
Building a Creative Brand: A 5-Part Series with Creative Brand Series

Chapter 1 - Building a Creative Brand

Series Overview

(light music) - If you don't know what your aesthetic is and you're an artist or you don't even know what your brand should look like. That's something you got to figure out. - I started Monkey, Monkey when I was 25 or 26. Initially exploded and became, the response to it was very strong and then suddenly I was running a company. (light music) - There are people who wait for opportunity to knock, there are people who don't realize opportunity has knocked. - I don't know, I've produced about 100 of them maybe and they sold like that. (laughing) - It turns out that Liesl had the right idea at the right time and starting a creative business is so much about that. - People have this idea of creativity like it's floating in a cloud or some, I don't know. I think it's problem solving. I love problem solving. - [Woman] You have to be willing to take chances. - [Woman] I was one of those things were taking a risk and putting myself out there paid off in the end. - You know when you draw something or you write something you know when it's good. Your heart's beating kind of fast and you feel happy. That's why the starving artists are willing to starve.

Part 1 - Identifying Your Brand

- [Christine] At first, I really thought that I was going to be a fine artist. I think I had this notion that artists were people who made work in their studio and showed it in galleries and maybe were starving a little bit and had to work at another job on the side. (gentle upbeat music) - [Interviewer] How hard was it to start a creative business? - I went to art school so I had like weird jobs. I was a cake decorator. I lied to get that job. I pretended like my mom owned a catering company, and I was responsible for all of her cakes. (interviewer laughing) I'm serious, and he had me with a piping bag write out "Happy Birthday." And I was like, "Oh, I've never done this before. "I hope I can do this." But it was fun, and I liked it. It was weird. I've also been a mural painter. I've been a nanny. I've been... A bartender, a waitress. I have a lot of really random skills, guys. Ask me something. Ask me anything. - [Interviewer] So when did you actually realize that you could do it? - You know I think I just got fed up. I had this horrible job. I worked for this lady that I called Skeletor. She was this enormously wealthy woman who was very cruel. And every day, I hated going to this job. I would get on the bus. It was like all the way on Jackson Street. I was going on the 24 bus. It sucked. It was so long. It was like the death march. And I just hated going to this terrible job every day. But that's just what I did. I was so used to having... You just need to pay the bills, and so I just did what it took. And I would have my own artwork on the side. And one day I got fired, and it was awesome! It was so liberating because for once, I wasn't being irresponsible. Someone else made that choice for me, and I think I probably just would have some shitty job that I hated without... I just don't know if I would have had the guts to take the plunge if I hadn't gotten fired. - There wasn't a moment when I realized that I had a sense of aesthetics. It was more a moment when I realized that not everybody had that sense because I felt, especially when I got involved in my work and there was a lot of visual elements that came into it. I started out, and I was an editor. It was about the words. And then I started getting involved in all the visuals and realizing that I had a lot of ideas and I had a lot of opinions. And I would have a feeling that something was or wasn't right or something could be different or better or color should change or a graphic design type should move or be bigger or smaller, and I thought everyone could see it. And then I think I slowly realized that everyone

couldn't see it. And I also realized that it didn't affect everybody the way it affected me. - I was constantly looking for sources of color. Grass stains. You could take a plant and pound it with a hammer and leave an imprint on something. It was really exciting as a kid to feel like you could make art in that way. And I knew how to sew, and I loved sewing. And we had a lot of fabric around, a lot of really beautiful fabric. And I always thought it would be really great to put more childish kind of things on fabric and tell stories on it. - People would stop me on the sidewalk when we were walking on the sidewalk and say, "Where did you get this dress?" And initially the request was primarily, "Well, would you consider producing these?" I've worked in the fashion industry for too long. I knew what was involved. There was no way I wanted to do that. But a dear friend of mine said, "Well, what about producing them as sewing patterns?" And I thought, "Well, that kind of makes sense." (whimsical music) - There's this period of time where you're trying to figure that out. And for me, that was in the first few years of my illustration career, and I had already signed with an agent. And I was still trying to figure it out, and she was very helpful. I used to have regular phone calls with Lilla where she would give me advice on how I might refine my style or that certain things I was making didn't necessarily look like they were made by the same artist and how I could work on that. And eventually, after working and having many conversations with her, I really started to hone my style. It's really important in the world of licensing and illustration to have an identifiable style or set of styles. And that doesn't necessarily mean you only have to do vector illustrations in a particular color palette or you only do line drawings. You can... I am a good example of this. I have my painterly style. I also draw in pencil, and I do line drawings. And I'm sort of known somewhat for all of those things and get work in all of those areas. And I also do some digital illustration. And so, but I think what has helped me over the years to begin to get more work is that I figured out in all of the mediums that I work what's my color palette, what's the subject matter that I'm known for, and really being consistent in all of those. And even using the similar color palette across all of my mediums, for example, or a similar style of drawing whether I'm using pencil or pen. And that's really worked for me. - Well, I started my business because I walked into different stationary stores, and I didn't see stationary that I wanted to buy. So I thought, "I'm gonna make stationary." So I already knew that I wanted to set myself apart. I think it's really important for people to set themselves apart anyway because something that's really graphic-driven, there's gonna be a lot of stuff on the market that's gonna look the same. So you... Think about what you do. Think about the best thing that you bring to it. And then you just want to amplify that and focus on that. - The people that have created their own brands, I think that creatively, they're leaders, not followers. As a coping mechanism, and also I think as a wise way to proceed, I've kind of learned that people may copy you. A lot of people will bring that up with me. "So and so copied this or so and so copied that." And it's like, "Well, they can't get ahead of you." And I think the people that have been successful at creating brands are always moving forward with their own vision which has some uniqueness to it. And they are willing to take chances. They're kind of courageous. They are able to imagine something new or different or bigger or from a different angle. - And you wanna figure out what you really want 'cause you can't be all things to all people. It's hard to say when I really found my aesthetic 'cause it's just such a natural thing. It's hard to divorce it from myself and talk about it in a removed way. But I knew that I wanted my company to be about my work, my own graphic work, and I knew that I wanted it to be eco-friendly. And I wanted it to be kind of fun and sophisticated but also playful. - It's not enough just to come up with a product. But your product has to have an original point of view and a unique brand. And I think Liesl did a very good job of developing a point of view. - Thank you. - It wasn't just about defining or coming up with three cute dresses for little

girls. But it was a whole point of view on what the market needed so it was a certain kind of style. It was a certain way of illustrating the patterns. It was a certain way of writing the instructions. And all of that together gave the Oliver and S product right out of the gate a unique point of view on what sewing patterns for children could be that was unique in the market. - I think you need to focus on goods that you're passionate about. You're gonna be making them by yourself probably so you're gonna spend a lot of time doing it so you better enjoy that, first of all. You're also not gonna have a life at all for a while so just know that and accept it. I promise one day it'll be worth it in the long run. Even if it's for your own well being, it's worth it. - You just know. I think you know when you draw something or you write something. You know when it's good. You go to bed with this sort of... Like that feeling you get when you drank too much really good coffee. You know? That like little... Your heart's beating kind of fast, and you feel happy. That's why the starving artists are willing to starve because it gives you this amazing little high. - Staying really authentic to what you love and what you are drawn to, and that's tricky because you wanna look for inspiration outside and see what are the trends, what artists are really doing well, what does the illustration market seem to be responding to, who seems to be getting a lot of work. You wanna pay attention to all of that, and you wanna be inspired by that. But you still need to make work that's authentically yours and that doesn't look like it's another version of somebody else's work or that you're copying a certain trend. And that's tricky so you have to sort of have to have your finger on the pulse of what's going on but also make work that is really authentically yours. - I was just at Spring Quilt Market, and a woman came into my booth with this really beautiful presentation, this really great artwork. And I sent her right over to Laura at Wyndham, and I said, "You have to see this. "It's really special." They signed her on the spot. And they signed her on the spot because it was different. It was beautifully presented. She thought through the whole collection. She thought through... The artwork wasn't really that complicated, but it was great. It didn't look like anything anyone else was doing for that company, and that's ultimately why she got a contract that very moment. And it's so important because it is an over-saturated market. - I think packaging is really important. Branding is really important, and those two should really go hand in hand. When I first started selling rubber stamps, I sold them in these adorable, screen-printed muslin bags, and they were so cute. We tied them with a bow. And yeah, that was great for boutique stores that weren't selling in high volume. But then when I was selling to larger stores, I would walk in and they would all be in a bin. And the strings would be torn out. The price tags would be stuck, and there'd be like nasty adhesive. They looked horrendous. And so I thought, "All right, I need to think about "how to make this better, "how to make this always look good "and how to keep the product intact "and how to keep the retailer happy." Where's their price tag going? On the bottom right. Is it gonna be on a shelf? Does the box need to stand up? Is it a large retailer that needs blister packs or a little hang tag thing? And that just changes by the retailer. - The identity for a brand is extremely important to us. And we spend a lot of time. - And a lot of money. - Oh, my goodness. We do; we spend a lot of time and money whenever we launch anything new like that. We have extensive strategy sessions. We do a ton of market research. We talk to a lot of people. We... Oh, goodness, it's an ongoing process. - We hire outside graphic designers that will come in with a new, different, fresh perspective to create a look that's something maybe different than what we had originally thought about and different from what's going on in the market. We try to work with graphic designers that don't work solely in the craft space to come up with a unique look. And we're very concerned with defining what the brand attributes are. We actually, with the last brand we launched, we started with a brand attributes document that laid out in great detail what this thing called Straight Stitch Society was supposed to

