

# Focused On The Future

An Interview with Farooq Kathwari, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Ethan Allen Interiors Inc.

**EDITORS' NOTE** Farooq Kathwari has been the chairman and CEO of Ethan Allen Interiors Inc. since 1988. A recipient of the 2018 Ellis Island Medal of Honor, he has been inducted into the American Furniture Hall of Fame and recognized as an Outstanding American by Choice by the U.S. government. He has also received the Yale School of Management Chief Executive Leadership Institute Lifetime of Leadership Award and Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year Award. Kathwari is an advisory member of the New York Stock Exchange and on the board of the Western Connecticut State University Foundation. He is associated with several nonprofit organizations, including the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University, and the Council on Foreign Relations. He is chairman emeritus of Refugees International. The author of *Trailblazer: From the*



Farooq Kathwari

Mountains of Kashmir to the Summit of Global Business and Beyond, Kathwari has been recognized as one of Worth magazine's 50 Best CEOs in the United States.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Ethan Allen Interiors Inc. ([ethanallen.com](http://ethanallen.com)) is a leading interior design company and manufacturer and retailer of quality home furnishings. The company offers free interior design service to its clients through the efforts of approximately

1,000 in-house interior designers and sells a full range of furniture products and decorative accessories through its website and a network of approximately 200 Design Centers in the United States and abroad. Ethan Allen owns and operates 11 manufacturing plants, including seven in the United States, three in Mexico, and one in Honduras. Approximately 75 percent of its products are made in its North American plants.

## Will you highlight your career journey?

I have been fortunate to have a very amazing journey, with many people helping me along the way. I grew up in the beautiful mountains and valleys of Kashmir, which were impacted by political turmoil and war. When I was six, our family was separated in the two regions of Kashmir; I lived with my mother on a 10,000-foot mountaintop while my father was busy leading politics in the Kashmir region, and I did not see my elder sister and brother for ten years. I became involved in sports and was captain of the cricket team in school and college. As sports took lots of time, I chose to study political science and English literature – not the recommended fields of medicine and engineering. At age 20, I was fortunate to be accepted into the MBA program at New York University in downtown Manhattan, where I took evening classes.

My journey in New York started with a first job in bookkeeping. I had to convince the owners of a small envelope-printing company that I knew bookkeeping, even though I had never seen a calculator. In less than one year, I got a job on Wall Street, in the accounting department of a well-known investment firm, followed by a job with the European Rothschild Financial Company – all while going to school in the evenings.



Ethan Allen offers complimentary interior design service, including state-of-the-art 3D room planning



All Ethan Allen upholstery is made in North America. Each piece is tailored and trimmed by hand.

While I worked at the printing company, my grandfather in Kashmir, who was well known for his arts and crafts business, decided to send me twelve wicker baskets of arts and crafts with a note telling me to start a business. The CEO of Bloomingdale's had given a lecture at NYU, so I decided to call him. It took about 12 calls, but he finally saw me, and Bloomingdale's became my first customer followed by many others.

One of my associates at the Rothschild company introduced me to Nathan Ancell, founder of Ethan Allen – and my journey with Ethan Allen began. First, Ethan Allen became a customer; in about five years, we developed a partnership called KEA (Kathwari-Ethan Allen) to develop products internationally for Ethan Allen. Eight years later, in 1981, KEA merged with Ethan Allen. In 1985, I was appointed president of Ethan Allen and in 1988, chairman and CEO. I was also able to take the company private in a management buyout in 1989, and in 1993 took it public on the New York Stock Exchange. Throughout my years in leadership, my focus has been to develop a business with a disciplined and entrepreneurial attitude.

## How do you define Ethan Allen's mission and purpose?

Ethan Allen is a vertically integrated enterprise that provides both great quality home furnishings and professional interior design service. We manufacture about 75 percent of our furniture in our North American workshops and have a retail network staffed by dedicated and knowledgeable interior design professionals. We offer a unique experience that combines complimentary interior design service with state-of-the-art design technology.

## What have been the keys to Ethan Allen's strength and leadership in the industry?

Ethan Allen is a single brand, selling products under a single brand name – and thanks to our vertically integrated structure, we manufacture most of what we sell. This unique structure, along with the fact that we have our manufacturing base in North America, helps us to manage our processes closely so we can safeguard the reputation for quality that has distinguished our brand for many years. Our company is also distinguished by our dedicated and professional teams, many of whom have a long record of service with Ethan Allen.

