

FEATURES

Design

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but the young family moved to Madison when she was nearly 3 years old.

Charles and Jean Rodenbough were somewhat perplexed by their oldest child's penchant for style. Her mother wasn't particularly interested in fashion, and style icons were lacking in Madison.

It began, Rodenbough says, with grandmothers.

Her father's stepmom, Grace Taylor Rodenbough, was Stokes County's first female representative in the General Assembly. In 1965, she took her 9-year-old granddaughter to the Sir Walter Raleigh hotel for four days of politicking.

Men in dark suits swilling cocktails and women sweeping through smoky rooms in lush clouds of chiffon and tulle showed Rodenbough there was a world beyond small-town North Carolina.

When her stepgrandmother died four years later, Rodenbough's father and grandfather told her to help herself to what she would like of the belongings. That was the beginning of her vintage collection.

As a tween, Kit designed and sewed outfits for her Barbie dolls. The little entrepreneur even hosted a party for her friends, inviting them to select designs for their dolls that Kit made and sold to them, Charles Rodenbough says.

"I got a sewing machine when I was 12, and Mom said, 'Here's the sewing machine, so I'm not going to buy you any more clothes,'" Rodenbough says.

Discarded scraps from her mom and grandmother's sewing machines were recycled into spiffy duds. Little sister Lucy was the recipient of a slew of homemade clothes.

Rodenbough spent untold hours wandering through the fabric store near her family's Madison home searching for supplies to transform second-hand Levis and Wranglers into daisy- and peace-sign-embellized bellbottoms. She designed her own prom dresses.

"I probably spent at least two hours every day sewing," Rodenbough says. "And if I felt the slightest bit sick, then I'd sit home and sew."

Like many teenagers, Rodenbough was convinced she had to leave her hometown after high school. Mom and Dad said no.

But when she landed a job in New York and Los Angeles, she designed everything from children's wear, socks and



Behind a selection of pins and brooches, Guylene Carver (left) chats with Kit Rodenbough at Design Archives in downtown Greensboro.

jeans, so the three agreed on the Fashion and Art Institute of Atlanta. Still, they worried.

"We'd envisioned a more academic life for Kit, and were afraid she might be making a mistake," Charles Rodenbough says. "Obviously, she was not." Lucy, the youngest of Rodenbough's three siblings and the only other girl, was less than thrilled when Kit moved away.

"I was 7 when she went to Atlanta, and I just thought she was the greatest," says Lucy Hoyle, now a social worker living in Greensboro. "Everyone always talked about how beautiful she was. But she would make me outfits that I didn't think were the coolest thing in the world."

Rodenbough was perpetually in style, but the lag time between European runways and Madison prêt-à-porter was substantial.

"She made me these God-awful plaid pants," Hoyle says. "They were green and yellow, and she just insisted they were the next thing."

Two years later, with her degree in hand and a newfound appreciation for home, Rodenbough made her way back to North Carolina and her family in Madison.

Gem Dandy Inc., a Madison-based manufacturer, was Rodenbough's first gig as a working woman. She designed for the company's junior line, Doll Rags. Inspired by platform wedges and leisure suits, Rodenbough created an entire line of gold-lamé disco wear for the 1979 holiday line. It was the company's most successful sales season.

From there she crisscrossed the state, working in Mount Airy, Madison, Mebane and Burlington. Each job taught her new skills, new life lessons. She designed everything from children's wear, socks and

other garments. But, consciously decided not to set permanent roots. She wanted her own business.

When she married in 1982, Rodenbough made her own wedding dress, modeled after the Emanuel gown Princess Diana wore at her 1981 nuptials. She toned down the ruffles and ditched the 25-foot train.

Her design jobs took her to New York City and sometimes Europe, so Rodenbough didn't feel a great urge to leave North Carolina.

In 1996, Rodenbough took a job as creative director with start-up apparel company Bob Timbrell. She learned to develop, design and market a line and also how to make presentations and schmooze with potential investors.

"We were there when it was exciting, and then we were there on the last day when they said you've got 20 minutes to get out," Rodenbough says.