be: who the customer was... - We all had homework for that. - What the atmosphere was. And everybody had assignments. - We did research. We each had a research assignment where I was actually researching... I loved my research assignment. I had this whole idea that we were gonna do something sort of over the top like if you've ever seen the old patent medicine ads where it was always, "This elixir can solve..." I don't know. "It can cure cancer, and it can soothe diaper rash." And it can do all these insane things that clearly this thing can't. It's probably just vodka. We wanted this brand to... We knew right away we wanted this brand to have a sense of humor and be a little bit ridiculous and a little bit like over the top. And so we really came at it from that perspective where I was doing research on all these different types of patent medicine and writing down all these key words of... Elixir was a good one and things like that. And the whole result of that was we now have this crazy... What's it called? - The manifesto. - The manifesto. The Straight Stitch Manifesto. And that was one of the things that we handed off to our graphic designers. And we said we wanted to be a little bit ridiculous. We just want this to be completely over the top. - I really don't think that I ever set out to create a brand. I don't think I was really methodical about it. I mean, I guess it's easy for me to say that this is how it's happened, but I don't think that I ever thought, "Okay, this is gonna be my brand, "and my logo's gonna be a cricket." I struggled for ten years like, "I need a logo. "What should I use for a logo?" And then when I landed on cricket, it just felt right, you know? It just felt like the right thing. But I did all of my own graphic design. I did everything myself so I was sort of limited to how much time I had and how much I even felt could happen at a time. And I wanted it to feel sort of organic, and it has happened in a very organic way over the course of 15 years. It's almost 20 years. - I had to think about the way the customer handled the boxes. I had to think about where the retailer was putting their price tag. And I also had to think about the take away. So I always had my logo on all my packages. I also have my website. I have a little something about where it's made because it being local, it being made in the US, is something that's important to me. And I think those are three things that you should always, always, always have on your package. Think about that as the only thing they're gonna take away from you, and you want it to be memorable. And you want it to be cohesive. And you want them to be able to find you elsewhere. - [Todd] All of this that we're talking about: you don't see any of this when you buy one of the patterns. This is all work that we do. - [Lies!] Months of work that go on behind the scenes. - [Todd] To figure out what this brand should be about. And now when people pick up one of the products, they get that it's lighthearted. They get that it's cheeky. - [Lies!] We hope. - They get that it makes claims that are a little bit over the top. And that's all work we did way on the front end with things like patent medicine and manifestos that you may not necessarily see when you see the product. But the ethos is all there. And that's the important work that branding can do for you. - I think growing a business is kind of a lot like growing a baby 'cause you put everything you've got into it. You spend so much time. It's so personal. You're spending every minute, every dollar. It's just a part of you, and eventually you've got to birth that baby and get it away from you. You've gotta kind of push that ship off and let it sail. - Most artists, we look at our work with a certain critical eye, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's a bad thing if it paralyzes you from doing anything at all, right? You want to have this balance of knowing that you haven't arrived or that something can always be better or more interesting. But also not let that prevent you from putting anything out into the world at all. So I have to force myself to sometimes put things out into the world that I know aren't perfect. And that's part of the creative process. And I think the more the general public understands that artists don't just sit down and know how to paint overnight, nor do they sit down and make a painting in one sitting that looks perfect. - [Interviewer] You were rejected. People

didn't like... - Yeah! Because, you know, you drop off this thing, and it's so important to you. And they just don't care. And you just so badly want them to care. And that feels awful. But if you do it enough... I think they say the law of averages like for ten nos, you'll get one yes or something. Out of like 40 nos, you get one yes. That's pretty good. - [Interviewer] And what did that feel like? - That felt great. That feels great. It feels great to get paid after not getting paid for so long. - You have to meet people. If you don't live in a place where there are a lot of creative professionals, you have to go there regularly. You have to recognize what the conference situations are, what the workshop situations are, where the places are where you can go and shake hands and meet people and tell them what you're doing and tell them about yourself and get good at that and never apologize for yourself or feel embarrassed to use the word craft or handmade. Just say it like you're proud of it. You should be. And get out there and get people just knowing who you are. And don't underestimate the power of one or two or three people at a time knowing who you are 'cause that's the way it grows. - The real power of social media is not using it as a platform to promote your product or your brand but using it to get a multiplier effect, to get other people to talk about your product or to talk about your brand. So what you wanna do is find the social media platform where people are talking most about what it is that you want to build and get yourself enmeshed in that community. Become part of that community. Join the discussion and then come up with interesting ways to get people in that community to start discussing your product. - We sell to high-end design shops. We sell to museum shops like the Whitney, LACMA in L.A.. We sell to larger retailers like Crate and Barrel and Anthropologie, J. Crew. We sell to a huge range of stores which is enormously humbling. I didn't know who my audience was. I just made things that I was passionate about. And I'm just lucky it has an audience, and I'm lucky that I get to do this.

Part 2 - Business Nuts and Bolts

(whimsical music) - [Female Voiceover] I went to art school. I didn't go to business school, and I started my own business, and you can, too. A lot of it is just usin' common sense (inspirational music) and following your passion and not giving up. - When I came to Todd and said, "I want to start this business." "Let's do this," Todd said, "I really think you need to go out and not just write a business plan, but actually test the market and see. - I was skeptical because I didn't know anyone who sewed. (Liesl laughing) And she was saying she was going to make a product for people just like her, and I knew exactly one person just like her who knew how to sew, and I'm a bright enough guy to know that a market of one isn't a big enough market to support a company. - Yeah. - So, I encouraged Liesl to do a market test. - [Liesl] Yeah, and so what we did is I took a pattern that I had developed for one of my sewing classes, just this convertible little backpack that had been hanging in the store and people were coming into the store and saying, "I want to learn how to make that." "I can't take the class. "Can I buy the pattern?" And so we ended up just locally producing, I don't know, I produced about 100 of them maybe, and they sold like that. - [Todd] So we decided that we would use the blog as the venue for doing the market test. So, Liesl put up some photos and said, "I've got this pattern, and some of you have seen it, "and I'm going to make these available." And we put a PayPal button, "Buy it now," which linked to Liesl's PayPal account, and we had no idea what would happen, if she would sell one or five or ten or more. And it turned out, she sold more, and then she sold some more, and then she sold some more. And you spent your time making all these packages by hand. - Running to the printer and running to the post office, and yeah. It was at that point, then, we said, "Okay, clearly there's a market for this. "This makes sense, yeah." - And I said, "You've convinced me. "Okay, there's enough demand for this. "Maybe we can do a business around

this." - You know, we do these totally crazy studio sales where people just have to tell us all about themselves and they send us money and we send them stuff, and it's really imperfect, and it can get a little messy, but for the most part, it's just been this incredible thing for us because we feel like we know, I feel like I know who wants the stuff that I make and who I'm designing for, and I can keep working for them. To me, that has really become my model. (whimsical music) That has really become the basis of my business. - I was working at the time as a management consultant. I had built a methodology for developing a business plan after having done some business plans for clients. So, I gave Liesl that methodology and those tools and said, "Okay, if you want to do this, you're on your own. "I'll give you a little bit of help. "I'll give you a process, I'll give you "some templates, I'll coach you through it, "but you've gotta do this on your own." - And I was dreading it. (laughing) - And she started, and she cursed me the whole way through the process. - I did. I absolutely hated it. But it was a good... It was a nice template, too, because it was really... I forget what the exact sections of it were, but it was really, "Who do you expect to be selling this to? "How many do you anticipate selling? "Via what methods?" You could be selling wholesale, you could be selling to stores, you could be selling direct to consumers. What's the mix of products that you expect to be selling, and to whom? It really helped me to think through exactly where I was going with this and what I anticipated it being. - The original business plan laid out what the proposed and projected costs would be and what the revenue would be, and you need both of those things to figure out if you can be profitable. So, we had a plan and we launched the company and then we used that plan over the first couple years to evaluate the success. We tracked our costs against what our plan costs were. We tracked our revenue against what our plan revenues were. And by having those benchmarks to guide us and by collecting the data to be able to track our progress against both of those things, we were able to launch the business and grow the business and be successful. When you're thinking about starting a business, people often ask, "How do I do a business plan?" You can go online and search. There are lots of resources. But I think one good way in the first stages of thinking through how you're going to turn this passion into a business is to use Michael Porter's concept of The Four P's. Michael Porter is a Professor of Strategy at Harvard Business School and years ago he said, "Every business needs to think about the Four P's." This is a great way of thinking through how you're going to get your business started. First P is Product. You need to define what it is that you're going to sell. That's figuring out all aspects of this. If you're going to get into the sewing pattern business, are you going to print your products? If so, you're going to have print minimums and you're going to have to find a printer and you're going to have to figure out where to warehouse those things. Are you going to do just digital? Well, then you wouldn't have printing costs and minimums and warehousing, but you'd have to have a website and be able to fulfill digitally, and you're not going to be able to do wholesale sales, so you're going to have to do all retail sales. So, you can see how thinking through some of these very fundamental questions about what my product looks like will force you to go down the road of each of the decisions you make about your product and get very deep into what it is that you're going to do. That's when Liesl was working on her business plan she kept pushing back on me, saying, "I don't want to make that decision. "I don't need to make that decision now." And I kept forcing her, and by the end of the process, she really had the product that she was going to produce very well-defined. - Yeah, it forced me to think through things that I would much preferred to sort of let happen organically, but I couldn't have developed it if I hadn't had some sense of where that was going and what it was going to be. - Second P is Price, and price comes both what you're going to charge for it and what your costs are going to be for making it. So, you need to get Product done first and

figure out exactly what your product's going to look like. That will allow you to do your pricing which will be, "How much is it going to cost me "to make this product, to design this product, to manufacture this product, to store this product, to ship this product?" which will allow you to figure out how much you have to charge for the product. So the second P, Price, is what are my costs going to be to produce the product, what do I need to charge, what are my volumes going to be so that I can recoup my costs? - There's so much that goes into that. - And there's a lot that goes into that as well. The third P is Place. Where are you going to sell this product? What place are you going to put it in in the market so that you can start generating income from this? Are you going to sell it direct to consumers on a website? Are you going to sell it wholesale through stores? If you're going to do that, how are you going to sell to those stores? Are you going to call them directly? Are you going to hire a salesperson? So, you have to think about where this product is going to be available, what the place is that people can buy it, and how you get it into that place and what your costs are, and what efforts you're going to have to expend to do that. The fourth P is Promotion. So, once you've got your product designed, your pricing done, figured out where you're going to sell it, how are you going to let people know that it's out there in the market? Advertising, social media. - Social media. - You really need to figure out, once you launch into the market how you're going to promote this, make people aware of that, and what all the costs will be in doing that? And then, once you've gone through that whole process of thinking about the Four P's, then you need to go back and iterate through again because decisions you made when you were thinking about Promotion will have impacts on Pricing. - When you're in the middle of it, it almost feels like you're just never gonna get out of it. I mean, it's just, yeah, I can't make this decision until I've figured out this component. It's a little chicken and egg-y, someplace in there, but eventually it does all sort of come together. And ironically enough, now, when people come to me and say, "I want to start my own creative business," the very first thing I say is, "You need to write your own business plan." That's my very first piece of advice to somebody. (whimsical music) And yeah, I mean, I dragged my feet all the way through it, but it was totally worth every minute of it. - The business and financial part of being a small business owner was a big learning curve for me. I had come from a job where I got a paycheck every two weeks and all my taxes were taken out and my health insurance was covered and I didn't have to do any bookkeeping of my expenses, and that was a huge shift for me. Sort of understanding that I needed to keep track of my finances and save portions of everything I earned for taxes was something that I sort of knew in the back of my head was probably true, but the first couple of years I wasn't making very much money anyway, but it was... Tax time would come around and I'd say, "Oh, crap." (laughing) I didn't deal with that. So, every year that I've been in business I've gotten better and better. As an artist, knowing... Especially if you don't have another job, if it's the main way that you make your income, you're always gonna be making your income from a lot of different sources, and you're also probably gonna be putting a lot of money back into your business, so buying art supplies and investing in travel, potentially. So, there's a lot of money going in and a lot of money going out that you have to account for. So, one of the things I learned early on was that I needed to be paying attention to my bank account in a way that I never had before in my entire life. When I learned bookkeeping, it actually was something that now I actually enjoy doing it, which I'm sure a lot of artists are like, "What?" I don't mind it so much because one of the things my accountant taught me to do is reconcile my statements every month and make sure that my QuickBooks balance was exactly the same as my bank account balance and things like that, and that's just like, I find that really satisfying. (laughing) I'm not much of a numbers person. I was terrible at math, but those kinds of activities, keeping order around the chaos that can often be your

