



family ditty

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One of Dickie Morris Wright's favorite childhood memories is of her father hooking up three saucer-shaped sleds to the back of a tractor and pulling Dickie and her brother and sister across the yard of their eighteen-acre homestead a few miles north of Charlottesville.

"We would ride in the flying saucers," Dickie says with delight. "We have lots of good memories here." Standing outside the home where she grew up, on a drizzling December morning, the peaceful wilderness of Dickie's childhood is palpable. Here, in the winter, she, Ben, and Kate—who are triplets—ice-skated on the pond in the woods, and in summer they lay on sleeping bags in the backyard, looking up at the stars.

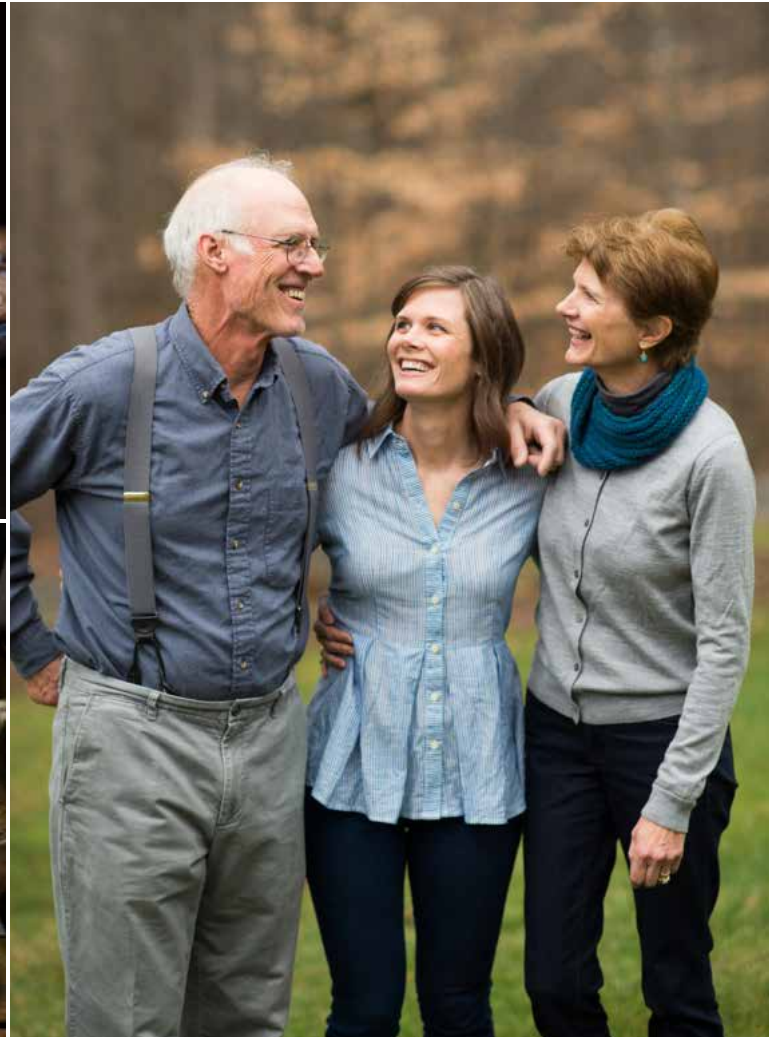
"We'd come home from school and make things," she says. "I think my parents really cultivated creative energy in just trying something to see if it worked—not knowing what you're going to make and just figuring out what it is going to be. I think a large part of who I am now is because of that childhood."

Who Dickie is now includes a small-business owner many times over, perhaps most notably as one of Charlottesville's pre-eminent event planners through her business, Just a Little Ditty ..., for which she also designs a line of custom handbags—known as "ditty bags," which inspired the company's name—as well as cards printed by Richmond-based Page Stationery. She and Ben also co-own Stonegate Event Rentals, which offers furniture, lighting, props, and infrastructure for events. With this roster, it's evident that the creative energy Dickie's parents cultivated paid off.

