

Pink magazine

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Millie Burke

The Lowcountry Dream

By: Christine Dykstra

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On the phone before our interview, Millie Burke laughed about the fact that she was already working on Christmas items, in May. When I first step into her studio later that week, however, I primarily see beautiful handprinted linens with Lowcountry and coastal prints. Then, I see them: Christmas linens spread all across several worktables in a far corner of the room. As she begins to speak, I sense that this is part of who she is, a woman always thinking ahead, focusing on her next move.

This is her latest endeavor, Lowcountry Linens, which started in February of this year. Millie jokes about her high-end operation, working on fold-up tables out of a small work room she shares with an artist. It may be a room sparsely appointed, but I can't take my eyes off the gorgeous linens scattered across various tables throughout the room. I'm

not the only one in awe; Millie reports that orders began coming in immediately upon opening, and the business is quickly growing.

It's no surprise that Millie chose to give her linen line a Lowcountry flair given that she's had ties to Hilton Head since childhood, living in Rock Hill, South Carolina, but spending much of her summers here. After graduating from St. Andrews University, where she also played tennis, she moved to Hilton Head full-time and worked in sales for Marriott. It was here that she met her Bostonian husband David, who was visiting during Heritage Week. After they married, she moved to Boston with him.

In Boston, she somehow concocted the idea of making pillows. She wasn't a seamstress of any sort, and had never done anything like this before. Clearly tenacious in nature, however, she enlisted a friend's help and learned to sew in two days. She scoured flea markets for vintage fabrics to use, and sold the pillows to high-end design stores. Over time, she opened a retail store with home accessories that later expanded to include a residential design business. As if that wasn't enough, she also started a hand-painted furniture and glassware business.

Besides all her business success, she is also no stranger to the spotlight. Or at least, her homes aren't. In 1998 in Boston, her home was featured on the cover of *Traditional Home*. Later, in 2003, she had another home in *Traditional Home*, which was additionally featured the following year on the cover of the premiere issue of *Décor*.

On the home front, she told her husband that she could probably manage ten years in Boston, but ultimately spent 14 years there before moving back to Hilton Head seven years ago. By then, she was ready to come home, and she wanted her children to experience home as well. As Millie explains the draw of Hilton Head, "People always come back." And, she's resolute: "I don't ever want to move."

Clearly, her role as mother to Lindsey, 19, and Colby, 17, has brought her great satisfaction. Both her children are tennis players, and she lights up describing the time she's spent with them over the years, traveling to tennis tournaments. No word yet as to whether either of them will ever follow in their mother's designing footsteps, but Millie's father enjoys the business, driving down regularly from Rock Hill to spend time with his daughter and enjoy her latest venture. A former textile engineer himself, one can imagine the pleasure he takes in Millie's work.

She is clearly at ease not only with life but with work as well, making it all look effortless. Once she begins delving into the process of implementing her business plans, however, I realize it all is anything but effortless. "I like to work hard," she explains, adding that many people don't realize how hard it is to bring an idea like Lowcountry Linens to fruition.

In the end, I leave her studio already wondering what her next project will be. She speculates about why she's constantly driven to do the next new thing, even if the next new thing is entirely foreign to her. "Maybe it's an athletic thing" inspired by her "competitive nature," she ponders. Maybe it's also just an intrinsic part of who she is. Because you can see it in her eyes; there's plenty more to come from Millie Burke.



Up Close

What she's watching on television: The Voice

Favorite design magazines: Traditional Home, Southern Accents, Veranda

College major: Business, Economics and Marketing

Her pet: a Yorkie named Jasper

Healthy habits: She runs or walks every day, and she also plays golf.

Where you can buy Lowcountry Linens on Hilton Head: Gifted Hilton Head in the Village at Wexford

Favorite thing about being a Southerner: She pauses for a moment before answering this one. "Grits?" she laughs and shakes her head. "Nobody understands grits."

Photography by Maggie Yelton

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