creative life feels good to me. - If you're an artist and you're good, someone is gonna come and they're gonna say, "You just do the art, and let me worry about "everything else." And what you need to do when that person shows up is turn around and run away as fast as you can because if someone sees you, that you're vulnerable and that you're not willing to invest the time yourself into building that brand and understanding who your customer is, they're gonna take advantage of you. You're basically inviting them to do so by saying yes. - One thing I see so many people do who start a creative business is they make the mistake of allowing other people to manage their numbers for them. So, they'll say, "Oh, I'll have to ask my accountant." Or they'll get to December, and they'll say, "Oh, I don't know how much I'm going to owe in taxes. "Maybe I need to talk to my accountant." There's no way that you can effectively run a business without taking ownership of your own numbers and managing your business according to those numbers. - Unfortunately. (Liesl laughing) - And so many creative people get into this because they've got a great idea, they like to make things, they want to be creative, and the numbers and the financials and the data and the programming and the doing the website, that's stuff they're not interested in, so they'll give that responsibility to other people, and as a result, they're not in tune with how their product is doing in the market, where the market's going, where opportunities might be, and they're not as successful as they could be because they're not both being creative and being an effective manager. - [Interviewer] What if they don't have a Todd, though? (Liesl laughing) - If you're not good at that yourself, or if you don't have someone working with you who is good at that, you need to make an investment for the sake of your business in finding somebody who can do that for you. Finding somebody who's a good part-time business manager. Finding an accountant who you trust who will sit down with you once a month and help you understand your numbers because if you're not checking in on a monthly basis on how your business is doing, but leaving that all to the end of the year when you have to file your tax form, your business isn't going to be as successful as it could otherwise. - Before, it was like, "Do I have enough money to pay rent, (laughing) "or buy food?" And if I did, I was fine, and maybe I put some in savings, but now, it's like... When you are an artist, you also don't get a regular paycheck, and you might have a month where you make a lot of money and every client pays you at once. Or you get money from a gallery show, or you get lots of Etsy orders. And then there's a month where nothing happens. And so budgeting your money and paying attention to your cash flow and how much money you have going in and going out and sort of anticipating when you're gonna get paid for things or when you're gonna have a lot of expenses is something you need to think about all the time. Paying attention to your current bank account helps with that, but doing some projection, putting a lot of money away into savings when you have it, knowing that you'll definitely need it down the road, if for nothing else, for income taxes, is really important. - Every month, we look at what our sales volumes were on all our products for that month. We look at what our inventory is, what we're holding for all the products that we hold in inventory. - I try not to look at that one. (Liesl laughing) - I give her a profit and loss statement, what all our expenses were, what all our revenues were for the month broken down by category, and I give her a statement of our accounts receivable. So, what income we can expect to have coming in. - So what we're expecting in within the next 30 days. - Over the next 30 days. - And the next 60 days. - So we can manage our cash. - Yeah, we've been around long enough now that we're not just looking one year out, we're actually looking two to five years out. - Every year we do a financial plan for the year and every year there are projections and assumptions. - I hate it. (all laughing) I drag my feet through every single one of 'em. And I know they're valuable, but they're still painful, I have to admit. Todd loves 'em. (laughing) - But having that allows us to see how we're doing, how the

business is going, and in the middle of the year, in June, we check back in. How we've done the first six months of the year versus plan, and we always find things that we need to change and we slightly change the focus and the emphasis of what we're doing for the rest of the year in response to where the market has led us over the first six months. There's some data that you can get and it will be firm and solid. So, if you know what the package looks like that you're going to produce, you can go out and get a cost estimate from whoever's going to be making your product for what it'll cost to produce that. That's data that's good and solid and won't change. But there are certain assumptions you have to make when you're doing a business plan that may turn out not to be right at all, and it's important to document and to know what's solid data that you have and what are assumptions. So, a big assumption in our business plan was the percent of volume we would do through the different channels that we would be selling the product. When Liesl first launched Oliver + S, over 80% of our volume was to wholesale accounts, distributors and fabric shops that were buying our patterns. After the recession that started in 2008, wholesale customers cut back on the number of patterns they were carrying in their stores, and more and more people started buying directly on the website, directly from us. So, we've seen that volume of wholesale versus consumer purchases change pretty dramatically. If we wouldn't have noticed that changing, we wouldn't have been able to respond as quickly as we did, and when we saw that happening, we responded by making a significant investment in building out our website capabilities, and that's paid very good returns for us as it's drawn more people to the site (accordion music) and more people have been purchasing directly from us. - Trying to understand who your audience is, like, "Who's buying my work? "What do they like? "What seems to be selling well? "What do I need to make more of? "What's the kind of work that design "and art blogs tend to feature?" So, learning a lot about what seems to do well will really help. - It's important to find ways to build feedback loops into your business. You want to know what's working, what's not working. And when you find things that are working, build that back into the next cycle that you go through. So, every time Liesl sits down to design a new season, we look at sales of the last season to see what worked, what didn't, and then we try to leverage what's working well and not do what hasn't sold well. - And it also, interestingly enough, being able to look at those reports actually can give us a lot of ideas for, "Oh, you know what? "This did really well. "What if we would take that same idea "and do something different with it?" So, it actually helps us to be very creative with our business, too, because we can really see. It's almost like real-time feedback where we can really see this is very effective for us, and so what if we go off in this direction? This didn't work for us at all, so clearly we need to bypass that next time and do something differently. It really does help us. - That's a great example of why, if you're running a creative business, you do want to have a handle on your numbers, because... - Absolutely - That's the way of getting feedback that'll tell you what's working and what's not so that the next time you go to do a line of product, you can take advantage of what you're seeing as being successful in the market and minimize what you're seeing as not being so successful. - [Interviewer] What are some other kinds of feedback loops? - Anecdotal evidence versus database evidence. So, anecdotal will be hearing from a few people or a few sources, and that's good because that can often point you in a direction, but if you're going to make an investment in building something there, you've got to have more than just a few anecdotal pieces of evidence that there's demand for that. - I often give the example... People will come and say, "We want more sewing patterns for boys' clothing." And so, I'll think, "Oh, yeah. That's a really good idea. We should do some more boys' patterns. And I'll go to Todd and say, "I think we should "do some more boys' patterns," and Todd will say, - No, no, what she will say is this. She will say, "I'm hearing all over the place! Everybody's talking about it! I'm

getting so many requests! It's on all the blogs I look at! We need to do... - More boys' stuff. And then Todd will say, "Well, let's look at the numbers." And we'll look at the numbers and inevitably, it's the boys' stuff that doesn't sell. But I'll say, "But I really feel like there's..." Right now we're doing it actually with women's apparel. I'll say, "I really feel like there's this big movement. "Women are starting to feel more comfortable "about their sewing and I think that "they're ready to start sewing for themselves," and Todd will say, "Let's look at the numbers." So, there's this constant sort of back and forth, and it can get a little tense at times. - And Liesl's the creative one and it's her job to go out and find new ideas, and she does a great job of that. And she'll come with an idea and she'll say, "I'm hearing it all over the place." And I will say, "Okay, let's put some data behind that. "What do you have?" And she'll say, "I saw two bloggers writing about it." (Liesl laughing) And I will say... - It's usually a little more than that. - "That's great! "So, if that's something two bloggers want, "how many patterns can we sell?" - And so that's when we go back and look at the numbers, and say, "Well, really, probably, that's not the best idea. "In the past, if we look, historically, "we haven't sold that many boys' patterns," for example. We can try it again. We might agree that we'll do another test and see how it goes, and we still... Especially with regard to boys' patterns, we always do put out at least one a year, but we have found that they just don't sell as well for us. It's kind of a back and forth, (whimsical music) and I know I make Todd crazy about this all the time, but when I feel very strongly about something, I will keep pushing, and I'll keep pushing, and he'll have to keep saying no. - And I will push back and we will... - And at some point, we'll agree. - When you're selling things on the internet, whether it's on Etsy or anywhere else, it's really important to present your product in a really professional, and I think even creative way. We all love getting things in the mail. A few of the things that I do... I get big postcards made that I include in every order. I hand-letter every envelope, and sometimes I get a lot of orders, and so it's more work, but I feel like people... Especially since I'm known for my hand-lettering, I feel like people appreciate getting an envelope that has their name and address in my signature handwriting. I think all of those little personal touches go a long way, and will... They'll cause people to come back to your shop because they know they can count on you for something that's really nice and high quality. Etsy is a really great venue for selling your work, especially when you're first starting out, but I think one of the really important things to remember is that it's really rare for an Etsy shop to just sort of take off immediately. It can take years. I opened my Etsy shop in 2007, and it really wasn't until 2010 that I started to get very consistent orders. There's just so many different ways to build your shop audience. Using social media... Every single time you post a new item, making sure that you're telling people about it more than once. If you can keep a regular blog and at least once a week, write about something that's for sale in your shop or something new that you're working on can also really be beneficial. You are in a community, so you could sell a painting or a print to somebody who would never have known about you otherwise. And that's great thing about Etsy. It's a marketplace. It's like a shopping mall and people will find you who might have gone to Etsy for a different reason. It's a great way, then, to sort of build a new customer base. Any opportunity you have to find customers in a way that you wouldn't have otherwise, like going to a craft fair is another great way. People come to craft fairs to discover new people, or they might come because they want to see Mary Jo, who makes their favorite vase, but then they find you while they're there and then you've got a new fan. I feel like any opportunity you have to lump yourself together with other people selling things is actually a great thing. If you do make good work and you do stand out, people will find you and they'll buy your work. - What I've decided and what I feel really strongly about is that what this age has given us... It's given us these giant retailers that control prices and sell everything

