



NATURAL FIT

Lexington-based, upscale children's brand The Beaufort
Bonnet Company has unique ties to Keeneland

By Robin Roenker





Markey Hutchinson, The Beaufort Bonnet Company's founder and president, descends from the family that owned the property that became Keeneland.

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Iconic Keeneland images and equine motifs characterize the new spring line available at [The Keeneland Shop](http://TheKeenelandShop.com) and on Keenelandshop.com.

If it feels as though the Keeneland-exclusive line of children's clothing from Lexington-based The Beaufort Bonnet Company is tailored specifically for a day at the races, it's because it is.

The new line for spring 2018 — which includes pastel-colored dresses and rompers with equestrian-inspired detailing and a blanket and dress printed with flowering trees, racing Thoroughbreds, jockeys, buglers, and the Keeneland finish pole — was specifically designed to encapsulate Keeneland in the spring.

"When we're working to design the Keeneland pieces, I'm always picturing kids out on the lawn on Sunday, with everything in bloom," says Markey Hutchinson, The Beaufort Bonnet Company's founder and president.

Hutchinson knows a thing or two about spending the day at the track. Through her mother's family line, the Lexington native is a member of the



Hutchinson is thrilled with the response to her Keeneland-inspired children's clothing.

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Keene family, owners of the original land on which Keeneland was built. Her mother's parents, in fact, lived in the historic Keene mansion — now known as Keene Place and used as a meeting and entertainment venue — until just before her mother was born, and Hutchinson and her sister have several of the home's original furnishings. (In a nod to that family heritage, Hutchinson and her husband, Bert, chose Keene Place as the site of their wedding nine years ago.)

So, when she was presented with the chance to collaborate with Keeneland on an exclusive line of children's clothing, the partnership seemed like a perfect fit.

"We originally approached The Keeneland Shop simply hoping to get our line of clothing into the store," says Hutchinson. "And we offered to put the Keeneland logo on some of our pieces, which is something we do for several hotels and resorts. But Kyle [Cassin, The Keeneland Shop's director of retail] said, 'Let's think beyond that. Let's really make this neat and exclusive to Keeneland.' And that just brought me to life."



IDEAL COLLABORATION

The Beaufort Bonnet Company launched its first Keeneland-exclusive line of children's clothing last fall and will roll out its new spring line in March, with plans to design twice-yearly exclusive product offerings going forward. The custom items, available only at The Keeneland Shop and on Keenelandshop.com, have received an enthusiastic response from The Beaufort Bonnet Company patrons, and not just here in Lexington.

"People love anything to do with horses. And even outside of Kentucky, so many people celebrate the Derby," says Hutchinson.



MICHAEL REAVES



REBECCA DOERING

Jockey silks adorn this romper, part of the new spring line.



REBECCA DOERING

These Keeneland-exclusive dresses also feature racing motifs in pretty pastels.

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Colleen Costello, The Beaufort Bonnet Company's director of design, says the chance to work on the custom line has been especially rewarding. "I love being able to focus on the needs of our custom clients to develop detailing that creates something truly special and unique for them," she says.

"Working with The Beaufort Bonnet team has been an excellent opportunity to create something unique for our customers," says Cassin. "We want our patrons to find something new and exciting every season they visit us at Keeneland, and this collection is a culmination of efforts with a partner we are proud to work with."



BUILDING A BUSINESS

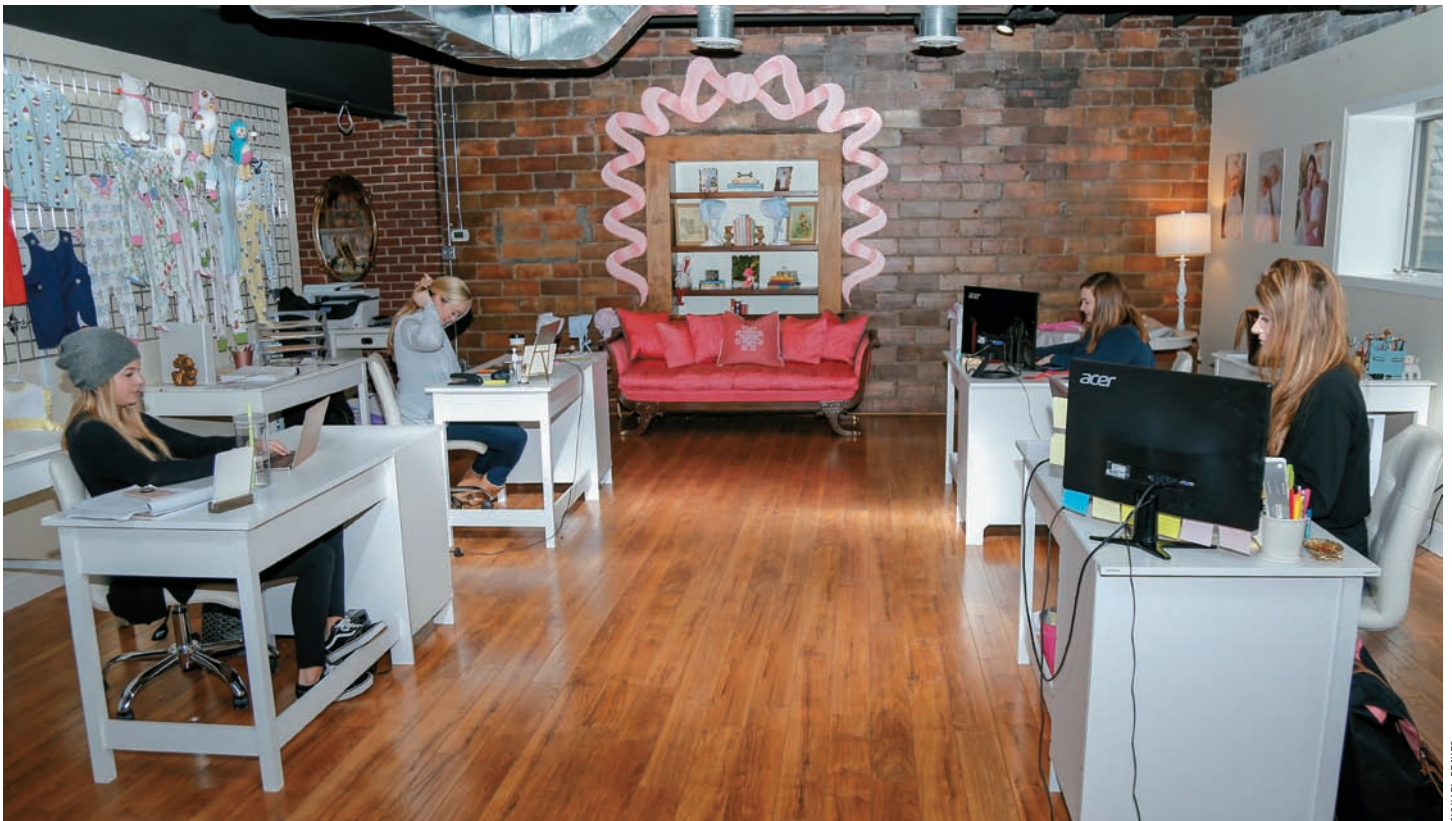
It all started with a bonnet. Hutchinson had seen a friend's baby wearing an heirloom-quality bonnet in a photo on Facebook and fell in love with the look. She learned the bonnet had come from a shop called Susu & John in Beaufort, South Carolina, and eventually received a bonnet of her own as a baby gift for the daughter she was expecting.

