

Homegirl

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Newcomb alumna Becky Vizard savors life—making high-end designer pillows—in rustic St. Joseph, Louisiana. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

It's somewhere between seasons here on the banks of Lake Bruin, and the weather hasn't made up its mind as to what it wants to do. Becky Watson Vizard (NC '81) crouches in the garden planted by her husband, Michael, taking advantage of a respite in the rain to harvest arugula and baby kale for tonight's dinner.

"It's what I've been telling people forever," she says between snips. "The real story is about working from here."

You look around her comfortable, landscaped yard nestled between the back of her rustic two-story home and the wavering sheen of the lake and think you understand

what she means by that, but you really don't. Not yet.

Four hours upriver from New Orleans in Tensas Parish, an hour north of Natchez, Mississippi, is Vizard's tiny, dwindling hometown of St. Joseph, Louisiana. Her house is 8 miles outside of town and a million miles from anywhere Vizard thought she'd be at this point in her life.

FASHIONABLE PILLOWS

That B. Viz Design, Vizard's small company run from a cramped little studio inside her home, is something of an economic engine in this neck of the woods tells you a bit about the greater metropolitan area of St. Joseph, population 1,176 and counting—down.

Vizard employs five workers—four seamstresses and an office manager—in the unlikely rural enterprise of high-end interior accessories. More specifically, she incorporates rare, antique textiles into fashionable, hand-sewn pillows, which she sells across the globe mostly over the internet but also in a handful of exclusive retail outlets.

In the 20 years she's been at it, Vizard estimates she's sold about 6,000 pillows, most priced between \$800 and \$2,400.

Inside the studio, Belinda Prudhomme, an employee and friend for nearly 30 years, stands at a worktable using a pair of manicure scissors to delicately remove a floral pattern of gold metal-thread embroidery from a tattered fabric made sometime in the mid-19th century. It will take her about an hour of meticulous work to completely detach the pattern, after which it will either be filed away for future use or incorporated into a pillow design that Vizard is currently working on.

While Vizard works with other kinds of materials, including early-20th-century suzani from Central Asia and fabrics from the workshop of legendary Venetian designer Mariano Fortuny, it's her use of antique gold thread embroidery that has made her a name. And there is only so much of it still around.

Several times a year, she flies out of Jackson, Mississippi, on expeditions for vintage fabric to be discovered and purchased in Turkey, France, Holland and other far-flung locations. In between those trips, she travels to New York to cultivate designers who may be interested in her product for their clients. (Vizard caught the travel bug early

in life from her late mother, Ruth Harper Watson [NC '58], who took her a number of times to Europe when she was a child.)

And lately, she's squeezing in presentations around the country to support *Once Upon a Pillow* (Pointed Leaf Press), a coffee-table book on her work, which was published this past November. Never mind that House Beautiful will be deploying onto her grounds next month for a photo shoot; about the same time she's planning to move the distribution portion of her business into a store in St. Joseph as part of a revitalization effort stitched together by a small group of concerned residents.

Fair to say this is a busy time in her life. And living in the boonies doesn't make any of it easier.

"People from all over the world do beautiful things," says Vizard. "It is hard to do it from here. Our internet goes out half the time. Our electricity goes out. The phone goes out. You run out of ink for the printer, and it's an hour drive to Vicksburg."

Sometimes, a designer from New York will call with an urgent need to have merchandise shipped overnight, which presents a problem most New Yorkers would find hard to fathom. "We call over to the grain elevator or the John Deere store," says Vizard. "'Has anyone seen the FedEx guy?'"

A DRIVE THROUGH ST. JOSEPH

The rain's at it again, softly pelting the car as Vizard drives through St. Joseph, giving a homegrown tour of the place of her childhood.

"This was my grandfather's law office," she says, as the car begins to lurch and rattle over a patch of uneven pavement. "Over there was a big, beautiful home that was purchased and moved out of town."

The memory of what was haunts the drive: an abandoned Catholic church, a burned-down grocery store, derelict houses to which she once rode her bike for cookies and lemonade.

Vizard estimates the town is now about one-third the size of the one in which she grew up. The decline can be attributed to typical causes of rural blight: the consolidation of farm operations, loss of young people to urban areas, plummeting property values, and the general fallout from educational, cultural and social decay.

And then there's the brown water that flows from the city's 90-year-old system. Tests show the town's water has high levels of iron, which is not considered to be a health risk, but "if you wash your white clothes in it, they turn tan," says Vizard.

The hard binary of her world doesn't escape her.

"I am a person with one foot in this incredibly rich environment and one foot in this incredibly poor environment," she says.