super super cheap, and are really difficult to deal with, in my opinion, or to support, in my opinion, and then we have these wonderful opportunities because of the internet and because of social networking of doing work, deciding how it's presented, and growing a customer base that's maybe just at first 10 people and then 50 people and then 100 people and 1,000 people, and giving them what they want and getting to know who they are, and deciding exactly where you're gonna go and whether or not you're gonna bring them with you. I think that if you know them and you can sort of visualize them, then you can keep working for them. If I had the choice between seeing a million of something at Target and getting 10 cents each or a penny each... It's probably closer to a penny each at the end of the day. Or having 1,000 customers that come and come back and see me online and see what I'm doing and I can connect with them and stay connected to them and I'm making maybe 50 or a hundred bucks off of each of them, that's better in my mind. They're gonna support me, I'm gonna support them, I'm gonna feel when I'm making something that I know who I'm making it for. - [Interviewer] How did you go from you walking into stores to getting to have sales reps, and... - Well, the stores were re-ordering because people were buying the cards, and so, then they would place larger orders and I could tell people... I put on my website, "I have these stockists," and I was lucky to have a couple of stockists that were a little more high profile, so people saw, "Oh, you sell there? "That's pretty cool. "I run a cool shop somewhere else." And stockists, or retailers, are really particular. A good store is gonna be like a curated museum. Their collection is gonna be hand-picked and it's gonna reflect something about them, too, and that's something that other stores look for. They want that cache, as well, so those tiny stores, they're being viewed by larger stores like Anthropologie. So, they'll say, "Oh, I saw this cool shop. "I call this cool thing. "I want that for us." At that point, when I started getting larger orders from bigger retailers, that came with a whole slew of larger problems, including perhaps, angering the really hip shop that I started out with, but unfortunately, with a business, it runs on money. You can't pay your rent in promises, and a small store that maybe is ordering 200 bucks worth of stuff twice a year versus a big account that's gonna order, you know, two grand worth of goods for this particular season, those are decisions you have to make and you've gotta play it by ear. - I made a decision pretty early on in my career that I wanted to remain a sole proprietor, that I didn't want to manufacture my own products. And that's not because I think there's anything wrong with that. I have friends who own companies where they actually manufacture their own products and design products with their artwork or with their design skills, and what I notice about them is that they are managing huge staffs of people, inventory that sometimes doesn't even live in the same town where they live, and having to travel a lot to go check production and things like that. I feel like what brings me the most joy in my day to day existence is the actual creative process and making art, and not managing a staff of people or traveling a whole lot for business, and so I've made a concerted effort to keep my business very small. That's not to say that I don't have goals to continue to do well financially from my artwork, but I have no aspiration to turn it into something that you would see in every store, like a Jonathan Adler or even a Lotta Jansdotter. Who, both of them I admire greatly. It's just for me, keeping it simple and... I'm fine with other people licensing my work if it's the right fit, it's just not something... Manufacturing products isn't something that I've ever wanted to get into 'cause I want to stay as connected as possible to the core of what I do, which is finding inspiration and delivering it in the form of a drawing or a painting. - We went to a trade show, which is kind of a necessary evil, I think. People have this perception that people can find everything online, but there's no substitute for going to these trade shows. Yes, it's a lot of money. Yes, it's a lot of time. But I promise it's worth it. You need a catalog, you need a price sheet, and you need to know, "When can I "actually send

these things out the door? "If I get a ton of orders, do I have "a plan to fill these orders?" Because that's the only way that you can get your face in front of people. You also will meet people who are your competition. You can see how they're doing things, what's working for them. You could become friends with them. Maybe you share resources. I think even though we're a company that our regular retailers order from, we still get larger orders at the store. We always make our money back, and you meet press people, and that face time is just... You can't put a price on that. I went to the National Stationary Show which is in New York, and then the next go-around was the San Francisco Gift Show and I met with our current reps... I met with reps. I was like, "Oh, these are such good reps. "This would be so awesome. "They have such good brands." I was so into it and I so confidently marched in with my box of samples and they looked at it and they asked me a couple of questions, and I didn't hear anything, and I was crushed. But then, I took into account some of the feedback that they had given me, and I thought about how I could ramp up. I thought about how I could just streamline production to make things easier on me and better for the retailers. How I could be more accepting of larger orders, and the next year, they picked me up and I was really excited. - [Interviewer] Oh, nice! Great, what was some of the feedback they gave you? - A lot of the feedback was about packaging, actually, because they know stores. Reps are on the ground and they... You can't go to every store that you want to sell in, so you really have to trust their knowledge. Sales reps really want brands that already know what they're doing. That have a track record. They know they can fill orders. They want you to (fingers snapping) constantly be coming out with stuff, and they want you to be organized. They want you to ship on time. They want you to be reliable. - I was a few years into my art career when I signed with an agent, and I had contacted her upon the recommendation of a friend who said, "I can see your work "being more in the market. "It might help you with the beginning of your career." I worked really hard to get my website ready and my portfolio ready. At the time, I didn't really have very much work, and I ended up contacting Lilla Rogers, who's my agent now, on a whim, really. I thought, "What are the chances? "The woman gets a thousand submissions a year." A few months later, she e-mailed me back. Actually, she e-mailed me back pretty quickly, but a few months later I actually ended up flying to Boston and meeting with her and signing with her. It was one of those things where taking a risk and putting myself out there even though my portfolio didn't feel quite ready paid off in the end. She saw something in me and my work that... She knew I had potential, and so she signed me, and I'm very grateful, 'cause having an agent is... For me, it's great. - [Interviewer] What do they do? What's great about it? - Well, they market your work, they promote you, they handle your contracts. They take your work to shows and... Shows like SURTECH, which is a surface design show, and Printsources... I don't do those every year because the bulk of my work is in book illustration, but they're great places to market repeat patterns and other design that could be licensed to go on home decor products or apparel or things like that. So, that's great. They promote your work to art directors. They have relationships with art directors who come directly to them, saying, "We have this job. "We're looking for an illustrator who "fits these qualifications. "Who do you have on your roster "that might be a good fit for this job?" Oftentimes, early on, before I had an agent, I might get an offer and have no idea if the money I was being offered was what I should be making, or if that's what everybody makes for that kind of job. They know those things. They handle contracts. They know all the legalese. The agent's job is to really (whimsical music) take care of you and make sure that things go smoothly with the client. You pay your agency a commission. Typically, agencies take anywhere from 25 to 50 or 45%, depending on the services they offer. For me, it's worth it. - So, one piece of advice that I always give people when they ask me about starting a company is that you

need to value your own time appropriately. So many people get into launching a creative business because they have a passion or a hobby that they really love that they want to turn into a career, and because they've got a passion for that, they don't think about the value of their time. What they typically end up doing is producing a product, pricing that product in a way that doesn't adequately compensate them for the amount of work they do to bring that product to market. So many people in this business have no overhead, they work from their home either on a part-time basis or a full-time basis, healthcare is provided by a spouse who has a full-time job, so they don't have to worry about that, they love what they do, so they don't think about this as work, so they don't track the number of hours they put into what they're doing, and then when they come to market with a product, it's priced so low that the cost of the product times the volume that they'll sell ends up compensating them at pennies on the dollar for the amount of time they put into it. Tough to figure out what the value of your time is. The one thing that I would encourage people to do is to sit down either with a spreadsheet or a calculator and try to do some basic numbers. Estimate, just estimate roughly. "How many hours would it take me "to develop a product and bring it to market?" And then multiply by 120% because you're gonna estimate low. Then figure out what is your time worth to you? If you were to take the number of hours that you're going to invest in bringing this product to market, and you were going to be working for somebody else doing a job, what would you get paid on an hourly basis? Multiply that times the number of hours you think that you're going to have to invest to bring this product to market and that will give you how much money you think you should be able to make. Then, you use that to help you price your product. Your product price needs to factor in the cost of manufacturing that product, the cost of distributing that product, and the cost of your time. Multiply your proposed volume times your proposed price per product, and all of those numbers should tie together. - I have my business persona, and in my business persona, I'm a lot more assertive than I am in real life. In real life, I abhor conflict and in business, I just think, "Listen, "this is just what it has to be. "You need to meet this. "I need this. "I'll do this." You just need to be responsible. That's a part of divorcing the business from yourself. They don't think my hair is stupid, this isn't right for them. That's a business decision that they're making, so don't take that personally. - When you decide, "Now is the time "when I'm really going to make a go of this," you really need to start thinking about this as a job. That involves adequately valuing your time. That involves figuring out what your overhead costs are and making sure that you're charging enough for your product to cover your overhead. I was having a talk with someone at Quilt Market a few years ago, and this was a very successful and well-known designer, and we were talking about overhead, and she said, "Oh, I don't have any overhead costs, "because a few years ago, we bought "the house next to ours, and we "run the business out of this house." And I looked at her, and I didn't say anything, but I thought, "Wait a minute. "You bought a second house. "That's all overhead for your business. (Liesl laughing) "You have a lot of costs. "And your product better be supporting the fact "that you own a house next to the house you live in "because you wouldn't have to have that house "if you didn't have to store your patterns "and ship your product from there." - But some people honestly don't have that overhead. They're working out of a spare bedroom or a basement. How do you value that? - But they do, and I think you need to think about the costs that support your business even if you don't have to pay for those. If you're working out of a spare room in your house, you need to think, "You know what, "there's a cost to taking up the "guest bedroom for my business." And you need to figure out what the cost of that is. - You think like a real New Yorker. (Liesl laughing) - It's the same thing for health insurance. If you're devoting yourself full-time to this business, you really need to be thinking down the road, "What would it cost me if I had to "buy my

own health insurance instead of "being on my spouse's health insurance?" And you need to factor that into the cost of your product. You also, as soon as possible, need to start thinking about paying yourself a salary. I talk to a lot of people who own creative-related businesses, and they don't pay themselves a salary. At the end of the year, they let their accountant tell them how much money they made and they take a little money out of the business based on their profit at the end of the year. - What's leftover, yeah. - But if you're working on this thing on a day to day basis, you really need to be paying yourself a salary. - Initially, that's really hard, especially when you've got a lot of start-up costs involved. If you've invested in your own business, you want to be paying back your investor, or yourself for that investment, so do you still recommend it right off the bat? - I recommend right off the bat you figuring out when you're going to start paying yourself a salary. - So even if you're not paying it right away, you still know when you will. - Even if you're not paying it right away, set a date and say, "By September one of next year, I will be "making enough money out of this business "to start paying myself a salary." And it doesn't have to be a six-figure salary, but it just has to be some number and you need to write a check to yourself every two weeks (whimsical music) and you need to pay your social security tax every two weeks and treat yourself as an employee. You're your own employee, but value your time enough to pay yourself out of your business. - I only take money for myself when I have it. I'm married, I'm in a relationship with somebody who has a regular job, and we both put money into a joint account every month, and so I'm obligated to do that. Now, if for some reason... This hasn't happened in a long time, but if for some reason, I didn't have our agreed upon amount to put in our joint account every month to buy food and pay our rent and stuff, I'd have to figure something out. Probably dig into my savings a little bit. But for the most part, I have that. Now, outside of that, then I have to decide, "Okay, what extra is for me? "What do I need to buy for myself and "what do I need to buy for my business? "Do I need new books? "Do I need new art supplies? "Do I need a new scanner?" So, I have my family obligations first, and then outside of that, my business and personal financial stuff, but I don't have a regular draw that I take regardless of how much I make. Someday maybe. (laughing) Not so lucky yet.

