



Mr. Smith comes to Chicago for swanky book signing

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The only thing missing from Thursday night's guest list for a party at the Ralph Lauren clothing store was a U.S. president. But the event came close. Its guest of honor was the recently named White House decorator—Michael S. Smith. And the mayor was there, too.

A who's who of Chicago gathered on the swanky fourth floor of the Michigan Avenue shop, where the L.A.- and New York-based Mr. Smith held court, looking very presidential at a desk with a faux gold-plated nameplate that said "Trump," a joke gift from a friend. He signed his new book, "Houses," for those willing to shell out \$50--and plenty did. Mr. Smith had to take numerous breaks to rest his hand.

It gave him time to greet good friends like Gold Coast real estate exec Katherine Chez and real estate mogul Judd Malkin--the two hired Mr. Smith to decorate their California homes. After the large signing event, Ms. Chez hosted a private dinner party at RL restaurant (with 40 in attendance, it was the biggest private event RL has done in years).

"I have a lot of friends and clients from Chicago," Mr. Smith said, refusing as always to name any (I reminded him that the "Taking Names" column is all about names, but to no avail). It's been documented that he's also decorated Cindy Crawford's home, and there was buzz at the party that he did work on Oprah Winfrey's California mansion--where she hosted a big fundraiser for now-President Barack Obama. (It all makes sense now.)

Those schmoozing with Mr. Smith included Mayor Richard M. Daley, his wife, Maggie, and her best pals, philanthropists Cindy Pritzker and Francie Comer; John Brennan, executive VP of the Merchandise Mart, where some of Mr. Smith's collection can be found; real estate and media mogul Sam Zell and his wife Helen, a board member of the Museum of Contemporary Art; Chicago interior design queen Holly Hunt; architect Marvin Hermin and wife Karen, a supporter of the Joffrey Ballet; businesswoman Trish Rooney Alden and Dr. Kris Alden, and former model and restaurateur Julie Latsko (her husband, real estate exec Fred Latsko, joined her for the RL dinner party). I asked Ms. Daley whether the mayor might have hired Mr. Smith to do any decorating--what a juicy story that would be. No such luck. "He's a friend of a friend," she said, pointing to Ms. Latsko.

The store's clubby atmosphere lent itself to lighthearted chitchat.

USG Corp.'s Finbarr O'Callaghan tried to find ways to distinguish the North Shore vs. Chicago design fans, prompting hoots of laughter from his oncologist friend who refused to be named. "Some of these people are my patients," he said. "I can't talk."

And interior designers Marshall Erb, Darl Grooters, Frank Monterio and Steve Jones were abuzz about the upcoming Lake Forest Showhouse & Gardens to benefit the Infant Welfare Society.

"I'm decorating the pool house, and it's going to be over the top," said Mr. Erb, prompting his friends to all lean forward and ask "How?" Ever the tease, Mr. Erb just smiled.

Ebony's Linda Johnson Rice, Corporate Cleaning's Neal Zucker, airport-spa owner Marko Iglendza and Mr. Malkin's business partner Neil Bluhm arrived in time to join Mr. Smith and his closest friends for pictures and dinner. As the crowd of a few hundred broke up and the select few headed downstairs for dinner, Mr. Malkin got in an elevator with a group of friends, including Ms. Chez. He had hardly talked to her during the evening, as she was greeting guests along with hostess Margaret Russell, editor in chief of Elle Decor. "Being apart can be good for the relationship," someone joked. Giggles all around (including from power couple Malkin and Chez).