design Star* that is exactly what it was. You're very much in competition mode. I was asked a couple times in the little interviews that they do on the show, "Who are you bonding with? Who's your friend? Who would you design with?" My response every time was, "Honestly, all I can think about is what my next move is. I'm not here to make friends. I do want to be friendly, and play well with others." Not that I wanted to be mean or ugly, I certainly wanted to get along with the people that I was there with - and I did quite well - but I was not there to pick and choose or judge anything.

I was like a horse in a race. I had my little blinders on, and the carrot was straight ahead. I was running ahead, trying my best to stay above water and not look to one side or the other. So, I don't know who I would pick. It would be like putting all the names in a hat - except for Cathy. I would not put her name in the hat.

Let's just talk about working with the woman. HELLO. She tried to hand me my ass every other minute.

So she didn't just cut the episode to look like there was friction?



Yes! She did it to herself. What you saw was the tip of the iceberg is all I will say. It is portrayed accurately. I was determined - and this was the first thing right out of the shoot - I kept telling myself, "I am not going to engage, I will not be that one that has conflict and drama because I am here to get my own design show. I could care less about having drama with someone else."

I'll be damned if I didn't get hooked up with her right out of the shoot. [laughs] So, it looked as if I was very passive. But truth be told, the living room was about way more than the coffee table... I feel like I was 99 percent responsible for that room aside from the bench. I had nothing to do with that bench.

Well, that was a great coffee table and I think you did such a great job with the rest of the room that Cathy's bench didn't really matter.

Thank you for that. There were little things that really bothered me, but under the circumstances I was able to pull it off. I am proud of it. I want that coffee table by the way. It's better in person. It's really hot.

So if you had unlimited resources, funding and time to complete a project, what would be your dream design job?

Kind of what I am doing right now. I don't know what I have unlimited resources, but my dream design jobs are these bachelor men in the high-rises that have these fantastic views, like a penthouse. I love doing bedrooms for them. I go in there and tell them, "This is going to be a babe magnet for you. Women are never going to want to leave your pad."

My job is to make the men look like men – its still very masculine and not too over the top.

But that's my dream - where they are open-minded and I get a sense of who they are and what their style is, and what they do for a living and try to incorporate all those things about them into the space. That's my favorite – those types of environments. Not the kids' stuff, believe it or not, which is what I am living in [laughs].

Is there anything else you have coming up that we should know about?

I am still trying to get to \$50,000 for Susan G. Komen, so if anyone wants to graciously give to the pink, they can do that on my website, as well as read my blog about the show.