Part 3 - Licensing Artwork and Fabric

(lighthearted ukelele music) - [Lisa] For many artists, they would never want their work to be on anything. And then you've got artists who probably are somewhere in the middle who might take a licensing deal now or again. And then you've got artists for whom that is their main goal. They want their artwork on everything at Target, or (laughs) at Crate & Barrel. (lighthearted indie-pop music) - I do license my illustrations, my drawing, my artwork for several different product categories. Most notably fabric, but also surfboards, and apparel, and some stationary. - Licensing your work essentially means that you are allowing another entity or a company to use your artwork. It varies, sometimes they can do a full buyout, which means they own it, and they own the rights to it, and they can use it for whatever they want, and then there are varying degrees down from there to very restricted licensing where they can use it, but only on a certain product for a certain period of time, and you can still use it for whatever you want to, or you could sell it to another company. Depending on how extensively they want to use whatever artwork you've made determines the price point. - Usually it's a larger company takes your artwork and finds applications for it within their existing product line or for their existing customer. More often than not, they also oversee the manufacturing of that product. But you as the artist typically are responsible for developing the actual product and presenting your ideas. And then the other company will take those ideas, and

your artwork, and your designs, and they'll run with it. They'll manufacture goods and sell them into their existing customer base. - There's licensing of existing work, and then there's licensing of work that you create for a company. And the pricing of those things is different, and the way you work with a client is a little different. Oftentimes, companies will contact you, and they want to license existing work, so work that you've already made, that's already in your portfolio, high-resolution images of it exist, and they have an idea for something they'd like to put it on. And so that's one kind. This birch tree journal has actually been on the market since like 2007 and it's still going strong, so. (laughs) I still make royalties from this one. I love it when the checks come. I don't really paint the birch forest anymore, but they were sort of an iconic theme when I started my career. And sometimes it's really great to have one type of imagery that you're known for, at least in the beginning. You can always branch out from there. I always did some work with Poketo, which is a Los Angeles based company. And they had a line of products that sold at Target. And that was an example of a job where they took existing artwork and put it on the product, so I didn't really have to do anything except send them the high-res image. The other kind is commissioned. So we wanna to license some of your work for fabric or wallpaper, but we want exclusive rights to it, and we want you to create it. So we'll work together to give you art direction, to create something specifically for us. One of the most fun jobs I ever did was wallpaper for Hygge & West. And this was a commissioned licensing job. They came to me and said, "We want you to do three designs." So I have this one, which is called Bohemian, and then this one which comes in three different color ways, which is called Ferns, and then this triangle pattern right here, which comes in three different color ways. That was probably one of the most fun licensing jobs that I've ever had was doing the wallpaper. - There's the myth of licensing, where people believe that it's all they have to do. People think that, a lot of artists are hopeful anyway, that they can just focus on the art and design, and then another company could come along and develop product and pay them a percentage, which is the payoff for the artist. And I think that's really appealing to a lot of us as artists, because it takes the burden of that, the business burden and the manufacturing burden, the marketing burden off of our shoulders. (lighthearted music) (birds cawing) (waves crashing) Maybe this is my own slightly thwarted perspective, but you've got about as much success of succeeding in a big way financially via licensing as you do becoming a famous actress or a famous musician. It's a very small percentage of people who license artwork that are actually profitable, actually financially profitable from it. It's a great way to build a brand, but I think it can be a mistake to really put all of your eggs into the licensing basket for my reasons. What happened with me, it was one of those situations where you think you've just hit the jackpot. I was at a trade show with my pajama line, Munki Munki, and I was approached by two people, and they introduced themselves. And they worked for literally the largest company that could've possibly come into my booth. And they said, "We love this. "Would you be interested in doing "some work for us through licensing? "Would you be interested in collaborating?" And I just thought, oh, my God. This is my moment, this is it. This is gonna be amazing. And it was a disaster, literally a disaster. I spent two years doing product development for them without any pay, without any guarantee, without any order almost full time. I was literally, the work that I was doing to sort of keep the lights on, because you can't call the electric company and say, hey, I'm doing something right now, I'm gonna get paid for it in two years, so how 'bout I just pay you then? And then the company, because every company has the right to do this, decided not to move forward, not just with me, but with any of the licensing in that category. The manufacturer that I was working with had already filled containers. The product was already on boats and on its way to the US. And the company canceled the whole program. And I never made a penny. There's a

big investment that happens in terms of time. And the thing about licensing is that you're not really getting paid typically until the product is shipped, sold, done. And from start to finish, that can be years before the product that you're designing actually hits the market, and you're actually eligible for any kind of payment. So after that, I thought, well, that was just one bad apple, and licensing could still really work for me. And I started doing a little thinking, a little investigating in licensing agents, because I thought maybe I just didn't have an agent, maybe I just didn't have the right contract. And I started talking to licensing agents, and something just didn't feel right. I mean, first of all, if a licensing agent needs to take 40% of what you're bringing in in income, and don't forget, you're only getting between three and 10% of overall sales anyway. So if Bed Bath & Beyond or Linens 'n Things or anybody writes a million dollar order, you're not seeing a million dollars. You're getting between three and 10% of that. And if you've worked with a licensing agent, they take 40%. And I guess my initial response to that was if you need to take 40%, no one's making any money. And then you still gotta pay the people that you hired to help you develop the product, or whatever your development costs were, whether you had to get on a plane and go meet with a company, or send them some nice portfolio work, or print out page after page after page of development samples. There's costs associated with all of that development. That's on your shoulders. At no time do you ever know if you're actually gonna get an order out of it. Which is scary. It's a big risk, it's a big risk. - [Interviewer] So then what happened from that experience to you having more successful? - Well, I think what happened is that I was very cautious after that bad experience, and maybe a little bitter. Which a little bit of bitterness when you have your own company, it's not a bad thing, necessarily. And it made me ask more questions. It made me more suspicious. It made me really wonder if the formula wasn't a little bit broken, at least when it came to favoring the artists. That's when I started looking at smaller companies, and started finding companies that were looking for surface design, and putting it on things that I really loved or connected with somehow. And that's when licensing started to work for me. I think it's okay to get really psycho about what you're willing to have next to your name and what you're not. I think it's actually a really important part of the process. I think you're better off just having one really beautiful image next to your name, and not touching the website again for another six months than you are just putting all sorts of stuff up there. The work that you're really proud of, get it next to your name everywhere. Get it next to your name on product. Get it next to your name on your website. And then stay true to it. Really stay focused on it. And it will eventually, that passion and that focus will start to attract people. And then be careful. Be careful about who you work with. And make sure that it's something, make sure the product that they are developing, if its licensing is something that you love just as much as you love your own work. And it's a long process. You've gotta give it time. I have a good friend who keeps saying, "I'm just." She's been designing fabric for a couple of years and she's saying, "It's just not working, I don't know." And I have to keep reminding her I've been doing it for 15 years, and I've just gotten to the point where I feel like I can control whether what I put out there is gonna be something I like or not. It's really gonna be really, really tough. (lighthearted indie-pop music) But now, I have a rule for love or for money. Now if I find a product that I really, really love, and I wanna get involved in it, or if it's a company that is doing amazing things like Walden Surfboards, and I wanna be a part of what they're doing because they're good people and they're doing good things, and they're producing a product that I connect with in some way, yeah, it's a win-win. - I size up a licensing job at this point in my career by saying, first of all, what's the reputation of the company? Do they make products that I find interesting or beautiful? Do I wanna be associated with this company? Because a lot of times, your name isn't on it, but people know it's yours. And sometimes

your name is on whatever is licensed. That's part of how they market it is using the artist. So I look at that. Would I buy this thing (giggles) that they want to put my art on? Does it feel aligned with my aesthetic? How much money am I gonna make? Does it feel worth my time? Especially if they're not buying existing work. If they want me to produce something new for them, is it something that is gonna be super time-consuming? Is it something that I can do relatively quickly in my schedule? So I take a lot of different factors into consideration. (waves crashing) - I got in touch with Walden. I said, "Hey, you're already using my art, "but if you would like me to develop the art "specifically for your product, I would love to do that. "I think it would be a really, really great match." it just felt right to try to put some artwork on a surfboard, especially because I had all of this mermaid art that really wanted a home. And everyone needs an excuse to have a mermaid in their house. I didn't even bring up the idea of licensing. I just told them that I felt like we could develop a really fun product together. And I felt like a lot of my customers, if not family members, would really love the product, so we should go for it. And they were totally into it. And we just went into it, we still don't have a written contract, which is great. Because every other company that I've licensed with that's bigger is like 20-page contract. You have to hire a lawyer to look at it. And then you gotta pay the lawyer, and you're just like. It's so complicated. But with Walden, it was like, all right, I'll do the art, you make the surfboard. And it's nice to be able to do work that just feels good creatively. - I approach licensing in a different way, because I control my own production for most of my products. I consider licensing a chance for me to do something else entirely. Pillows, tote bags, something that I can't source myself. I think about, oh, what can I get from this? Licensing is great for exposure. It's great maybe for some money. But for me, I just kinda find it gets me most when I think of it as like a creative outlet. - The beginning of my career, I probably took more licensing opportunities, or pretty much every licensing opportunity that came my way, because I was just trying to get my name out there. I'm a little bit more discerning now, both because my time is more limited, because I'm so busy working, and also because I can be. The main thing that new, or I don't wanna say young, because I didn't even start my career until I was in my 30s, but new artists, or emerging artists or illustrators need to remember is that the more you get your work on the internet, the more you can sort of brand yourself as somebody who has marketable illustration skills that would lend themselves to licensing on products, the more chance there will be that you will get a licensing job or sign with an agent. And sometimes that takes years. So there's portfolio development. There's developing a clean, really easy-to-navigate website, building a social media presence online, getting your name out there so that art directors are going to stumble across your work, figuring out ways to send press releases to blogs that you love who might potentially write about your work, keeping your own blog that, and building a following. So in this day and age, I feel like the internet is really the way to get your work out there. Before you actually had to have an agent in order to get work. Now you don't have to have an agent because of the internet. I think still for a lot of people, having an agent is a great thing. Although, it's no longer necessary. - I think that there are great opportunities in licensing on a big scale, on a small scale, but I think you need to pick. If you're interested in licensing, you need to be the one that decides where it goes and how it's used. Because otherwise, it's not gonna help you in the long run. It's not gonna give you more customers that are gonna continue to support you and gonna continue to grow with you. And I think, too, a lot of us in handmade, in this market where handmade is such a crucial part of it, we recognize that people are looking for products that feel personal, and feel special. And licensing can be a real trapdoor there, too, because if you're everywhere, if people start seeing you on shelves of big box retailers, they're gonna start to wonder if you're really designing for them anymore, because

