



Finding Home

How Christina Knisley of Bohemian Farmgirl Built a Business by Being Herself

BY HOLLY J. COLEY

Photographed by dKol Photography

SOMETIMES IT'S THE ROAD we're hesitant to travel that takes us exactly where we want to go. That's what Christina Knisley has found. After decades of fighting an internal war over whether to pursue a creative life full time, the designer of Bohemian Farmgirl has given in—and damn, it feels good.

Growing up in Hudson County, New Jersey, she used to dream of greener pastures—literally. “I’d look out the window and up at the crows in the trees and wish there was something else,” she says of her early years. Even then she wanted to plant, build, explore.

In an area that has the distinction of being one of the most densely populated counties in America, she was somewhat a fish out of water. Shabby chic wasn't a thing yet; neither was Pinterest with its *rustic chic*-inspired mood boards. No one was trying to escape the bustle of NYC, especially to somewhere more rural. But Christina was always a little ahead of the crowd. “I was always making things,” she says. “And I was always looking for ways to sell the things I made.”

Like every boho spirit, she had an intense wanderlust, and by the age of 10 knew she would need to fund her future excursions. Inspired by Encyclopedia Brown books, she knew she wanted to go into business for herself. She'd knock on the doors of seniors living in her neighborhood and offer to run their errands. For her efforts, they'd give her a quarter. By no means was it a lucrative career step, but it showed her she was capable.

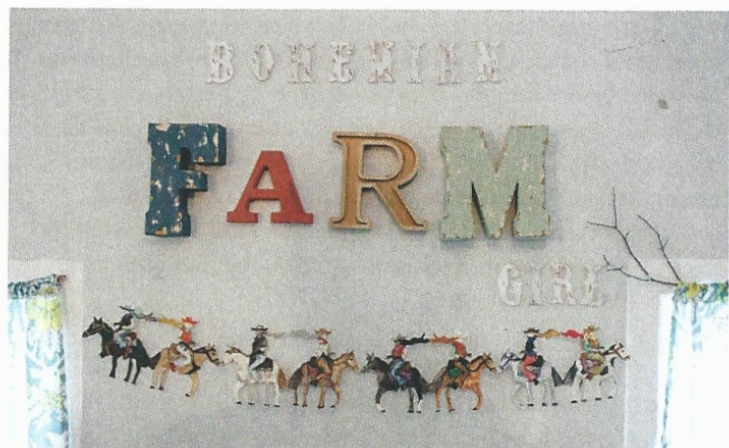
Odd jobs aside, her real joy came from making things. She had a strong trio of women who inspired her. “It was my mother who taught me to sew, sitting at the kitchen table on her lap as she pushed fabric through her Singer, bringing to life the doll clothes she saw in her mind,” she says. Her grandmothers also championed her, one reminding her she could do whatever she wanted, the other instilling in her a sense of adventure. “She wanted to travel around in an RV and see the country. We'd go camping every year and live outside and make crafts at the picnic table. She always nurtured my creativity.”

By the time she had her first apartment she had started making home accessories, catching the eyes of visitors and neighbors. They wanted to know how much her things cost, and soon she was putting price stickers everywhere. Clothing, art, furniture, there was no limit to what she could make.

Her question was, should she?

“I always wanted to do something to help people, but I also had this draw to be creative,” she says. A struggle began that would last for several years.

IF YOU KNOW BOHEMIAN Farmgirl, you know Christina. Her home and headquarters is tucked away on an operational tree farm, stationed on 25 acres of land in Ulster Park. Driving down the road to the 125-year-old farmhouse, it feels as though time is slowing. There is no roaring sound of traffic, just the wind and song of birds. As I approach I spy a tire swing, chickens and a garden. Christina sits barefoot on her porch, surrounded by two





dogs, a cat and her own little farmgirl, Maddie. “My tagline for [my company] is ‘Growing a family, planting a farm, nurturing a creative life,’” she says, gesturing to the property.

