



redit, or blame, adventurous parents who “lived full tilt.” By the time Greta Nicholas graduated from high school, she had hopped all over the world, from England to South Africa to Tortola, from Savannah to Palm Beach to Charlottesville (on two horse farms, by then one for each parent).

When it came to raising her own children, Nicholas—at the time a fine-art photographer, a stylist for fashion designer Vera Wang, and, improbably, an equestrian living in Brooklyn—did the polar opposite. Soon after the birth of her first daughter, Esme, in 2002, she literally bought the farm, putting down one deep and grounded root on her own horse farm in rural Woodstock.

First, Nicholas built a house on 20 acres. But “it lacked nostalgia,” she says, so she sold it as soon as it was finished and found something much more to her liking: a well-worn 19th-century farmhouse beside a winding country lane, surrounded by fields and framed by the Catskill Mountains beyond. It reminded her, she says, of her mother’s farm in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“I opened a saddlery store, and I also dabbled in real estate—it’s how to make ends meet and have your country life,” explains Nicholas, who does more than dabble on her working farm, with ponies grazing the fields, a big vegetable garden and greenhouse, a chicken coop, two peacocks, and a new horse barn in the works.

Then, when her mother, Aileen, was dealing with some health issues and decided to sell her Virginia farm, she moved to Woodstock too, settling into an old dairy barn that was recently renovated on her daughter’s property. “It was either tear it down or fix it,” Nicholas recalls of the dilapidated structure. To fix it, she knew just whom to call.

Designer James Huniford has been friends with Nicholas for years, and his pared-down aesthetic—minimal yet warm—and passion for repurposing weathered materials suited the project to a T. “I went up and saw the barn, and I found it to be

RIGHT: The living area of a barn renovated by designer James Huniford for Greta Nicholas and her family at her farm in Woodstock, New York. The cocktail table and sofa, in a James Huniford fabric for Lee Jofa, are by Huniford Collection, the tray table is from the 1940s, and a photograph by Daniel McCabe hangs above an antique Sheraton table. For details, see Resources.



Raising the Rafters

Greta Nicholas enlists designer James Huniford to rescue a derelict barn on her farm in Woodstock, New York, and transform it into a suitable setting for her elegant mother

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A mica pendant by Huniford Collection hangs above a Regency table and an 18th-century chair in the entry; the 19th-century dressing table and 18th-century chair are American, the bronze statue is of Nicholas's grandmother Frances Ottley Wood, and the doors and flooring are reclaimed wood. For details, see Resources.



just magical," Huniford recalls. "It was similar to the ones I grew up around in upstate New York."

Once a portion of the old cow barn was gutted—pulled-up floorboards revealed hay bales buried 20 feet deep—and rebuilt to make it structurally sound, Huniford went to work. Because the 1,000-square-foot residence needed to be wheelchair accessible, he crafted an airy, open floor plan and used salvaged barnwood to clad ceilings, sheathe cupboards, and create easy-access sliding doors, such as for the double-height bedroom and spacious bath, which features polished concrete floors and walls of waterproof Venetian plaster.

For the furnishings, the designer had access to mansions worth of blue-chip English, French, and American antiques that Aileen, an only child, had inherited. Her grandfather was industrialist James Henry Ottley, who published *McCall's*; her mother, Frances Ottley Wood, was a world-class equestrian and *Life* magazine cover girl. Dinner guests included Fred Astaire, who spun a young Aileen across the dance floor, and Bing Crosby, who used to sing "White Christmas" to the family.

"She said, 'Here's my stuff. Use what you want to,'" recalls Huniford, who describes Aileen as "the country version of Pauline de Rothschild." Sifting through her cache taught him a lot about



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Nicholas with her daughters, from left, Adelia and Esme. Dynamite, a Welsh pony, peeks into the kitchen, which features custom-made bead-board cabinetry, a Rohl sink, and a vintage Moroccan rug. A painting by Rene Ricard hangs above a Queen Anne walnut lowboy in the entry. For details, see Resources.



his client, even if he only selected a tiny portion of her belongings. “I understood who she was and how she wanted to live,” Huniford explains. “That furniture had so much direction.”

So he mixed her vintage wing chairs and antique flip-top table with his own spare sofa and cocktail table. Metallic leather and sapphire velvet give new life to carved-wood chairs. In the bedroom, clean-lined custom shelving pairs with ancestral portraits. A letter painting by the late poet and artist Rene Ricard, who was a friend of Nicholas’s, hangs above a Queen Anne lowboy in the entry. It’s signature Huniford: restrained elegance with a thoroughly modern point of view.

Only one piece caused a kerfuffle. Aileen owned an assortment of superb antique light fixtures, but Huniford had something else in mind for the entry area: a cone-shaped mica pendant inspired by a Jean-Michel Frank design. The ladies balked. It wouldn’t provide enough light, they said. Huniford caved, then persevered. They now laugh about it. “He’s like my big brother or sister—we are always fighting over who gets to wear the apron,” Nicholas jokes. “We’re both creative people, and we have definitely been married and divorced in our relationship many times. But I don’t think you have real relationships unless you have those ups and downs.”

Now, three generations of equestrian women commingle under almost one roof. Esme and her younger sister, Adelia, shuttle between their farmhouse and their grandmother’s barn, which, though small, captures the buoyant spirit of this extraordinary woman. “It’s so nice to live this way,” Aileen says. “I can’t even tell you.” ■



In the bedroom, an 18th-century Sheraton field bed is dressed with antique French linens, the 19th-century chest of drawers is English, and the portrait is of Nicholas’s grandmother. **FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** An 18th-century sofa covered in a Fabricut fabric faces a wardrobe custom made from reclaimed wood and a Queen Anne corner chair in the bedroom; the rug is vintage, the walls are painted in a custom C2 Paint color, and the ceiling and floors are of reclaimed wood. A chair by Huniford Collection, photographs by Nicholas, an antique sink, and vintage ship lights in the bathroom; the medicine cabinet is made of reclaimed barnwood, the walls are waterproof Venetian plaster, and the floor is polished concrete. Aileen and her grandchildren outside the barn, which is painted in Benjamin Moore’s Spanish Red. For details, see Resources.