

off the lip

Motherhood means listening to the details of life

GWEN GARDNER | Creative mom

Being a new mother left her completely exhausted. So when her then-6-month-old daughter Elizabeth took a nap, so did Gwen Gardner of Newport. But there was a special moment one naptime on the couch as Gardner felt her sleeping daughter's breath on her cheek. She started thinking about the light and beauty and other things, like green stuff and dog hair, that could possibly be inside her child — still so pure and innocent. She didn't let those thoughts drift by. She wrote them down and produced a poem called "Inside Me," which has remained the signature children's T-shirt and onesie design of her organic clothing line Simply Chickie for the last six years. A former sailor, she earned an MFA in children's writing through Vermont College of Fine Arts and a Master's of Education and Secondary English through the University of New Hampshire. Gardner also co-owns Portsmouth tutoring center Great Place to Learn with Deb Ozug and still finds time for ice skating. Check out more of Gwen's children's and adult's organic clothing designs at www.simplychickieclothing.com. **BY BRE EATON**

I understand you have a famous ancestor who was also a writer.

If you look back through our family history, we've been writers, artists and educators all the way back to Nathaniel Hawthorne and other people connected with the family. Elizabeth is named after Nathaniel's mother, Elizabeth Clark Manning, as well as Elizabeth Peabody, the mother of the kindergarten movement. She was the reason that Sophia, her younger sister, and Hawthorne met and later married. And that's who we all come down through, their son Julian. That is the legacy, but my father was a writer and my mom paints. (*She points to an oil landscape painting on the wall.*) I couldn't help but be an explorer, educator, writer, and artist — Elizabeth's destiny will probably be no different.

Is Elizabeth a constant source of inspiration for your Simply Chickie designs?

She helps me and has been the inspiration for the company — she is the "chickie" and we try to keep it simple in our house, thus Simply Chickie.

What observations have you made about Elizabeth's creativity?

When I'm upstairs working on the computer, she likes to pull out of her coloring books and the giant art box. She'll spread it all out and likes it best when I color with her. She won't like it if I get a ding on my BlackBerry and go to check it. She'll say "No, Mommy. We are coloring now. You're not finished!" Her most recent creation is a story about a rainbow. (*She holds up a paper booklet and laughs, then*

reads the big, crayoned writing, pointing to the rainbow drawn on each page.) "First it happened." (*Flips page.*) "Then this happened." (*Flips page.*) "WOW, then this happened." The rainbow illustrations just get bigger on each page!

How old were you when you had Elizabeth?

I was 41 when I had Elizabeth. I was pretty much resigned at 40 that I wasn't going to have children. I was not married. But surprise!

How has being a mother changed the way you observe the world around you?

It reminds me to pay attention, listen to the details of life. I try to pay attention to her traditions. Now for three weeks, we've been swimming. Her favorite day is when we go before school. I think she likes this time because it's so quiet. The first time the sun was rising and she said, "Mommy, the sun is walking with us." (*Laughs.*) So even though it's the hardest time to do it, it's her favorite and that's important. I like to set up patterns and traditions because they create security.

Why is creating security important?

I had an incredibly solid and secure childhood. I think that if children can feel secure, loved, and paid attention to for the first five to eight years of their life, they've got a good shot for the rest of their lives, handling whatever life throws at them. Those first years are so important — you're forming, and you can't go back. So I try to check myself and indulge her for five minutes in whatever creative game she creates because

that's what she'll remember. They don't remember the tiredness; they remember the time you spend with them.

Many of your designs are for children's clothing, but if you could make a T-shirt design for mothers, what might it say?

"I'm available for a play date." (*Laughs.*)

How do you find time to run two businesses, be a mother and maintain your own sense of self?

I have a few secrets. My first is I don't watch TV. The average American watches 26-28 hours of television a week — that's four hours a day! I didn't know what a Snooki was, and I'm fine with that! And it's fine if you want to watch that much TV, but that's where I get my time, which allows me to run an entire second business. I also have a washing machine and dryer in the kitchen, so while I'm waiting for the potatoes to bake, I can fold underwear. And, there's a lot of sweaty clothes in our house between Elizabeth playing and my sports! My two main passions have been running and ice dancing.

Ice dancing?

Ice-skating. I have a really awesome partner Andy Schmitt, whose life is very busy too, but we make that commitment to each other because we both have a love for the sport — the beauty, the speed and the "click" when we get it right, when we know our partner is going to move a certain way. I feel it makes me unique too, and I like being a little odd. Most of my friends love the fact that I'm eccentric. (*Laughs.*)

What do you think is the most challenging thing about being a mother today?

Time and where to focus my attention. I don't multitask well. I have many hats but I can only wear one at a time. If I'm with Elizabeth — and she knows this — if we're reading in bed and I get a ding on my BlackBerry, she knows that I will not respond, because that's our time and that's our focus. Whereas if I'm in the kitchen making dinner and get a ding, she'll bring my phone to me. She knows. I also wear different hats at Great Place. I keep my phone in my purse. The world could be exploding, but I'm working on verbs with this particular kid. I'm there for them — a catcher in the rye — that's my role, and I could be doing nothing more important than that. But then, when they get picked up, I'm the manager and have to deal with scheduling issues, an SAT class that needs to be set up, a child whose failed a trig exam and needs to pull it out before the end of the year. Then I'm running off to the skating rink to go practice. And then home for story time.

Some say we become our parents. Have you noticed this to be true for yourself?

One of my mother's mottos is "never say never." I don't use never. I will say, "It's highly unlikely." Every time I've used the exact word "never," it happens. I said at one point in my life I was never going to get married. I did. Never going to live in Texas. I did. Never going to get divorced. I did. Never going to have a child. I did. So I don't say never anymore!



She just does it. Gwen Gardner of Newport juggles being a mom with graphic design for clothing, tutoring and ice dancing. She wears one of her T-shirt designs for adults. Her time-management secret? No TV. PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

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