Event planning came into Dickie's life almost by accident. She originally envisioned a career in medicine, following in the footsteps of many in her family, including her father, but as she worked her way through her undergraduate degree, she realized it simply wasn't her calling. She sought advice from her dad, who told her to consider what she enjoyed and believed she could do well. She rattled off a few options, one of which—seemingly out of the blue—was event planning. The very next day, a fellow student mentioned that she had just finished an internship in event planning with Easton Porter Group, a Charlottesville-based hospitality company, and Dickie jumped at the chance to put her hat in the ring. She got the internship and remained at Easton Porter for three years, gaining valuable experience.

At a certain point, though, Dickie began to feel that she needed to strike out on her own. This was nearly a decade ago, before Charlottesville became a destination wedding hot spot, and she seriously considered leaving her hometown in order to build the business she imagined. On her last day with Easton Porter, as she climbed into her car to drive home, an old friend called to tell her that she was engaged and that she wanted Dickie to plan her wedding. And so a business was born, now seven years old and counting.

Dickie provides comprehensive and month-of wedding planning for about twenty couples a year, as well as corporate event planning for a handful of clients, growing the business through a stellar reputation and word-of-mouth alone. "I love going to work every day," she



says, grinning. “I love what I do. It’s such a good fit, and I’m very lucky that I fell into it.” Her approach to event planning is to make the event a reflection of the hosts. “I think authenticity is really important,” she says.

That devotion to genuine experience is clear this morning in the Christmas brunch that Dickie has planned in her childhood home, where it is easy to imagine the tight-knit family life she so joyously recalls. Built in the early 1800s, the house’s old bones lend a cozy feel, while its architecture provides subtle reminders that families have called this place home for more than two centuries. An antique rectangular table in the dining room is set for six: Dickie and Ben and their parents—David and Katie—as well as Dickie’s colleague, Rachel Douglass, and an old friend, Emily Ely. Dickie’s sister, Kate, lives in North Carolina and is unable to attend, leaving the family all the more eager to see her during the upcoming holiday.

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For the brunch, Dickie has engaged the talents of two of her friends: Harrison Keevil, chef and co-owner of Brookville Restaurant, which specializes in Southern-inspired cuisine made with Virginia-sourced ingredients; and Jenn Pineau, owner of Nature Composed, a garden-based floral design studio. Dickie and Harrison go way back, to college at the University of Virginia, while Jenn and Dickie collaborate frequently through the events world. Jenn has come prepared with a host of seasonal flowers and greenery—much of it clipped from her own garden—which she expertly arranges down the center of the table and across the fireplace mantle. She twists delicate wreaths of boxwood to house the place cards; under each lies a simple menu, designed by Dickie and printed by Page Stationery in her signature script, with its delicate, svelte vertical lines.

“I love writing; I love letters; I love mail,” Dickie says of her collaboration with Page, which includes letterpress invitations and day-of paper goods for weddings as well as greeting cards. “I just think there’s really something special about the written word.”

In the kitchen, Harrison is cooking up his signature scrambled eggs, perfectly crisp bacon, and tender sausages, while in the oven, a batch of baking powder biscuits rise. The aromas of the bacon and biscuits mingle with the woodsmoke from the fireplace as Dickie’s family and friends mill about the room, sipping mugs of hot coffee, their voices a chorus of friendly banter. As Harrison pulls the biscuits from the oven, everyone gathers around the table and settles in, taking a collective moment to admire the spread. Glasses are raised in a toast, and heaping dishes are passed from hand to hand.

From her perch at the head of the table, Dickie surveys the room. One of the elements she most treasures about her job is being able to observe the events she plans. Now, as she looks over her family and friends, happily immersed in this meal, a glow spreads across her face—one of pride and love, memory and hope. Dickie is home. ❖

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