



Sharp talent

Apex artist Laura Kelly transforms imagination into reality
 by Elizabeth Shugg

Laura Kelly's proudest entrepreneurial moment occurred just after she noticed her artwork on display in an important licensee's office.

"The first time I visited Checks in the Mail, they took me on a tour of the facility. When I looked at the shelf of licensor binders and saw mine between Mary Englebright and Southpark, I found myself fighting back tears of pride," she says. "I took a picture of it for my scrapbook."

This Apex artist, international entrepreneur, community leader, former teacher, and devoted mom to sons Dylan, 13, and Dawson, 10, owns and operates Laura Kelly Designs & Licensing, a retail and wholesale business offering products and services centered around Kelly's whimsical artwork. With her signature black Sharpie, Kelly pens playful drawings of children, animals, flowers, and other everyday items that have made her famous and have taken the licensing world by storm.

Laura Kelly cultivates a creative and inspiring work environment at her downtown Apex business.

Inset: The artist's whimsical designs have caught on both locally and online, and feature everything from animals and children to flowers and nature.



photos: Laura Kelly Designs & Licensing

A flair for design

Kelly's favorite products for 2009 include the Leap Year mom and family calendars, which became available nationwide this summer.

"I'm not sure what I love about them more: their organizational capacity or fun stickers," she admits.

Kelly's retail items also can be found in downtown Apex's Rusty Bucket. In addition to standard and customized stationery products, her Me and My Peeps drawings — depicting fun images of family members on decals and iron-ons — have stirred up interest from companies such as craft and hobby supplier Plaid Enterprises, and now are available at Michaels and AC Moore. Other popular products include bank checks, coasters, Koozies and Swankie Hankies tissues.

Most recently, Sharpie asked Kelly to work with its back-to-school campaign and join the Sharpie Squad, a blog featuring inspirational Sharpie artists at www.sharpieuncapped.com. She's a perfect fit.

"As a child, my dad would bring home great big boxes from work, and I would use Sharpies to decorate them," Kelly says.

"At one point, my brothers and I had drawn Sharpie graffiti, quotes, and funny things about our family on all the walls in our gameroom," she adds. "My mom was actually fine with it."

Thankfully, this tradition continues online rather than on walls of her family home. Susan Wassel, Sharpie's social media manager, couldn't be happier.

"Laura's work with Sharpies really caught our attention. She is so talented," Wassel says.

"We're excited to work with her for our back-to-school campaign and know that whatever she creates with Sharpies will be a true testament to her creativity and passion."

Art imitates new life

Kelly experienced her first big break as

an artist when she couldn't find a suitable birth announcement for her eldest son, so she created one herself.

"The design was of a baby and his puppy in the bathtub," she says.

"When I sent them out and got such a great response from friends wanting me to

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draw their kids and pets, the Paper People collection was birthed, too."

And that was only the beginning. Kelly opened a stationery retail store in 1996, then launched the Paper Girls stationery line in 2002. She leased a brownstone in

downtown Apex and opened the Funky Monkey Paperie in 2003.

One licensing agreement turned into two. Before long, Kelly had contracts with Andrews and Blaine, Books are Fun, Checks in the Mail, Clearly Fun Soaps, Converting Inc., Custom Candy Concepts, DRG, Lady Fortunes, Leap Year, Learning Express, Lovett, Royal and Langnickel, Plaid, Leanin' Tree, and Thirstystone.

She maintains a long-term goal of creating a nationally known brand with a solid base of products and media that "generate joy, happiness, and empowerment." These also are key ingredients for creating an inspiring work environment in her studio, where vibrant illustrations allude to the colorful personalities collaborating on her latest collection.

Simply Beautiful.