you're not. You're designing with this whole development team with this retailer, or you're designing with trying to appeal to as many people as you can, and sorry, and I don't think that's the only way to work. I don't think that's the only way to have a company where you have a multitude of products. If my artwork's gonna go on something, I want it to be something that I would use, and love, and appreciate, and not a product that I don't understand. (lighthearted indie-pop music) - [Interviewer] How is it different when you're designing fabric? How do you start that process? - Yeah, that's been a real learning process for me because I didn't have any real technical training in any of it. And it's been over the course of, I guess including the years I did Munki Munki, 15 years until I finally realized that I needed to think through what the overall pattern would be once my illustrations all came together. There's a real science to it. It's an art, but there's a real science to it. I started Munki Munki when I was 25 or 26, and the idea was that. The idea was to design fabric with images that I thought would be appealing to kids, and then make clothing out of it. And it initially sort of exploded and became, the response to it was very strong. And then suddenly, I was running a company. And I was coming from a background of having worked as a naturalist and wilderness guide. I'd never even worked in an office. I'd literally never worked in an office. Email was very new at the time. And my dad was like, "Heather, you gotta get a computer." And I was like, "I really think this whole email thing is a fad." And I wasn't buying into any of it. I wanted to do everything my own way. And it was, ugh, it was just a nightmare. And I didn't really have a big pile of money. I took the title of my car and went to this local economic development corporation and convinced them that I would give somebody a job in Arcata, California, which was an important thing in an economically depressed place. And so they gave me a little bit of money, and I hired a few people, and I got some partners, and I got the bank involved. And pretty soon, it was this big out-of-control company that I didn't know anything about running, and it was really tough. And again, we'd all moved to the northern part of California because it was beautiful, not because we wanted to work really hard. A lot of people were like, "Yeah, I'll be here till three. "I'll totally help you with this, but I'm leaving at 3:15." Or "The surf's really good today, so I'm not comin' in." And I always had to really honor that, because that's why we were there. We were there for this lifestyle. But eventually, it made it really clear that I couldn't stay there, and I couldn't be an artist in a place where there wasn't any money. And that was a really, really, really sad reality for me to realize that it was gonna be in a place, and this is for me, this is very personal experience. I know that people succeed in places like that as artists all the time, but for me, it wasn't working. And I realized that I really needed to be somewhere where the work was. And I sold my company, which was a great thing overall. And I left Northern California, and I decided to be in a place where people wanted to work really, really, really hard and there was a lot of opportunity for creative professionals, and I went to Manhattan. And one of the first things I did was start designing fabric and licensing those designs. Because Munki Munki, a lot of its success had been because of the fabric prints. So I thought, well, maybe I should just start with the fabric. (giggles) when I started licensing fabric, there were only really a handful of us who were even putting our name on the fabric. It was not like it is today. It's very different. And I think a lot of that has to do with the way the crafts market, the consumer base exists online, and the way that people follow one another. And the blogging was a huge part of that initially for a lot of us. I'm not sure that it's as crucial now for whatever reason. I think that everyone's sort of looking for that new vehicle. But terms of building a brand around ourselves and our lifestyle on fabric and crafts and sewing is such a home-based kind of interest that we could all talk about our families, and our lives, and really get people to understand where our artwork was coming from. It was a lot of fun. It was really a lot of fun in the beginning. It introduced me to this world, which is surprisingly

large in New York City of people who are interested in crafts and handmade. And I realized that there was this place for me in the city within that community. And I made some very good friends. Some of my closest friends today are those people that I met in that first few months of being there, of trying to do things in that market. And it's a really wonderful group of people. It's really tremendous, and they do tremendous work, and it's just exploded. These companies have grown so much, and it's been so fascinating to be a part of it. But the licensing of the fabric is very simple, because it's just a flat surface. It's not as complex as designing a lot of other products. And there's a big market for fabric, but there's also a lot of designers. And the reality is, and this is the unfortunate reality, and I get asked about this a lot, only the very, very top tier of fabric designers are making enough money to really live on, to really make a difference. And I've been designing fabric through licensing off and on for seven or eight years, and I don't think I've ever made enough in one year to say pay my rent for more than a couple months. (laughs) I think that there's definitely probably a real disconnect in what people think we're all earning and what we're actually earning. And that can be a struggle. Because I do feel like it's our artwork that really drives the product, but you have to honor the work that a company like Windham does, and the risk and liability. And having come from that manufacturing place of Munki, Munki, I get it. I understand what it costs to make this stuff, and the cost of selling it, and the cost of marketing it, and the cost of warehousing it, and shipping it. It's a lot. It's a lot of liability that I don't want. And it is a shame that we don't all make a little bit more. (laughs) But I have a great relationship with Windham, and I feel like if we really work hard, we could probably make a real dent in terms of what we're bringing in, but we'll have to see. I would recommend if anyone wants to get into fabric design, I would really recommend taking some classes just in that surface design and pattern design category, and in Photoshop, and Illustrator. Those are skills that are gonna take you in other directions anyways. To have those skills, to have those really specialized skills is a wonderful thing. And then for anyone who's interested in licensing that artwork within that fabric market, you have to be doing something different. You have to be doing something unique. You can't look at another designer and say, oh, I'm gonna do more of that. And I'm not saying that just because I don't want anybody else out there doing mermaids. (laughs) That's fine with me. I think it's because there's so many of us now in that market that if we don't all find and serve our niche, we're not gonna make it. We're gonna be competing with each other too closely. - It used to be that you could do a book, and the book would be the launching pad. And because you had done the book, you would become known. - I mean, I produce products for a market, and I make books for products that I can't produce for market. (laughs) - You have enough clout in the industry, you might be able to negotiate something different for your contract. - Just like with launching a company, to not be sort of following, oh, this is what everybody does, it's to be thinking outside of the box. - I think if I just did the picture books, I'd get a little lonely. And if I just did the crafts market, I think I would miss the money. (laughs)

Part 4 - Book Publishing

(gently chiming bells) - [Woman] I get to help make people make their dreams come true, because they, for a lot of people writing a book is a dream. So that's kind of a scary place to be, but it's also exciting to help somebody do something that they have dreamed about. (soft music) - When you put a lot of effort into defining a brand you really wanna get the best return that you can get from all that work, so you need to think about once the original product based on that brand is in the marketplace how do you expand that brand into new directions? And one of the first opportunities that we got to expand the Oliver + S brand was for Liesl to do an Oliver + S book. - Right, and it fit

beautifully into our brand, because our sewing patterns were always very apparel-based and yet I had all these ideas for these smaller accessories and toys and hats and bags and things like that that we didn't feel really warranted a pattern on their own. And so it fit very nicely to put them into a book. How do you wanna say? - [Todd] It helped build the brand and build the reach of the brand. People come to know the brand through that book. Liesl had brought the patterns out at a time where there wasn't really anything in that space and so people were very interested in what she was doing and she started getting approached by publishers saying, if you ever wanna do a book please consider me. And we decided that it might be a good thing to do a book. - I got into book illustration because I had already had this stationary gig with Chronicle Books. And I, so I ended up doing a couple of, illustrating a couple of books with them for other authors and then I, now I'm working on one that is my own. And I also have a friend who is an art director who hired me to do two different children's books that she was working on with two different authors. So oftentimes the book jobs, if that's where you wanna go, come from relationships that you have with people in the publishing industry or art directors who work in the book industry. I also think that it's possible for someone to make their way into the book world by simply making illustrations that would be conducive to book illustration and marketing your work that way and sending your portfolio or trying to get a meeting with a publisher that you wanted to work with. So I think there's a lot of different ways. But for me it just sort of happened 'cause I knew people. - I'm ready to release my second book. I've just written a proposal for my third, which I'm under contract for. And book publishing is great, it's not a great payday, but it's great for exposure. It's a really fun exercise for you to create things that you probably couldn't sell. It's really fun to be able, just like Creativebug, like sharing your skills with other people. I personally love that. So with rounded shapes it's easier to move the rubber itself. Because the stamps come apart I've just taken the one portion that I want to reprint. Look at that. I've produced products for a market and I make books for products that I can't produce for market. And I like showing people how to do stuff. I like finding the little tricks, I like share, it's kind of like having someone come visit your studio. And it's really intimate, it takes a lot of time. It's definitely not easy, but I think it's really rewarding. The publisher that I'm with now actually approached me about creating a book and he said, he called me up and I could not believe it. (laughs) He said, what is the book of your dreams, or something like that. I was like, what are you talking about? I don't have one. I had never thought I would, it's just something that had never occurred to me. But the more and more I thought about it I thought about what's integral to my brand? What do I love doing? What do I know a lot about? And so I wrote a book proposal, luckily they accepted it, and that took me a long time, but oh god. (soft music) - Well, I think the first thing is that you have to have an idea that you're passionate about. The idea that you're passionate about can't just be that I wanna write a book. It has to be more specific than that, but not so specific that you're rigid. Because we do have a lot of cases where people send me one idea and then, and they're passionate about it and then we sculpt that. So I think it's just really important that a proposal be backed by passion, that it be a very clear articulation of the content that you imagine and any particular vision that you have for how it will come together. In some cases people don't have, they might know exactly what the words are gonna be, but they don't have a vision of what the pictures are gonna be. And that's fine, but whatever it is that an author has figured out that needs to be shared with us in the most clear and concise way possible. Oftentimes a proposal will include sample content. That certainly helps. Sometimes it, it always needs to have if it's a craft book or a design book, anything DIY, it needs to have visuals. It doesn't mean you have to hire a professional photographer at all, it just needs to be clear. - [Interviewer] Clear what the projects will

be or what it is you're proposing? - Yeah, clear what you're proposing. If it's a book of 20 projects maybe you have pictures of five projects, not necessarily the five that are gonna be in the book, 'cause you might not have done that, but five that sort of stand in as representative of what you're looking to do. A proposal should have a biography that explains who you are and how, why people are gonna wanna see a book from you and how you're gonna be able to promote it. - It's like creating a business plan in a sense. - To a certain extent. - Here is the audience, here's how we, 'cause every publisher wants you to do a lot of marketing of your own book now. I think that's, a lot of publishers won't even look at you unless you bring an audience to them on their own. So it was really here's our audience, here are the customers that we're already selling to, and here's what we anticipate this book looking like. So that was a. - And here's what makes the book concept unique. Here's why there's a real need for it. - Here's what we think would be in the book. - Sample. - This is the approach. It was part of that whole thinking through it was is this a how to sew book? Or in our case, this is a book that assumes that you already have the basics of sewing, and so we're not going to talk about what are the tools that you need and this is how you thread a machine. We were making that assumption that you already had that or had another book that was gonna show you that. So it was all that sort of anticipating what we wanted that book to be in order to write the proposal. - It used to be that you could do a book and the book would be the launching pad and because you had done the book you would become known and now it's very unlikely that you'll have an easy time getting a book deal if you're not known first. - [Interviewer] Is that sad for you in a way? - Yeah, it is sad for me. I'm an introvert from way back. I feel like it's harder to get published if you're an introvert, if you're quiet, if you're not out there promoting all the time. I feel like I wanna protect my own. (laughs) And I think that there are extraordinary people with extraordinary ideas who are not public people and who don't want to be and they shouldn't be neglected because of that. It's just tricky. You have to find ways around it. I think that some of the, there are people who are comfortable with the online world, so they're very comfortable putting themselves out there, but they might not wanna do events in person, that's one possibility. There are things that we can do as a publisher, but it's definitely harder to work with people who aren't out there promoting. And another reason why it's sad is that sometimes people who are great at promoting don't have the most exciting ideas, so it becomes a little bit of like a popularity contest and not always based on the quality of the work. And that's sort of, that's kind of a bummer, especially to an introvert. (laughs) Sometimes I get proposals for books that we would never publish, because it's just not at all like the work that we do and it's clear to me that the author didn't do his or her research, because it's like, why would you send us this? Like we would never do this. But oftentimes I get letters from people who did a lot of research and that's impressive. They say, I am writing to you because when I looked at my shelf my three favorite books were A, B, and C, and I noticed that your company published them and the reason that I like them is one, two, three, and my idea's this and this is what I envision and I'm excited to be working, at the possibility of working with you. You can also look in the acknowledgement section of books that you love and oftentimes authors will communicate something about the relationship they had with the publishing house by way of the acknowledgements. You have to read between the lines maybe a little bit, because it is polite to always thank your editor, that doesn't mean you always had the best experience. But in a lot of cases you can tell. Also, you can always certainly figure out if there are any authors who you know or who people you know know or if you're going to a conference maybe an author who's book you really liked will be there and you can try to politely arrange a time to speak with authors about the experiences that they've had with different publishing houses or maybe there's stuff like that on

