

EXCERPTS FROM *MAKING WAVES*
by Libby Brown
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PART ONE
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THIS END UP

It had to have been the best and the worst store opening ever. We painted a leftover crate panel to use as a sign. "THIS END UP." Stewart hung it above the doorway on a rusty old bracket. Anyone it fell on would have been knocked unconscious, but we were innocent then of liability concerns.

We were also innocents on the subject of marketing. Without realizing it, our opening day coincided with the Strawberry Street Craft Fair. The celebration was an annual neighborhood event that drew people from all over Richmond's Fan District. In 1975, "the Fan," anchored by then-sleepy Virginia Commonwealth University, sat squarely between the ultra-conservative West End and the downtown Capitol. It was home to a mix of Bohemian humanity: starving artists, musicians, center-city lovers, renovators of old houses, the gay contingent and the homeless. Lazy with sunshine, a light autumn breeze and leaves turning yellow and red, the day was custom-made to suit the Saturday fair underway in the park across the street. Children laughed, balloons bobbed and adults wandered the friendly crowds.

The store was mobbed from the start with a heterogeneous crowd of happy contrarians. They wore hiking boots and L.L. Bean shirts, their square, uncool Volkswagens waiting at the curb. These young customers, who would later be regarded as the economically powerful baby boomers, prided themselves on owning earthy things counter to their parents' culture. Our rugged, original-design furniture suited them perfectly.

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Within an hour I had taken the first order. By that afternoon I had written three. One man used his last check for a purchase, and he made it out to "Up Your End." I was so excited I took it anyway. While I helped a woman interested in furnishing her mountain house, my mind scrambled furiously to calculate how many VW bus trips it would take to deliver such an order.

"How soon could I get all this? I'm in a bit of a rush," said my customer, thumbing her wallet.

Oh my. How much better could this be?

Just then I heard people chuckling. Putting aside our book of 12 fabric choices, I turned to see the reason. Unable to find mom in the crowd, my two-and-a-half-year-old, almost-potty-trained son was doing what he thought was right. With flawless aim, he had set sights on the side of the This End Up chair and was, well, keeping his training pants dry. I could have kissed the kindly woman sitting in it for her graciousness as she rose from the ersatz toilet.

Years later in response to a This End Up customer satisfaction questionnaire, that woman wrote in the comments section, "I was sitting in the chair when the owner's little boy went to the bathroom on it during the opening day of your Strawberry Street store. Please tell her that I bought my furniture several months later because of that accidental demonstration. Every piece is still like new after eight years. Thank you for a wonderful product."

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After settling my son on my hip, I slid the abused chair over the wet spot on the rug and returned to the mountain-house order in time to witness a granddaddy rat scurry beside the customer's foot and smush its fat body under the couch. Baby Stew, who was learning animal names, screamed "WAT" at the top of his lungs. The woman screamed, "OH MY GOD," at the top of hers. I barely got out of her way as she fled the store, tinkling toddler and super-rodent.

We couldn't bear to shut the door as long as there was interest. By 9:30 that night, I had waited on so many people and answered so many questions I could hardly remember where I had placed the day's receipts. Hiring help was immediately put at the top of my todo list. At the top of his, Stewart listed to remind me to charge sales tax. I had forgotten it all day.

As we locked the door, headed for home exhausted and hungry while hugging two sleepy children to our shoulders, guilt about balancing work and family rumbled. The challenge I had been seeking crowned that day, like a newborn. What would this infant entity demand of me? How could I nurture it without turning my back on my own needs? I wondered why I felt so exhilarated. Three orders, a rat, tax evasion, and bodily fluids would not be a cause of euphoria for most people. But I was elated, and in my naiveté I believed that it would be fun to join my joyful new independence with my familiar, comfortable life.