It's a duality that she has in the last several years worked to reconcile and make whole.

THE THICK OF IT

Credit Bill Watson (B '56, L '58), Becky Vizard's father. He was the one who got Vizard and her then-fledgling family to move to the area back in 1987. At the time, Vizard was living with husband Michael and their first child in Shreveport, Louisiana, doing well in her first professional design endeavor of producing hand-painted socks.

While the couple entertained thoughts of following Michael's career to Atlanta, dad weighed in, convincing Michael that he needed help in the small, community bank he ran in St. Joseph. It was not what Vizard had in mind when she graduated from high school and came to New Orleans to attend Tulane. Then, she had aspirations of living in New York or perhaps Europe.

"To my horror," Vizard writes in her book, "as hard as I had worked to escape this really rural country life, I was back in the thick of it."

Vizard says she felt like a "failure" moving back to St. Joseph. This, despite the fact that her hand-painted socks were being sold at retailers such as J.C. Penney, Mervyn's and Talbots.

Vizard, who likes to say she comes from a family of "characters," enjoys telling the next part of the story. After two years of living in town, she and Michael built a house on her family's property on Lake Bruin. The new house is spacious and, because the Vizards are caught up in their respective whirlwind careers, remains for some time undecorated and under-furnished, which is great for their, by now, two kids who have the run of it and learn how to Rollerblade in the hallways and the living room. In time, Vizard does get around to designing the interior of her house and, it turns out, she's pretty good at it. So much so that her friends ask her to come

to New Orleans to consult on remaking their homes. Then friends of friends. And then she's getting paid to do it and the whole thing explodes into a new line of work. Which is great because it allows her to get out of St. Joseph and into the larger world, which she so desperately wants. The sock business gradually falls aside as she does more and more custom, high-end design for clients from Houston to Manhattan. And she's at it for about seven years and it's fun and chaotic and crazy and, eventually, finally—it gets to be too much. Too much running, too much time out of town and away from family.

Here's where the pillows come in, and this time you can credit Wilson Henley (UC '83), an old Tulane friend living in Manhattan, who hired Vizard to redecorate his place. Which she did. Only problem was, she needed an antique pillow to complete the job and the only one she could find in the entirety of New York was too "froufrou." So she made her own pillow out of 19th-century curtain panels she found at a flea market. (All girls in St. Joseph grew up sewing, she says.) And then she made additional pillows with the leftover fabric and began selling them to other clients. And gradually, working in her own home designing and making pillows seemed like a better idea than fussing with the homes of other folks.

"I started trying to figure out a way to slow down the decorating and build up the pillow business," she writes in her book.

Funny thing—the more she was home, the more she began to feel at home and the more she began to get involved in the community. In 2009, Vizard hatched a plan to create a farmers market along the levee in St. Joseph. She drove around Lake Bruin with her son distributing flyers, inviting people who vacation there from Jackson, Monroe and other cities to drop by. Every Saturday during the summer, the market is now attracting not only locals but also wealthy visitors who flock to the lake. "The idea is to get the lake people to meet the local people, and perhaps some of them can get hired to do things and jobs can be generated," says Vizard.

Moving part of her operation to Plank Road in downtown St. Joseph will open up some studio space, and by decorating it with displays of antique fabrics and tapestries as well as educational material for visitors to enjoy, she's also hoping to infuse the town with a little culture. She mentions like-minded friends and neighbors who are opening a pottery store, antiques gallery and art studio in what were shuttered structures on the same block. The Council on Aging is also moving in, and Vizard is helping pick colors.

Eventually, she says, the water problem will get fixed. The town will come back.

"I have been inspired by the Mississippi Delta because each town has something worth driving there for," says Vizard. And those towns aren't situated next to Lake Bruin or its adjacent state park. Turns out that living in the boonies may actually have some amenities.

"That's the beauty of where we are," she can now admit.

And, finally, there's the beer-de-lier project, a sideline of sorts in which she fashions elaborate light fixtures out of strands of beer bottle caps. Vizard has involved local youngsters in assembling the strands, paying by the bottle cap. She sees them get excited about being paid to make art.

"That's what makes me happy," she says. "I love making beautiful things, and I love seeing people prosper."

She also loves living in a place where everyone waves to everyone, she loves walking in the state park, she loves dinner with Michael (a gourmet cook), loves living next door to her father, loves sunsets over Lake Bruin, loves the people she works with and thinks she's blessed to be able to employ them. She loves thinking that just maybe there is a future for her hometown.

"It's come full circle," she says. "I love where I live."

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