With her entourage trailing behind, she shows me around the house. There are splashes of the brand’s signature turquoise and pink found throughout the space. Much of the décor has been created by her, including a rustic barnwood hairpin leg bench, curtains and photo transferred art hanging on the walls. In her sunroom a rhubarb-and-strawberry pie awaits, along with cider donuts and a cold pitcher of water. Garlic from her garden cures in the window. It’s a different version of Shangri-La.

Christina assures me that it doesn’t always look like this. Most days, she says, are a balancing act trying to check off her to-do list before Maddie returns home. Like herself, the six-year-old is full of creative energy. Christina often finds herself sharing her studio space with the young artist who sews, creates books, draws, and has elaborate plans for the two of them, including owning a farm store and café. When asked what she likes to do with her mother in the studio, she says with a big grin, “I like to distract her!”

BEFORE MADDIE CAME, CHRISTINA faced another type of balancing act: finding time for her own artistic pursuits while working in the health-care field. After high school she went to

study business, but it didn’t take long for her to find her way into the art department, where she became intrigued by art therapy. Wanting to enter that world fully equipped for its challenges, she graduated with a degree in psychology. Soon she found herself working in group homes with mentally ill children. It was a job she calls “important” but draining. To get away, she’d venture upstate, frequenting the town of Warwick. With its Apple Festival and Main Street, it was a refreshingly different scene from her daily life. She decided to move there.

This didn’t ease the stress of her job, however, and she chose to switch gears, earning her teaching certificate in art. It seemed like the perfect blend of her creative talents and need to help people. Still, it didn’t feel right. “There was always something missing,” she says.

She tried to find that missing piece through opening a shop on New Paltz’s Water Street Market. She sold natural cleaning products and home goods that she made, along with wellness products. It was during that time she met Alan, her future husband.

It was a beautiful and exciting time, but soon they were packing their bags for the city again, so they could work on their master’s degrees.

“I just kept going around and around on how to incorporate art and education and healing and all the natural stuff,”



Christina remembers. “[I was] trying to figure out how to not be ‘this is my job, this is my home, this is what I do for fun,’ and trying to integrate everything together.”

It was like being on a carnival ride that she couldn’t find her way off. And then Maddie came, and the way became clear. “I had her halfway through my graduate education, and I almost didn’t go back,” she says with a laugh. “I just wanted to stay home and be Mom. Being an entrepreneur again made sense.”

Christina and her family traveled back upstate, and soon she was busy growing, sewing and raising Maddie to play and explore her own dreams, which really is what being a Bohemian Farmgirl is all about.

SOMETIMES CHRISTINA CARRIES BUNDLES of fabric into her dining room where she can spread out and get some cutting done. While home furnishings have been a constant in her creative repertoire, becoming a mother has not only triggered the start of her business but influenced what she makes. “I started making [Maddie] clothes, and people wanted to buy what I made,” she says as she rolls out fabrics, each in bright colors with whimsical vintage prints.

Her designs focus on play and function. The Little Farmgirl Dresses—her most popular items—go over-the-head, so there’s no fumbling with buttons or zippers. They’re 100

percent cotton and easily convert into tunics as a child grows. The line also includes boy shorts, handstitched animal portraits, wall décor, totes, lamented cotton tinker aprons for kids and utility aprons with deep pockets perfect for holding gardening tools or paint brushes.

Because she does everything by hand, most items are one of a kind. She uses organic materials as much as possible and often buys from Etsy sellers. It’s her way of supporting other small-business owners. In the upcoming year, she plans to expand the company to include more items that speak to the brand’s aesthetic, including products from other makers. She’s also considering offering workshops at her home where people can feed their own creativity while having the full country experience.

Ironically, following her passions has allowed Christina to help the world as she’s always dreamed. “If I do things that make myself happy, that joy spreads to other people,” she says. As the women in her family inspired her with their own loves, she can pass hers on to someone else, and maybe, just maybe, they’ll have the courage to plant a farm, grow a family and nurture their own creative life. She hopes so.

To shop Bohemian Farmgirl, visit Christina’s Etsy shop at www.etsy.com/shop/bohemianfarmgirl. You can also find her at marketplaces around the Hudson Valley. Learn where she’ll be next by visiting her website at www.bohemianfarmgirl.com. ■