

Fine Furniture Family



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF OLD BISCAIYNE DESIGNS



PHOTOGRAPHS: AMY JO YOUNG

top: Old Biscayne Designs began making wood furniture after first establishing a reputation for quality beds made from hand-forged steel.
above: Nick and Gretchen moved their furniture business to Americus after Hurricane Andrew drove them from Key Biscayne, Florida.

Nick and Gretchen Gabrielli overcame adversity to win business success in the furniture industry.

Good afternoon, Old Biscayne Designs," said the woman, happily to help the customer on the other end. The caller never realized that the number she dialed to place an order rang a mobile phone balanced on the hood of a pickup truck.

But that scenario describes the work setting in the early 1990s for the fledgling furniture company owned by Nick and Gretchen Gabrielli. Her grandmother's deserted dairy barn was the new finishing department, her father's farm shop housed metal fabrication, and his old hay barn became the shipping department. The couple settled in at the new pastoral

headquarters outside of Americus after fleeing Miami's Key Biscayne Island in the wake of Hurricane Andrew's destruction.

Winds of Change

The couple began Old Biscayne Designs in Florida back in 1990. They were working in different careers when they met in Miami. After the couple married, they sought a business that would allow them to visit Nick's family in his native Argentina. They settled on an import business.

They brought lovely vintage beds from South America to designer showrooms in key U.S. cities. When

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customers clamored for more, the Gabriellis segued from antiques into the manufacturing of custom-design furniture. Soon they cased beyond beds, expanding their line to include armoires, chests, tables, benches, and other case goods.

Old Biscayne Designs in Miami was still struggling for success in 1992 when Hurricane Andrew pounded Florida and changed the company's fate. Gretchen turned to her family and hometown of Americus. "I called my father and said, 'Dad, we need to come home.' He said, 'Come on.'"

A mere 48 hours after Andrew hit, Nick and Gretchen rented a truck, loaded their equipment, and set up shop in Jimmy Greene's unused farm buildings. "Our customers didn't even sense a change," Gretchen says. She should know—she answered the calls that routed to the cell phone on the truck.

Home Sweet Home

The couple had planned to return to urban Florida, yet Americus carried its own appeal. Connections to family and friends made it "easy for us to establish relationships with people in town and with suppliers," Nick says. When his children from a previous marriage, Nico, then 8, and Valentina, then 9, moved from Argentina to live with their dad and stepmom in Americus, small-town Georgia became even more attractive.

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Becoming Furniture Mavens

Old Biscayne Designs enjoys enviable success in the industry today. The high-end collection sells in all 50 states as well as Canada and Puerto Rico. Prices for each individually crafted and signed piece range from \$1,200 to \$10,000. The furniture is made with solid bronze, iron, and aluminum castings and interesting combinations of wood, leather, and metalwork. Pieces feature hand-rubbed patinas, durable paint finishes, and details made with original decorative hardware.

Just as they planned, the couple combines business with visits to Nick's family in Argentina. Wherever they travel, including Europe and the Caribbean, they get ideas.

Somehow, this couple manages to make creativity look easy. That's true whether they're designing a new piece for their collection—or conducting business with nothing more than a cell phone, a pickup truck, and a dairy barn.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

Old Biscayne Designs: Call 1-800-397-5397, or visit www.oldbiscayne.com.



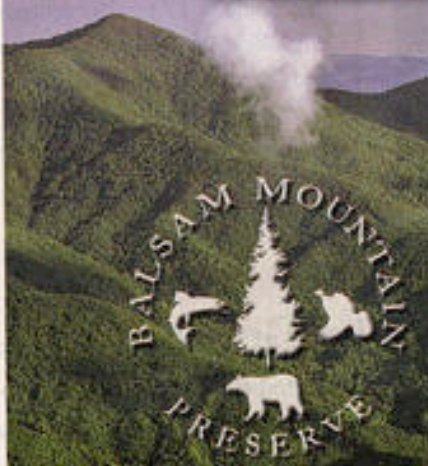
At the Americus facility, a worker hand casts small metalwork to be used as a furniture detail. The company also owns plants in Argentina and Mexico.

Making Magic

In their travels, Nick and Gretchen constantly seek inspiration for new designs. Gretchen creates journals by sketching images, tucking in photos, and writing real and made-up tales about the people and places they encounter. She transforms these tidbits into promotional stories surrounding the products of Old Biscayne Designs.

Each furniture design receives a history of sorts, tying it to such sites as a grand cemetery or an opera house; to such figures as Eva Perón, Argentina's former first lady; or perhaps the legend of a gaucho whose skillful riding transforms him into a centaur (half man, half horse). The evocative tales add to the products' allure. "If you own a piece that has a story, you've not only bought the piece of furniture," Gretchen explains, "you've bought the history of it too."

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