As part of our rebranding as the Interior Design Destination, we have continued to strengthen and develop our retail network which consists of more than 180 Design Centers worldwide. When clients enter an Ethan Allen Design Center, they aren't greeted by a salesperson; they're greeted by a professional interior designer who can help them as little or as much as they'd like, from ordering custom furniture to reimagining their entire home. We're constantly adding to our slate of 3D design tools, including our 3D Room Planner which provides clients with HD previews and 4K walk-throughs of their proposed designs. Most client orders are then custom-made in our North American workshops.



*Ethan Allen sees modern design from a classic perspective, with a focus on craftsmanship and high-quality materials*

## How critical has it been to maintain an entrepreneurial and innovative culture as Ethan Allen has continued to grow?

It's extremely important and has been throughout our 94 years in business. Ethan Allen was started by two entrepreneurs, Nathan Ancell and Ted Baumritter, and it's been my privilege to follow them as a leader for the past 40 years. We keep our core value proposition at the forefront – North American manufacturing, quality, classic design from a modern perspective, complimentary interior design – but we find innovative ways to make those experiences fresh and relevant for the here and now.

I mentioned technology in our Design Centers, but it's also become an important part of our manufacturing. Through innovation, we've

developed processes that have made us more efficient – programming C&C machinery to cut intricate table pedestals is one example – while retaining hands-on craftsmanship at the assembly and finishing stages. This careful balance has helped us continue to create innovative designs while crafting beautiful, high-quality products right here in North America, even as many of our competitors have gone overseas.

## How is AI impacting Ethan Allen's business?

We're finding ways to incorporate AI into our processes at headquarters, mainly to increase productivity, and will continue to do so – technology, as I noted before, is very important in all areas of our enterprise. Looking for ways to combine personal service and technology continues to be key in our product design, marketing, retail network, manufacturing, and service.

## What are the characteristics you look for when attracting talent for Ethan Allen?

As anyone on our leadership team will tell you, talent is one of our main areas of focus. We look for people who will support our culture of hard work and innovation, and we continue to develop teams that are both entrepreneurial and disciplined. We encourage our interior designers to conceptualize themselves as people who operate their own entrepreneurial businesses. They create designs backed by Ethan Allen's extensive selection of custom furniture and decor, and rely on Ethan Allen's manufacturing and logistics for order and delivery. Our most successful designers are those who build long-term relationships with clients, earning repeat business as well as word-of-mouth referrals.

## When you look to the future of Ethan Allen, what excites you the most?

I am pleased to see many of the chances we took years ago truly paying off. When our



*A classic dining table and a handwoven rug meet modern, minimalist dining chairs, showcasing Ethan Allen's diversity of style*

competitors moved manufacturing overseas, we chose to stay close to home in North America – people thought we were crazy. Yet in today's world, when we as a nation are reevaluating the importance of domestic manufacturing in our economy, the decision to stay here has placed us in a strong position.

When I see the great talent across our company, the fact that we continue to operate as a vertically integrated enterprise, our success at combining personal service and technology, and our attitude of constant reinvention, I am optimistic that we will continue to make progress. As I always say, we are just getting started.

**With all that you have achieved leading Ethan Allen, are you able to take moments to reflect on Ethan Allen's impact?**

I think Ethan Allen's staying power proves the importance of operating with a long-term focus – something that too many public companies have gotten away from. We build our furniture to last, and we've built our business to last by setting up dedicated teams and retaining them, growing our North American manufacturing and doubling down on our commitment to quality, investing in our unique combination of personal service and technology, and remaining flexible and agile – because the only constant in the business world is change.

**How do you define success?**

I think people feel successful when they can take pride in their work and the work of their teams, and when they're part of a business



*Products like Ethan Allen's Solenne swivel chair are made to order in hundreds of fabrics and leathers*

that reflects the best of its values, including treating everyone fairly, with dignity and respect. Leaders can feel successful when they stay focused on doing what they can to make their people better.

As for our business, I'm proud of our strong financial position and the independence we've maintained, and I'm pleased to see that our guiding principle of constant reinvention is alive and well. ●



*The curved Calista seating collection, one of Ethan Allen's most popular new introductions, debuted in Fall 2025*