

ETSU Today

The Magazine of East Tennessee State University

FALL 2015

Making Room:

Cristi Holcombe
'designs' a career
from a childhood
hobby

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ON THE COVER:

Interior designer Cristi Holcombe, Class of 2003

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Cristi Holcombe

From Rearranging her Bedroom to Creating Elbow Room



While rearranging her childhood bedroom to maximize its playspace, Cristi Curlee Holcombe had no idea she would one day arrange furniture—as well as select decorative elements and contribute ideas toward the functionality of living spaces—in million-dollar homes.

Cristi grew up helping her family raise show horses on a farm in Slapout, Alabama, a small town which, she notes, gained national attention in 2014 when native Jessica Meuse reached the top four in season 13 of *American Idol*. Today, Cristi is nationally known for her recent work on HGTV's *Elbow Room* and operates her own interior design company in Atlanta.

"When I was a child, before I even knew interior design was something people did for a living," Cristi recalled, "I would come in and think, 'How can I get the most floor space so I can play, and make the most use of my room?' I would move my daybed to the far corner to get the most space in the middle of the floor as possible. And then I would think, 'Well, that doesn't really give me enough space to get to my closet,' so I moved everything around a different way."

Cristi says that while her parents thought she was "kind of kooky" at the time, they allowed her to do what she wanted with "her space," even when she insisted upon pink carpet at one point. But even at the age of 8, she carefully placed washcloths under the furniture legs before scooting the pieces across hardwood flooring to avoid scratching and scarring (and making noise), and she was developing spatial skills that would later become one of her strongest points as a designer.

The family moved to Sevierville, Tennessee, the summer prior to Cristi's senior year of high school. She considered returning to Alabama to attend college but found East Tennessee State University to be the right fit for her, not only because of its proximity to her family and to the mountains, where she could indulge her love of skiing, but also because of its inviting campus and "great sense of home."

"Coming from a small town, I didn't even know interior designers existed, and I declared my major as psychology," Cristi said. "But that was about the time when home design shows were becoming a trend. 'Shabby Chic' was on TV at that time. And I found myself coming in and watching all the home shows on TV while I was studying."

One day during her second semester, Cristi was taken by surprise when she was casually flipping through the ETSU course catalog and saw Interior Design. She thought, "Is that even a major?" That discovery prompted a visit to the chair of what was then the Department of Applied Human Sciences* to learn more, followed by a change of major.



Photo courtesy HGTV's *Elbow Room*.

Cristi changed majors again her senior year, from Interior Design to Merchandising, with the goal of pursuing a career arranging window sets and merchandise displays for a large department store chain.

"I took all the merchandising classes in that last year, and really have never used it since," she said with a laugh. "It just wasn't in the cards for me to do that. I was always into design."

Cristi landed an apprenticeship as a design assistant for an interior designer in Atlanta soon after graduating from ETSU with her bachelor's degree in 2003. Not quite ready to work on her own when the apprenticeship ended, she joined Beazer Homes, one of the top 10 homebuilders in the United States, and designed the interiors of over 100 model homes before spending a few years as a lead designer and project manager for a major hotel company. Then in 2009, she realized she had enough experience to follow her dream and launched Cristi Holcombe Interiors.

Through her full-service firm, Cristi offers everything from design consultation, space planning, and selection of materials, paint, furniture, and more to custom cabinetry design, purchasing, and procurement, and construction administration and project management. In the beginning, she focused on projects involving a few rooms in a home. Within the past year, though, she has transitioned to working primarily on new homes, collaborating with clients, architects, and contractors from start to finish, which allows her more creativity than existing homes, where she must work around design and construction elements from the past.

"While I'm not new to design, my company is really young, so I feel incredibly blessed to be working on new homes in some of Atlanta's top communities," she said. "I am really looking forward to the opportunities that are in the near future. I can see my company growing tremendously over the next year, if everything falls into place."

In addition, Cristi, whose work has been featured in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Cabin Life*, *Cottages and Bungalows*, and *Parenting*, spent three

seasons on HGTV's Emmy Award-winning *Elbow Room* as a production designer, helping host Chip Wade and crew in creating more space by renovating, remodeling, or building additions to the homes of families who had outgrown their living quarters. Because her second child arrived shortly after her third season on the show, she declined an offer to participate in a fourth, but she continues to work with Wade and other professionals from the show on various projects.

In her spare time, Cristi enjoys staying at home with her husband, Billy, a marketing director for Thomas Eye Group in Atlanta ("... and Cristi Holcombe Interiors," she jokes), and their son, Chase, 3, and daughter, Hayden, 1. She looks back fondly on her time at ETSU and the friendships she made through Alpha Delta Pi Sorority, the campus ministry The Well, and her classes. She and sisters from her ADPi pledge class still take an annual "girls' trip," and she's even done design work for several of their homes.

She also looks back fondly on her childhood on the farm. "It was one of the best ways for a child to grow up," she says. "Back then, I always wanted to live in a big city, which is funny, because I really do live in a big city now, and now I think how nice it would be to raise my kids on a farm, like where I grew up. It gave me a tremendous sense of responsibility, and I learned a great deal of respect for the outdoors. I loved the fact that we could just leave our doors open—never had to worry about locking the doors, or kids getting kidnapped. Things like that didn't happen in a small town then. I absolutely loved where I grew up, but had I not moved, I wouldn't be doing the things I do now."

*The Interior Design major is now housed within the Department of Engineering Technology, Surveying, and Digital Media in the ETSU College of Business and Technology. ■

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