His Old House
Kevin O’Connor went from bank exec to home improvement host

It began with stubborn old wallpaper. That’s what set Kevin O’Connor on a short road from fan to host of WGBH’s This Old House, the long-running home-improvement television series that is one of Boston’s most beloved cultural exports.

In 2002, O’Connor, then a bank executive with some construction experience, and his wife, Kathleen, bought their first house. “It was a total fixer-upper,” he says of the 1894 Queen Anne Victorian. “We wanted something we could work on,” but before long, “we had a list of stuff we couldn’t figure out on our own.”

The couple e-mailed a question about wallpaper removal to Ask This Old House, a spin-off show featuring the flagship program’s team of experts. “Remarkably, given the amount of e-mails I now know they receive, they answered ours,” says O’Connor (GSM’99).

General contractor Tom Silva arrived at the O’Connor home north of Boston a few weeks later, with painting contractor Jim Clark and WGBH cameras in tow. The enthusiastic O’Connor quickly developed a rapport with the crew as he and his wife stripped the walls under Clark’s direction. Full of good questions and quick to learn, he proved an ideal subject for the do-it-yourself segment.

“What I didn’t know then,” he says, “was that the former host, Steve Thomas, was planning to retire, so they had an eye out for his replacement. They called me a month later, completely out of the blue, and asked: ‘Do you want to host This Old House?’ I didn’t believe it.”

In April 2003, at age thirty-four, O’Connor became the host of This Old House, the third in the show’s history. It’s “the coolest job,” he says. “The guys are great . . . I get to work with the best people in the building trades; it is a sort of round-the-clock tutorial — hopefully for the viewers as well as the homeowners in the process.”

O’Connor has been a fan of the television show all his life. In his native Maplewood, New Jersey, he grew up watching This Old House on weekends with his dad and brothers. “I loved working with my hands and building stuff — typical stuff like tree forts, go-carts — anything that put a power tool or sawdust in my hands.”

Not so typical, the O’Connor kids — five boys and two girls — had a father who was a civil engineer, known for the 1970s expansion of Newark International Airport. “So our tree fort was the only one in the neighborhood with full sheets of plywood and real two-by-fours and stuff my dad snagged off the job site,” he says. “We had a real serious tree fort.”

When he got older, O’Connor worked construction on his father’s projects, including two thirty-story towers. That continued during the summers after he enrolled at the College of the Holy Cross.

Later, O’Connor earned an M.B.A. at Boston University. He was a senior vice president at Bank of America when he got the call from This Old House.

Now in his sixth season, the Emmy-nominated host is still asking questions of the experts. And he continues to restore his Victorian, room by room. “It’s satisfying to take that house, which was pretty run-down and dilapidated, and turn it into a place my wife and son and I just love.”

It also means that O’Connor can both “relate to the frustrations of homeowners,” he says, “and appreciate the satisfaction” when a project is finished.

Patrick Kennedy (COM’04)

This article originally appeared on the Boston Irish Tourism Association Web site at www.irishmassachusetts.com.