The company closed in 1999. Rodenbough walked out the door and registered the name Design Archives the next day.

The store had flitted through Rodenbough's mind for years. It was conceived as a dot.com business, but after the bubble burst in 2000, a brick-and-mortar version seemed a more viable option.

She wanted to make it happen but didn't quite know how. For the next two years, Rodenbough half-heartedly conducted a job search, but young professionals with newly minted degrees were more marketable than a single mother of three.

"She never really let us know how hard things really were," says daughter Natalie Vail, 20. "I looked at it as we had love and not money, and that's more important than anything that holds a family together."

All the while, Rodenbough began to collect and store vintage clothes in her home. Her initial investors backed out, and her savings were shot, but a small business loan from American Express put a check in her pocket.

On a trip to downtown Greensboro, Rodenbough drove past the vacant building at 304 E. Market St. She was drawn to it, but the papered windows prevented her from even a glimpse at the interior space. After a few phone calls, she went back with the landlord for a peek.

"That front door opened, and a chill went over me," she says. "I thought, 'I'm going to fill it up with my stuff, and it's going to work somehow.'"

Rodenbough moved her wares in, and the store opened on Sept. 1, 2001.

Ten days later, the Twin Towers fell, the economy withered, and the already struggling store owner was left with no money, no name recognition and no shoppers.

"On Sept. 12, I woke up in the fetal position," she says. "It took Rodenbough a month to regain her normal eating habits and cheerful disposition."

"I thought I was scared before, but I was really scared then," she says.

Convinced she should cut her losses, Rodenbough called an auctioneer from Winston-Salem to evaluate her collection. "We stood looking at the stuff, and she turned to me and said she wouldn't do it," Rodenbough says. "She said I had to find a way to make this work, do whatever it takes, borrow from friends' money."

Five years later, the 5,000-square-foot store is one of the largest vintage stores on the East Coast. Newspaper articles shortly after the store's opening slowly brought in customers, and the pace has yet to slow.

"Everyone in the business knows of Kit and Design Archives," says Beth Sartore, a fashion design consultant and Rodenbough's friend for 10 years.

Hometown designers working for companies such as Tommy Hilfger, Old Navy and Ralph Lauren stop by for inspiration.

"Many designers that use her store for inspiration usually end up buying an item or two just to wear," Sartore says.

Customers who have moved to other states drop in when they visit. "It's not anything I'm getting

rich off of, but it seems to make other people happy, and it really makes me happy," Rodenbough says.

She is forever toying with ways to improve her business.

One thought is to open a chain of the stores, but she worries some of the personalized charm could be lost. Employees and customers alike call her by name and look for her ever-present grin when they walk through the door.

"I consider her more of a friend than a boss; she's that type of person" employee Shannon Byers says. "She's laid-back, you know what you're supposed to do, and you just do it without having to worry that she'll get mad at you."

And loyal customers know Rodenbough's not just in it for the sale. Unsure patrons often wander out of the dressing room seeking advice. If it looks good she'll tell them; if not, she'll gently suggest something else.

"Kit is always saying, 'Let's meet at 5, but she won't show up until 6:30,'" says Hoyle, who lives in Guilford County along with Rodenbough's two brothers and parents.

"But it'll be because someone came into the store, and she doesn't want to rush them even though she knows they won't buy anything."

The family gets together often, and if a week goes by without some sort of reunion, it feels a bit like withdrawal, Hoyle says, laughing.

The initial vision of the store as a haven of inspiration, complete with cubicles in the back to archive fabric, still lingers in Rodenbough's mind.

Design students categorizing garments. Piles of velvet, silk and cotton stacked to the ceiling.

Someday. For now, she works with the more than 500 consignors who bring her estate merchandise, the college students who staff her store and an ever-growing customer base.

"We live in a throw-away society," she says. "People inherit these large estates with a lot of clothes and things saved by people with a Depression-era mentality."

No one wants to throw away the past, but minimalist lifestyles make it difficult to keep up with the relics, she says.

Rodenbough is more than happy to act as curator.

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