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Knock, Knock: A Rhode Island Summer Cottage with a Full-Time Gig

by *Cookie Magazine*



Brooke Williams, This is Authentic

Writer and interior decorator [Leslie Banker](#) had made a pretty nice life for herself in downtown Manhattan: co-authoring several books with her well known decorator mom Pamela Banker (*The Pocket Decorator* and *The Pocket Renovator*) and living in a small but swanky apartment in the West Village. But then she connected with financial software developer William Mullins, the son of old family friends, fell in love (and then into marriage) and found herself packing up to live in a charming Victorian summer cottage in Jamestown, Rhode Island that they purchased on a lark. We caught up with Leslie 2 1/2 years later to meet her 4-month-old daughter Harriet and see how she's settled in to life outside the big city.

So why Jamestown, RI, of all places? You're a life long New Yorker!

I know! But actually this was a place we both loved, having spent a lot of time up here visiting friends (separately!) But then when we were up together a couple of years ago, I dragged William to a bunch of open houses (I had the real estate bug) saw this place, fell in love and bid on it. And they accepted the bid! It felt

kind of like putting the cart before the horse, but once we had the house, we knew we would figure out how to move our lives up here. We both work from home, which makes it easier.

Sounds idyllic. What do you guys do up there when you're not collecting shells (or changing diapers!)

The diaper changing part is pretty full on, actually. I had no idea how much time and energy I'd spend just dealing with the day-to-day aspects of being a parent. Right before Harriet was born, William and I wrote a book together--it's kind of a field guide to British pop culture called *Britannia in Brief*. His parents are American, but he was born and raised in London so our points of reference are so different. When we visited his London friends, I felt like I needed a dictionary just to get through dinner. So we wrote one! It's like a series of talking points for sounding intelligent when surrounded by Brits. We had a great time working together, and would love to do more, though trying to edit text with a brand new baby was pretty challenging. Thank goodness I had the chance to re read the edits! The book comes out May 19, and we've started a [blog](#) as well. Now William is back to consulting and I'm taking a bit of a break to hang out with Harriet.



Speaking of different cultural references, did you find it challenging to merge your two decorating styles?

Well, William came to the marriage with some really beautiful old furniture from his family--a lot of amazing classic dark brown mahogany stuff. Luckily, I've always been a big fan of English designers so it's been fun to mix my more mid century style things (like these vintage oval mirrors) with his more traditional pieces (like this side table in our upstairs hall.)



How would you describe your newly combined decorating style?

Oh, eclectic for sure! Because of all the different furniture styles. But also sentimental because so much of it comes from our families or was purchased while traveling.

So then which one of you brought in the print of the possums?

It's actually an old Audubon animal print that my mother picked up at an auction. She has often used these prints in decorating projects but this one ended up with me. And the sconces come from an old antique shop on Long Island. They actually use real candles!



A place to lounge in your dining room? How cool is that? Bet you didn't have space like this in the city.

To be perfectly honest, that is the only place in the house where that loveseat actually fit! But I do love the idea of having a place to hang out that's right near the kitchen. Ours is old-fashioned, and there's no place to sit in there, so if we're entertaining, people can congregate here while we cook. I really love having the space to have these multiple seating areas--we even have one in our bedroom. It's the perfect spot for chicken soup and a movie.



Lucky you! Are we detecting a travel theme here, with the landscape photographs and the globe?

I actually took those photographs of Ayers Rock on a trip to Australia. And the globe is vintage, which makes it fun to look at as so many of the places on it no longer exist or have different names! I love to travel and believe that it's a great source of inspiration and the best way to find unusual things. I always keep my eyes open. I mean who knows, for example, when you might stumble upon the most amazing robin's egg blue papier mache bull's head that absolutely needs to be hung in your stairwell?



So you found that on a trip?

Yep. There we were, in New Orleans, in a store both standing in front of this amazing object. William turned to me and asked "Are you sure this will work?" I boldly said yes without really thinking. I was a little worried until we got it home and found the perfect spot for it. It's so important to trust your instincts.



Speaking of blue, you've painted your daughter Harriet's room a bright shade of blue as well. Were you purposely trying to go against the grain here?

Well, the room was originally a guest room and my office, but I was pregnant by the time I got it up and running. I had matched the blue to the color of the ocean on an old map I had lying around and was much too attached to repaint just because I found out I was having a girl. Plus a friend told me that in the 19th century, blue was the "official" color for baby girls, anyway. So I left it.

Any nursery decorating credos that you live by and care to share?

Don't be afraid of color! I love the bold use of color in any room. Also I'm trying to keep the clutter to a minimum. We throw everything into this old toy chest (it was actually my mother's when she was a kid) and toss a sheepskin on top to soften it up. I'm also trying to stay on top of Harriet's outgrown clothes by keeping a little basket by the changing table. When something no longer fits, into the basket it goes to be passed along to a friend.



The art doesn't look typical for a nursery...

Well, it's actually left over from when this was a guest room and my office, but I thought I'd leave these things up. I especially love the photographs of my father and his twin brother playing paddle tennis because they say so much about their distinct personalities. My uncle looks incredibly composed while my dad is totally frazzled!

What about that great chair?

I bought that chair 15 years ago while I was visiting a friend in Asheville, North Carolina. I convinced her to schlep it up to New York in her car, convinced my mother to keep it in her storage space and then finally found a home for it when we moved here. I also painted it bright red, which gives it a whole new life.



You seem to be into red... we see it crop up in the living room as well.

Not to repeat myself, but I am a big fan of injecting bold color into a room. Because it's an old beach house, we painted the walls a creamy off white to keep the overall feeling light. Painting the inside of the bookshelves is a great way to introduce a bold splash of color without having it take over the room. I used the same trick on these shelves as well [see photo below] The bright orange connects the hallway to the bits of orange in the dining room rug.



This is cute... is that Harriet's hangout?

It's a big old fashioned bassinet on wheels that I just love! I feel like I'm pulling her around on a float. In this photo, she's in the kitchen, but I drag that thing all over the house. It's another hand-me-down from my mom, who re-did the fabric skirt especially for Harriet.



Do you think parenthood has influenced your decorating at all? Any pearls of wisdom for new parents?

Hmmm... I might be a bit more practical these days! We are trying to keep the living room free of toys, etc. We'll see how long that lasts. I think it's important to have one spot in your house that is free of bright plastic things that squeak! Nothing is permanent--being a mom has really hammered that home. You have to be true to yourself and your own sensibility. And remember to have fun. That's good to keep in mind with or without kids in your life.

9:00 AM, April 01, 2009

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Wow! What a fabulous chic country look, and what a darling little girl.

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It is great isn't it! I have been a huge fan of Leslie's books (Pocket Renovator and Pocket Decorator) and was so happy to be able to showcase her new home here.

brookew | April 4, 2009 4:08 PM