Later, when she dressed her daughter Bellefaire "Betsey," now 6, in the bonnet, people would "literally ooh and ahh over it," she says. "They said it was so nice to see a baby dressed like a baby." Friends and strangers alike kept asking where the bonnet had come from, and Hutchinson dutifully pointed them to the South Carolina boutique.

Eventually, she realized she'd found a product that was literally selling itself. "I reached out to the shop owner, and a few months later I purchased the company," says Hutchinson.

Hutchinson launched The Beaufort Bonnet Company — a nod to the bonnet's place of origin — in 2012, and through sheer will, careful branding, and savvy marketing, she has built the company into a major children's line. (The company boasts roughly 95,000 Instagram followers.) It now retails not just bonnets but also children's dresses, rompers, swimwear, pajamas, and more. Late last year The Beaufort Bonnet Company was acquired by Atlanta-based Oxford Industries Inc., a leading apparel company whose brands include Tommy Bahama, Lilly Pulitzer, and Southern Tide.

"When I purchased the company, the original owner's two seamstresses had retired, and I had no source to manufacture or any means to acquire the product," says Hutchinson,



MICHAEL REWES

The company's Old Vine Street cubicle-free offices are designed to encourage collaboration and the exchange of ideas.

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who eventually identified a manufacturing source in Lafayette, Tennessee. “I had this sense of urgency to get the business off the ground and make sure it was going to survive and thrive.”

Armed with a willingness to work endless hours, Hutchinson — a mom of two (her son, Wakefield, is now 8) with no previous business ownership experience — slowly and steadily built a team of e-commerce, marketing, and design professionals who are as dedicated to the brand as she is.

“To look back on where we started is really overwhelming, and I’m very proud of our team,” Hutchinson says. “We have a lot of people who have been with us from the beginning, who in those early days either worked for commission only or very small pay.”

For her part, Hutchinson is quick to note the company’s success lies in her ability to spot talent in others. “I can’t sew a button, and I can’t take professional photographs. But I think being able to recognize what I’m good at and what I’m not is really helpful. And recognizing talent [in others] is what I’m good at.”

The company’s clothing line is now available in more than 300 retail outlets worldwide, including shops in London, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and its thriving online store (thebeaufortbonnetcompany.com) has become a go-to site for people looking for heirloom-quality pieces for the special children in their lives.



REFINED BUT FUN

At The Beaufort Bonnet Company’s headquarters in Lexington on Old Vine Street, airy workspaces — decorated in whites and pastels, with not a single cubicle — offer the roughly 30 staffers ample room to collaborate and bounce ideas off one another about what to create next.

“We want the brand to be timeless, classic, traditional, all of those things. We like to say our pieces are refined, but refined doesn’t have to mean that it’s boring,” Hutchinson says. “We like to bring a little bit of whimsy to our designs.”

And while the company’s adorable bonnets and outfits often star in customers’ Easter photos, birthday parties, or first day at the beach trips — scenes the company loves to repost and share on social media — Hutchinson says the brand is about more than just a certain look.

“We want our customers to appreciate the garment more than just for the cuteness factor. It’s also about the feel and the practicality as well,” she says, noting that as a mom herself she feels she is her target customer and, like a customer, doesn’t



The Beaufort Bonnet Company’s popularity has soared and some 300 retail outlets worldwide now carry the line.



The new spring collection includes clothing for even the tiniest racing fans.

want to be tied to an iron or worried about stains.

For Hutchinson, being able to interact with customers on social media and see, first-hand, how they’re using and enjoying The Beaufort Bonnet Company clothing items has been one of the best parts of the company’s success.

“We’re getting to be a part of these families’ memories, and that’s such an honor,” she says. “We get to be a part of helping make their kids’ childhoods special.” **KM**