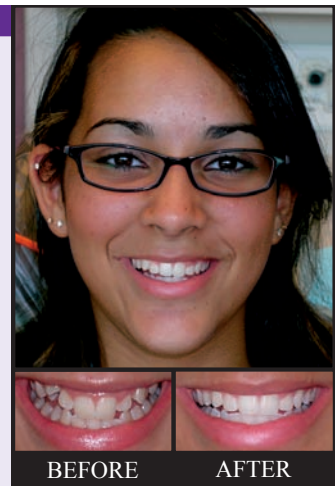
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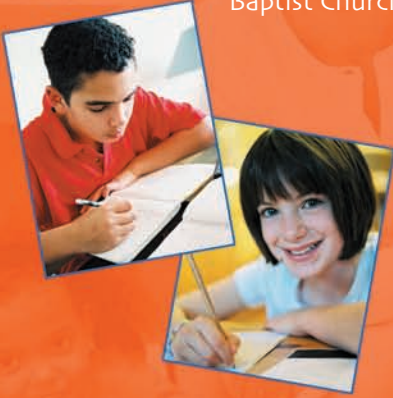
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"While at work, we socialize in an environment that is bright, cheery and jamming with tunes," Kelly says.

"You can walk into the office at any point and hear the girls laughing," she adds. "Part of balancing the work is creating a great experience for everyone while we do it."

When it comes to creating art, however, Kelly prefers peaceful, organized space.

"I usually listen to music," she says. "I work best sitting on the floor, pretzel style, with my light table in my lap."

This upbeat, organized approach comes in handy when Kelly retires her Sharpie for the day and morphs back into mom mode.

"Raising my children to be lifelong learners and contributors in our world is my top priority," she says.

Kelly refers to her sons' treatment of others for verification that she's raising them well.

"I get compliments daily from coaches, teachers and neighbors speaking highly about the level of their compassion, kindness, and generosity," she says.

"When Dylan was in second grade, he was chosen to be a peer mediator, and he's currently a U.S. ambassador for youth soccer," Kelly adds. "Dawson wears his heart on his sleeve and keeps an open mind, allowing his friends to be authentic. He really keeps true friends around him, even at a young age. They create balance in a world full of chaos."

Giving back

Kelly grew up in the middle of two brothers reading, drawing, coloring and daydreaming.

"I believed in imaginary fairies, gnomes, dragons and magical, faraway places," she says.

She left her childhood home in Upper

St. Clair, Penn., a suburb of Pittsburgh, to earn a degree in elementary education at the University of Kentucky, then followed her dream of becoming an elementary school teacher. She credits her students' creativity with fueling ideas for much of her artwork to this day.

"My biggest inspirations are the many open, loving and deep imaginations of my students when I taught elementary school. When they told stories of make-believe, I found myself believing that the magic of my childhood was re-created," she says.

"Every time I see my students — who are now in their 20s — and they share their life stories, I'm proud to be a part of their childhood."

Kelly's successful licensing business also serves as a conduit for connecting with her community.

"A community is only as strong as its weakest member," she says.

"Businesses are in the eye of the public and therefore serve as a role model for integrity and responsibility. Businesses need the community to survive and therefore should give back."

In addition to serving as a member of the Apex Downtown Business Association and Apex Chamber of Commerce, Kelly is involved with her sons' schools and has served on various town council committees. She was a producer of V-Day Apex 2009's recent "The Vagina Monologues" and has helped coordinate the town's Fun Festival, and she has worked with Wake Teen, Boys & Girls Clubs of Raleigh, Triangle Down Syndrome Network, Girl Scouts, and Dream-2-Reality.

Apart from raising her boys and giving back to her community, Kelly hopes to serve as a source of empowerment and love for other children to be all that they can be. She realizes that her gifts are exactly that — gifts that she must share with others.

"All children have a birthright to be successful and have their dreams come true," she says. "Happily ever after is for everyone." **WJL**

Elizabeth Shugg is a freelance writer based in Apex.

To learn more

For more information on artist Laura Kelly, visit www.laurakellydesigns.com. To purchase some of her inspiring creations, visit www.expressionery.com.