different online sites where you can ask around. But you do wanna send proposals to publishers that make sense. It used to be everyone always said, you have to like do, compare it to other books that are out there. And sometimes that's useful to me, because I publish in the craft area if it's an area that we've done a lot in, say like knitting or sewing or quilting, typically I don't really need them to tell me what the competitive titles are, because I know what they are. If it's an area that we're venturing into now, like maybe something like beading or jewelry making, then it might be helpful to me, because I'm trying to educate myself about that area. But when an author works on a proposal he or she should do research about publishers. - We had a certain vision for that book and we wanted to be sure that we could accommodate that vision or that the publisher that we chose could accommodate that vision, and so we had fairly extensive conversations with each of those publishers and asked them point blank, what is your vision for this book? And with a couple of the publishers we just didn't feel like their vision for the book matched our vision. One publisher wanted us to put a lot more apparel in the book and that just didn't fit right with what we saw it being. So ultimately we went with a publisher who we felt was the best fit, who we really felt like we could work very well with. - Yeah, I think that people might find this interesting, we chose to go with a publisher that didn't give us the best financial offer. Because we knew going into this that this wasn't ultimately a moneymaking project for us. It was a way of expanding the brand and extending the brand and we wanted to make sure that the book would do that for us. - And that was an important part in the decision for us. - Yeah, the publisher that gave us the best financial offer for the book wanted the book to look and feel like all of their other books and not like the Oliver + S brand. - It is important for us that the author have a unique perspective on it. It's not that you have to do something that's brand, brand new, because there aren't that many things that are that way, but it's important that you bring something new to it and that the idea not feel derivative or just kind of cookie cutter. And remember that your proposal is the publisher's first sense of what your manuscript is gonna look like. I often say how you do anything is how you do everything. (gentle music) Depend on the author. If it's a big book, which is a relative term, but let's say over 160 pages, over 20 projects, not a lot of it or any of it has been written, it's all sort of new, it typically takes an author between nine and 12 months to pull that together. And then we, at STC Craft, edit the books as the author writes it. We work out schedules, so that we're kind of in there helping to develop the idea and also refine the content, so that when we get to the actual deadline we can almost immediately go into the design stage. At the end of, typically toward the end of the writing of the manuscript stage we would start working on photography and of all of that detail. And before we work on photography we also talk about the design of the book and kind of a vision for it. So then once it literally goes to the graphic designer that typically takes another few months, usually like three months, three or four months. And then you start going to the printer and then you start getting proofs from the printer and you go through several rounds of proofs. And then once the book's printed then it has to be shipped. So it all feels a little bit archaic given the speed of the internet. I said that authors generally take nine to 12 months. Certainly some happen more quickly. It's a little bit, it's not always a question of how quickly an author can produce the material, because the way that the book trade works there's certain periods of time when the sales team can go into major accounts from big bookstores to distributors to online book sellers, and the people who decide that they're gonna take books only see the sales people at certain times of year. So it's not like every time we have a new book we can be like knock, knock, look, it's it cool? It all happens in these seasonal chunks. And we have a lot of work that we do on catalogs and other promotional materials, so it's very, it's quite multifaceted. (laughs) The way it's typically done is you get an

advance and then you get a percentage of each sale. And then once you've earned back the advance you get more funds, more payment. The more books you sell the more you get and you get a royalty statement typically twice a year. I have heard of publishers that don't pay in advance and then you get royalties right away. I think that you shouldn't sort of depend on it as a source of like, oh I'm gonna write this book and then retire. And there are people who write craft books who are really successful. But I don't think that it's, what should I say? I think that the best thing is if you see your book as part of a multifaceted plan and that whenever, as much as possible when you're working you're sort of feeding different parts of that plan and then getting a positive result from different parts of the plan. I think it tends to work better. I think, for example, Joelle Hoverson of Purl, she did books with us really early on in her business. I think that that helped her to build her brand and bring customers to her business. Obviously it's huge now and just her name and the Purl name continues to help to sell her books, so there's that sort of back and forth. - The book is kind of like a loss leader for us. It's something that gave the brand more credibility and introduced more people to the brand. The book won't, didn't make us much money. And definitely didn't pay back Leisl's time that she invested in doing it. - What went it, yeah, yeah. - But it's helped expand the brand, make the brand a bigger thing and it's brought new people to the brand. - [Interviewer] On the editorial side, I know that authors are paid royalties for books, but on the illustration side, is that is royalty-based? Or that's usually a? - If you illustrate somebody else's book it's typically, I think there are probably exceptions to this, and if you have enough clout in the industry you might be able to negotiate something else different for your contract, but typically those are flat fee and the royalties go to the author. So it's considered like a paid job. But if the book is your own and you are also the author and the book is your copyright then obviously you would get the royalties. So that's pretty much how it works I think in general. - I think most people that are succeeding in this crafts market have a, they've found their own niche. I think the people that are succeeding aren't just following what another person is doing. Everyone's finding their strengths. We all have our strengths. For me it's the illustration, it's the artwork. So I do the fabric, but I also do, I sell limited edition prints of my artwork and I do projects with Walden certainly, but then I also do things that pay the bills. And I love, I've most recently been doing a lot of illustration in picture books, which is work that I love. But it's very solo work, it's very independent work. I'm in front of my computer drawing and I'm alone and it's, the crafts market is where a lot of my friends are. So even though I'm making a little less there it's like there's a lot of creative inspiration between all of us and a lot of really, really powerful relationships, and some of my best friends, and it's excited to be a part of it, it's exciting to feel like we're all part of this inspiring each other and other people. As corny as that sounds, you really sort of feed off it, which is great as an artist. And I think if I just did the picture books I'd get a little lonely and if I just did the crafts market I think I would miss the money. (laughs) (gentle music) - It's a long term commitment and it's even longer than it used to be, because of the change in how books achieve success. And now when authors hand in their manuscripts I always remind them that the work has just begun, that there's a lot more to do both in terms of getting through the design stage and all of that, but also through promotional work and that it's not a simple sort of six week period when they might do a blog tour or a real life tour or see a lot of publicity for their book and that was kind of old fashioned that there was a six weeks period when a book was promoted and then it kind of lived on the energy that was generated from that. Those days are over now. The book has to stay in the conversation and kind of, I don't know, in the current all the time. And I really look for authors who can continue that conversation for years. And if you look at Natalie Tahhan or Kaffe Fassett, it's built into their business plan that they will be out there

promoting their books. It's part of what they do to sell other things or to share their message or to teach. And so that's ideal, because it's an organic process by which different arms of their endeavors can be successful at the same time and that feed each other. And it's harder for an author who doesn't have kind of a multifaceted plan, because maybe they can't just be on the road promoting one book all the time, that's tough. And book sales might not make them feel like it's really warranted, but if they're out there teaching and lecturing and promoting their brand and in the process promoting the book, which also promotes their yarn line or their fabric line or their stamp line or whatever it is, then all their eggs aren't in one basket and everything is supporting everything else. And that's really the ideal at this point. - Well, even back when we launched the book, when the book first came out, everything that was happening in blogging then was sort of these blog tours that were happening and it was all, oh, I'll get this person to blog about the book this day, and this person to blog about the book that day. And I kind of felt like oh, everyone's already done this, I don't wanna do just another blog tour. What can we do differently? And I think that's the important, I don't wanna say that I did it all that well when it comes down to it, but I think it's important, again, just like with launching a company, to not be sort of following, oh, this is what everybody does, it's to be thinking outside of the box and to be, okay, this is what everyone else is doing, so what am I gonna do a little bit differently in order to kind of change the rules of the game or in order to get people's attention. Rather than this is just the way it's always done. - It used to be that the creative person was a little bit of a mystery, that you didn't always have a face, you didn't sort of have a personality. And I remember when I wrote my first book, going on a book tour was a really big deal and tons of people showed up. And I've heard from many people that author tours happen less often now and that often when they do happen the number of people that show up is less than was typical say 15 years ago. - Oh god, by the end of, (laughs) when you write a book and you're looking at your like 14th dummy you just never wanna see it again. So I actually just saw my last, the final dummy for this book that's coming out in a couple of months. - [Interviewer] Can you explain real fast what a dummy is? - So after you write a million drafts you get this book back, which is called a dummy, which is totally insulting, 'cause you just spent so much time doing it and you think you're so smart, but you get a dummy and you go through your final edits, make sure all the templates are in the right place, all the photos in the right place. And by the time you review that final dummy you just never wanna see that book again. But luckily some distance and some times passes. I just actually saw the dummy for my last book two months ago and I think when I finally see it again in November it's gonna be okay. I'm gonna have enough time away from it that I'll love it again, but god, you hate it. It has to get worse before it gets better. - [Interviewer] And what was it like when you got your first copy? - Freaking out. Okay, first off, when I pressed send on my final manuscript I cried, I put my hands up on the keyboard, and I cried, 'cause I just, oh. It was such an enormous undertaking for me. And then when you get it in real life and you see your name on this book, or you walk into a store. Okay, one thing is like you know, you see your name on a book and it comes to your house and that's awesome. The other thing is when you walk into a store and it's just sitting there, which is like kind of a high I get when I see my products in stores anyway, but something about it being a book and being in the Library of Congress is, I'm proud of myself for doing it. (gentle music)

