



**KENDRA SHEA, IIDA, NCIDQ**  
Interior Designer/Owner at KS Shea Designs

Kendra Shea first earned her AAS in 2010 from New York School of Interior Design and started her career at a startup hospitality firm with a design focus on nightclub and restaurant renovations. After leaving the east coast, she then continued her education, earning her BAA in 2015 from The Art Institute of Seattle. During her schooling there, she found her passion for volunteering and networking, joining the Puget Sound Campus Center Council as a student and served as Event Chair and PSCC President. As a professional, she took on the role of Director of the PSCC and then VP of Campus Centers. Kendra continued in hospitality design focusing on hotels and multi-family before then moving to work on small medical TI, community spaces, and education design. In 2019, she received the IIDA NPC Emerging Professional Award. That same year, she and her husband, Simon, opened their own small design studio, KS Shea Designs, specializing in contract production work and any project where she can flex her love of color and pattern. In 2020, Kendra obtained her NCIDQ. Outside of design, she enjoys a good dance class, working in her garden, walks with her pug, Netflix, or playing video games.

**Q: Brief intro/What type of work do you do/ where do you work?**

A: I am an independent designer. Most of the time, I work as a contractor and assist in production of Permit and Construction Documents for Residential and Commercial projects for other design firms. I also take on a few full commercial design projects throughout the year, either on my own or collaboratively with another design firm.

**Q: When did you decide to take the NCIDQ Exam? How did you decide what order to take them in?**

A: I decided to take the NCIDQ in 2019, about 5 years into working in the field. I had planned to take the tests in spring of 2020, which got pushed to fall 2020. I knew I wanted to start with the FX since I had been out of school a few years and figured starting back at the basics made sense. The next logical test was the PX, since I knew I wanted to finish with the PRAC, as it was the one that gave me the most anxiety. I also stacked the FX and PX a week apart at the beginning of the month and then took the PRAC at the end of the month.

**Q: Did you fail any exams/retake any? How did you stay motivated through that process work?**

A: I did not fail any of the exams.

**Q: How long did you study for the exams? What did you use to study?**

A: I studied for six months, but some of that was because of the COVID-19 pause. I started studying in January 2020 and kept studying until the spring testing cycle was cancelled at the end of March. I took a break and started studying again in July of 2020 and took all the exams October 2020.

I studied a few different ways. I learn best by writing, so since I had already read through the NCIDQ Reference Manual the first round of studying, I took the time to write out the entire book (not just certain parts) on flash cards for myself. My IIDA chapter has an NCIDQ study program that gave me weekly check-ins and access to people who had already taken the test and could give advice on what to expect at the testing center and test content.

I also found a group of other designers taking the tests at the same time. They were by far the most valuable assets to me passing the first time around. Other designers' experiences with things I had not encountered yet in my career was super helpful in understanding a lot of the PX. Also having someone who is in the thick of it with you to give some perspective when you're panicking about all there is to remember the days before you test is a must!

**Q: Has the practice of interior design lived up to your expectations that you had as a student? Any surprises or disappointments?**

A: The practice of interior design has some similarities to school, but in many ways is very different. I talk about this a lot in my podcast, *Design Over Drinks!*

School is all about finding your voice as a designer while also giving you the technical skills and knowledge of design fundamentals to work in the field. Because the reality is that the first 8–10 years, the “Emerging Professional” years, are often spent at a computer, doing finish plans, interior elevations, and finish schedules, not Design with the capital D. Instead, you collaborate with a group of other designers and architects to design a space, but you as an individual are no longer the sole person creating the entire design start to finish in a vacuum. Sometimes you’ll even come in after many decisions have already been made, but still need to produce a functioning interior space. It takes time to become a principal and design lead within the profession and be the one making final decisions on design again.

On the flip side, I was ready to go into the workforce and use the software programs I had learned. I was prepared for deadlines and that inevitable last-minute push to get it all done. I understood a basic CD set and what went into one. I knew generally what kind of spaces I enjoyed designing, what kind of design work I wanted to try, and what part of the process was fun for me. In that way, I was ready to start working and show off my skills.

**Q: What advice would you give to current students that you wished you had received?**

A: Network, Network, Network! Being a part of your design community is a must. Find a professional organization in your school and join — ideally as many as you can as a student. Those connections will open doors for you in the future. Also take as many internships as you can before you leave school. Showroom, dealer, design firms — don’t be picky. Take them all, and you’ll get a better idea of what you can do besides working at an architecture firm. This is a great way to experience the realities of the

design field, especially if you want to pursue commercial design.

**Q: Why did you become NCIDQ Certified/why was it important to you?**

A: As a commercial designer going out on my own, I felt having NCIDQ Certification shows to both my contract and design clients that I have knowledge and dedication to the health, safety, and welfare of them and the spaces I help create.

**Q: How has having an NCIDQ Certificate benefited you and your career?**

A: Having my NCIDQ has been a benefit in that I do have more credibility as a designer. It has given me better work opportunities and even become president of my local IIDA chapter.

**Q: Have you/are you interested in pursuing any other credentials/certifications or licensure/registration/certification in a jurisdiction? If so, please provide those details.**

A: I have considered WELL Certification in the future, but nothing else at this time.

**Q: What could the industry do to overcome obstacles from diverse individuals being represented and having equal opportunity?**

A: This is one of the biggest changes I hope to see during my time in the industry — more diversity in all aspects of the profession not just interior designers, but manufacturers, builders, reps, and dealers. Diversity within interior design will be a long-term systematic change that needs to stem from industry leaders, giving their designers and employees the time and space to foster the introduction to the profession. Build in time for designers to be part of interior design programs in the public-school systems, and other programming by professional organizations, not on their own time, or on top of the long hours designers often have.

However, the barrier to entry is still very high. It can’t just stop at introducing young people to the profession. Resources, such as scholarships and funded mentorship programs to help prospective students find and afford the cost of education, supplies, programs, and even

certification, are desperately needed. For every foundation fostering diversity in architecture students, there should be one for interior designers as well.

**Q: What are common misconceptions people have? How can we combat these misconceptions and communicate more effectively?**

A: I ask this too on my podcast and what I hear the most as the biggest misconceptions are that design is “pillows and paint,” or it isn’t as easy as DIY TV programming makes it seem. I also believe the misrepresentation of the industry on TV does not convey to the average viewer that interior design is a viable career option or all that it entails. It only shows what goes into designing the wealthy residential market, not commercial spaces.

In reality, interior design is everywhere in everyplace and requires the specialized knowledge of those who have studied it, not just “a good eye.” Some designers focus on space planning and problem-solving to create a functional space. Others select finishes (including paint) or focus on furniture and end user needs. Others just work on the software programs and production design. Each person is just a portion of the process to create the spaces that we occupy every day.

To combat the misconceptions is to learn how to advocate for the profession. Know the difference between designer and decorator and that both are important but different. Learn how to explain what it is you do and why it’s not exactly architecture or exactly decorating either.

**Q: Anything else you’d like to share?**

A: I do love to talk about interior design, the A&D industry, and the future of the built environment. To hear more about my thoughts, and those of other young professionals from the West Coast, listen to my Podcast, *Design Over Drinks*.