Part 5 - Work-Life Balance

- [Lies!] I really thought this was going to be something I could do, you know, while our daughter was napping, it was just going to be this little thing, and within weeks we realized that this was

going to be much more all consuming. - I reached a point this past winter where I realized that I was completely miserable, and here I was with my dream job, doing what I loved for a living, drawing, and painting, and making cool things, big social media following, other people obviously liked my work, and yet I was really unhappy, and I had to assess what was making me unhappy, and what I realized was that I was just working all the time. I hadn't figured out yet how to say no, or how to assess whether I even had time to take another job. If the job came my way, I would just take it. - It's especially difficult when you're passionate about what you do. I have not figured out how to live my life in a way that feels completely balanced. - No, there's no balance. Well there's balance in the sense that I'm always falling in one direction or the other, which is, you know, that old cartoon of that guy on the highway leaning, and that's what balance is to me. Balance isn't the perfect yoga pose, balance is just trying trying not to fall completely off the tightrope, you know. - In the beginning I thought, oh, if I don't say yes to everything, I risk, you know, making clients angry, maybe they'll never want to hire me again, I risk not making as much money as I have the potential to make. Maybe that means that I'm a slacker if I say no. - After about a year of finding that the business, Liesl had identified a really good market opportunity, people were responding to the product, and opportunities were coming along that Liesl just couldn't take advantage of because she was spending her time running the business as well as developing product. - And taking care of the kids. - And that. (Liesl laughs) - I think this is the flip side of success that people don't really talk about. We often focus on how to get the first client, or how to break into the illustration market, but then once you do, how do you manage when all of a sudden lots of people want a piece of you? And I'm sure for me, in my situation, it's not even as extreme as some much, much, much more well known illustrators and artists who probably get even more requests for work. So I had to figure out, okay, I have to have more balance in my life, because otherwise it's not worth it. - [Todd] I had a job that was no fun at all. I wasn't feeling like I was in control of my life, or in control of my destiny. I would put our daughter to bed Sunday night, and literally would not see her until she woke up Saturday morning. - Todd was, you know, working 60 hours, and then coming home at 11 o'clock at night and doing the bookkeeping for me, and you know, running the analytics numbers, and things like that, and oh my gosh, I think we were aged 10 years in a year. It was brutal. - It wasn't a fun year. - No, it wasn't. - So we made the decision that in order to get our lives back, I would leave my job, and come on full time, and run the business so that Liesl could focus 100% of her time on product development, and take advantage of some of these other opportunities that we saw coming along. We saw this as an opportunity a, to grow our business, but b, for me to kind of get my life back. - The first two days that Todd came, I had just moved into the new studio out in Brooklyn, and the first two days, the first two weeks I think, Todd would come into the office, and say, "is it really okay for me to wear shorts here?" (laughing) Like yeah, you can wear whatever you want to. - Two of the most over appreciated things, overrated things, are the joy of natural childbirth, and the joy of having your own business, because what the joy of having your own business means is that you're responsible for everything, for everything, for every success, every failure, and unfortunately the failures feel a lot more intense than the successes. - Running your own business is really, really lonely, and you spend a lot of time by yourself, and sometimes you just get in this cave, and you don't know what's up and what's down, and just to have someone to talk to as a friend, and just someone who supports you, and loves you. It doesn't have to be a spouse, it can just be a pal. - It's very lonely. You're alone in it, whether you've got people working for you or not, probably more so if you have people working for you, because you're constantly sort of that relationship takes a lot of maintenance, managing another person takes a lot, it's a lot of work. You're very much alone, and I

think when I get together with my friends who are in similar businesses than I am that's our biggest complaint. It's like, aw, I can't make anyone else do this for me, no one's taking care of me. You know? Because you're up there, and you're having to sort of keep your hands on so many different things. - To be perfectly honest, I think I might have cried every day for the first week or two after Todd joined. I felt a lot of pressure at that point. I really felt like the burden was on me for the financial well being of our family. I mean, yeah, it was a team effort, for sure, but because I'm the person who's actually developing the product itself that we sell, and that makes us money, I suddenly felt like I was the responsible person, it was all on me at that point, and I think I probably broken down crying almost every day at some point for the first week or two after Todd came on board. I still remember that very well, just feeling this sudden burden that before, it had just been sort of this fun hobby, and it was great, and if it took off that was going to be wonderful. Suddenly I also was responsible for feeding our family, and actually putting money in the bank. - There are nice aspects to what we do. Running our own business and working together gives us flexibility, it allows us to be in control of our destiny, to make decisions about how we want to spend our time. - I don't know how much control you feel like you have over your destiny, but you know, that's the nice thing about it is that if our daughter has something at school, if she has an event at school, which she often does, we can go, we don't have to worry about being at the office at a certain time to make the boss happy, or if we want, this summer we're going to Berlin for three weeks. We're still gonna be working, but we have that flexibility that we can do things like that, we can pick up and go someplace because we can run our business from pretty much anywhere. So we're not beholden to someone who, and you know, we make the rules. We make the business decisions ourselves, which is wonderful. - And so that's a great part of owning your own business. - Yeah. - And calling your own shots. The flip side of that is that you can never coast. You can't go into work at nine and leave at 4:30, take a break in the middle of the day, (Liesl laughs) and surf the web, - Right. - Because if you're not working to build your business, to build the next thing to increase your revenue, you're not going to get paid. - When I first started the business, I did everything. I didn't have any money, so I'm like, all right, how do I make a website? How do I source this on the cheap? And I would just scrounge, you know? Sit down, dog, but then as my life gets more full, I realize that I would rather pay someone else to take care of it and have those headaches for me. Now I have employees that I can trust, which gives me massive peace of mind, and makes me massively happy. Now my priority, well it never was about making money, but it is, yeah. My happiness has been more at a premium now, and spending time with my family is more at a premium for me now, and I will pay anyone to help me that I can. - If we went to work for someone else, we'd make a lot more money doing what we do working for a larger corporation, or working for another company. So financially it certainly doesn't pay off nearly in the way that it would if we were working other jobs. - But it's been a lifestyle choice. - Yeah, it's a lifestyle choice, and so if you're comfortable with that, if you're okay with, you know, not having a large retirement fund, I guess it's all right, but yeah, I mean, it's a risk that you take, and I think that's the other side of it is that you constantly feel that burden of, and I guess now we've been doing this long enough that I'm not in tears every day about this, but you constantly feel that burden of, you know, it's up to us. No one carries you. Whatever happens with our business is because we worked, and we've constantly been strategizing about it. - Some time that I spend, it's a little unclear whether it's work or whether it's life. (laughs) Whether it's fun, or you know, it's kind of both. It's really hard when you turn what you love into work. I would say that if you can put your hours on your door, and try to live by that, I know an illustrator who at least used to do that. She opened at nine, closed at five. I think it's hard if you really love what you do, and it's like

nine at night, and you wanna keep doing it, but ultimately most people who don't create some boundaries end up feeling burnt out. (Liesl laughs) - People look at what we do and say, oh, it must be a dream to own your own business. - It's so dreamy. - And to work with your spouse, and I always say, be careful. Your dream may turn into a nightmare. (Liesl laughs) and there are some days when it feels more like a nightmare than a dream. - There are some days, actually there are some days that we work from different locations. One person will work from home, and one person will work from the studio, because both locations, our apartment is tiny, and our studio is tiny, and so when you're 24/7 together, it really becomes too much, and we really do find that periodically we just need a little bit of separation from each other. Because I travel on the subway, or via bike from one location to the other, I sort of, there's just this geographic distance that sort of, that's kind of my time to, okay, work is done, now we start the real life, but there was a point where Todd just said, okay, dinner time, work is off limits. We don't talk about business at dinner, and periodically we kind of sneak it in there a little bit, but we really do try to keep it separate. - Sometimes we pretend like we have, because my husband works with me too, he helps me out with sales, and he does the books, and it is so hard. We say, you know, at 6:00 p.m., we're not going to do this anymore, we're not going to talk about business anymore, but then, that's like such a lie, because you can't. I mean, so much of our lives are wrapped up into it that it's hard to divorce it from, you know, our life. (laughs) It's hard to divorce business and life when you spend a lot of your life doing business. - My husband works really hard, and he used to work really long hours, so I could kind of get away with doing the same, and no one was really getting up in my grill about it, but after we had Bea, we both realized that we really had to be careful about where we were spending our time when we weren't with her. - You know, I was like a card carrying workaholic, and proud of it, and yet I was miserable. You know, people would ask me, "how are you?" And I'd say, "I'm busy," and like this is getting really boring. I don't want to be busy, I want to have a life too, because my work was suffering. I wasn't getting the inspiration or the downtime to actually do a good job even. My relationship was suffering, and my friendships were suffering, and I was obviously suffering. - And that drifted over to everything, to our other friendships, and to our hobbies, and to our work. - We definitely have to set boundaries. - Yeah, and it's a struggle for me. I still like to talk about, because I just kind of, like, I think, especially when you're a creative person, - Yeah. - You just kind of enmesh yourself. - Liesl's the creative mind, and her work is always is always going on, - Yeah. - And she's also somebody who likes to talk through what she's thinking. - He's much more stoic. It all goes on in here, and it all goes on here with me. (laughs) - I'm really good at what the shrinks call compartmentalizing. I can do work at work, - Yeah, yeah. - And then I can turn it off, and then turn it on. - Yeah. - Liesl's always on. - It's true, it's true. - And there are times when I have to tell her, no, not now. Put that aside and talk about that tomorrow. - Yeah. - Because we're having dinner with our daughter right now. - Yeah, and we did, very early after you started working with me full time, Todd did say, you know, it shuts off at dinner time. - Before Emmy was born, you know, Evan and I would say we're gonna stop talking about work at 6:00 p.m., but then we couldn't and I had to be working at midnight, and that just wasn't feasible, and eventually, I mean, I'm not embarrassed to say that we had to go to marriage counseling, because that bleed, it was just all over. It was just, we couldn't fix it, because we just didn't have those boundaries set. So we worked hard to get those boundaries back, and I'm a lot happier for it. - I'm at this point now where, even if I took less work that I'm offered, I would still be okay financially, and I could maybe make more time for fun and relaxation, which is what I think keeps us sane, right? And feeling balanced, and I didn't have any of that for a long time. I started to reframe how I thought about balance. I think of it now more as not a balance game, but a seesaw.

You know, like kids have the seesaws in the playground. Think of your workload as a pile of rocks, right? If you put the pile of rocks on one end of the seesaw, the seesaw's gonna tip to that end, and having balance doesn't necessarily mean taking that much less work, or not working hard, it just means that to balance out how hard you work, you have to take an equal amount of play or relaxation. Now sure, if you're working all of the time, you're not going to have the equal amount of time to play, so you do have to start cutting down on the amount you work, but some of it is how you spend the time that you're not working. So I found that before, I spent a lot of the time when I wasn't working just staring at the ceiling and feeling depressed, and now I actually take the time that I'm not working to enjoy myself and intentionally relax as much as I can. I started taking yoga, and I swim laps at lunch, and I try to do it without guilt. - Now I'm much better at saying, all right, I'm gonna work on this for an hour, and this for an hour, and this for an hour, but even then, I always have more to do than I can handle, I always have to pull myself away from the desk because there's always more that you can do when it's your company. You're never done, you're never done, and as my husband likes to say, working at home, you're always at work, but you're never able to get anything finished. Always, always, always, always. - If I spend the weekend sewing a dress with Gretchen Hirsch, that's related to my work, but it's also related to my play, and my own creative fulfillment, and my feeling of how lucky I am that I get to work with such extraordinarily talented people, and kind people, and that I have a little bit of a ticket into their world. - Is it perfect? No. I have those days still, but I know how to snap out of them a little bit more easily now. Everybody who has struggles with working too much, or their identity being wrapped up in working should take a look at that and figure out, you know, is this really what is feeding me and making me happy? And if it's not, how can I use my life outside of my work to both make my work life a little bit better and more enjoyable, and also just to take care of my own needs, like sleep, and food, and friendship?