

# Alphabetical order

A FRIENDLY BOARD GAME DELIVERED MUCH MORE THAN A NIGHT'S LAUGHTER AND ENTERTAINMENT FOR A BRITISH VISITOR.

By Alice Griffin, photography by Helen Leigh Dolan




When our family invited my cousin, Becca Griffin, fresh off a 24-hour plane trip from her English hometown of Liverpool, to play *Scattergories*, little did we know that it would mark a turning point in her career. In fact, it was the category-based party game that would prove the inspiration behind Becca's best-selling alphabet stationery range and transform her love of illustrations from a hobby to a full-fledged business in just two years. As I think of my cousin's success, it's hard not to reminisce about her peripatetic journey, and celebrate the small part that we, her Australian counterparts, played.

A child of the '80s, Becca grew up in the small village of Gilroyx on the fringes of the stunning Cumbrian Lake District. Three energetic younger brothers, a pair of free-spirited parents and a stunning rural backdrop made for an interesting upbringing. Far from convention, Becca's parents jumped on the organic, eco-friendly bandwagon earlier than most. "They wanted us to be as self-sufficient as we could," Becca recalls. "This meant growing all our own vegetables and gaining fresh produce from our animals. We had loads of goats, pigs, cows, ducks and hens running about. Mud and worms made my childhood."

Never destined to be a girly girl, she believes it was the encouragement from her teacher parents to explore, discover and enjoy nature that sparked her interest in art. "We would all sit around the table and draw and colour and then play with the animals outside," she says. "In such a small village you had to make your own fun."

All good things must come to an end however, and at the ripe age of just 19, Becca farewelled the comforts of her Lake District home to pursue her passion for illustration in the bright lights and big city of Liverpool. Setting off with romantic notions of artists and the creative lifestyle in tow, John Moores University was a rude awakening for Becca. Little money, a competitive market and a lack of confidence made her rethink her career choice as an artist. "I didn't feel I was cool enough or alternative enough to be a graphic designer," she says. "I felt there were so many people with greater individuality and talent than me." The reality of life as a full-time artist became even less appealing as the student loans and debts piled up. "We weren't taught how to make money from our art," she recalls. "I didn't feel I had many work opportunities outside of graphic design."

Despite graduating from uni with a graphic art, illustration and print-making degree, Becca's art was put on the backburner when she gained full-time employment in pub management. Running a local pub taught her invaluable business and customer-service skills, but the long hours and demanding physical tasks drove her to work in a government housing call centre a few years later. Freeing her time considerably, the routine of nine-to-five work drew Becca back to her first love, arts and crafts. "I was at a loose end with all this extra time, so I started drawing again as a hobby," she says. "Friends began showing interest in my 



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE: A work in progress; rough drawings from the soon-to-be released Australian alphabet card; the 'You're Right Up My Street' greeting card; the release of Becca's board game, Alpha Doodle is a career highlight for the artist.





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**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:**

A new design comes to life in the studio; alphabet prints are Becca's trademark; The Beatles Alphabet notebook is a customer favourite; the artist's treasured paints; the You Old Dinosaur birthday card; it's a pun of fun with The Perfect Pear greeting card.

work, and wanting some for themselves. It was then that I realised my work might be good enough to sell."

Despite her friends' encouragement, it was 18 months before Becca finally plucked up the courage to set up shop at a crafts fair. "I didn't do it for a long time as I was scared people would laugh at me and tell me they were rubbish," she says. "There is something really intimidating about putting your personal work out there to the public." But put it to the public she did, and to Becca's relief, the response was overwhelmingly positive. "It was a turning point for me," she adds. "I realised I could invest more time and effort into my illustrations as there was money to be made."

Contrary to the artist stereotype, Becca now approaches her work with a business-savvy practicality that was no doubt picked up from years of drink-pulling and staff training behind the bar. Preferring order and organisation

to the usual creative mayhem, a plan of attack is already in place before Becca even picks up her pencil to begin a new design. "I need to research what's out there and what will sell before I dedicate my time to design," she says. It is this dedication to her goals and business plan that sets Becca's operation apart from the rest.

Five years on from picking up her pencil, business is booming. This year, following another hectic Valentine's Day — "I sold more than 4000 cards in a few days" — Becca gained the confidence to call it quits at her day job at the call centre. Forgoing a steady income for life as an artist and small business owner in England, a country in the midst of economic crisis, was no easy feat. But sheer determination, a hard work ethic and a great support system have paid off. Far from her days designing at the dining room table, Becca now works from her studio in a warehouse she shares with

other artists and producers. An open-plan office has made life a whole lot more interesting. "I went from sharing my workspace with my cat to sharing it with such a mixture of people," she says. "We even have a puppet-maker on site!" Indeed, creativity loves company, and Becca is no exception. "It was isolating to work and live by myself," she adds. "With 15 artists sharing this workspace, it's really helpful to chat and get an objective perspective on your work."

That's not to say that running Becca Griffin Illustrations is easy. The daily grind of small business responsibilities such as budget, time management and managing casual staff is challenging. "I think the biggest issue is cash flow," she says. "I supply a few shops and galleries and I spend time chasing people up for payment. There's always the money there but it's just about being organised and assertive." Becca contends with an artist's worst fear, copyright issues, by maintaining her practical, good-natured attitude. "Look, breaches of copyright happen," she says. "You just have to cope with it the best you can. Nothing's completely original. My alphabet cards are my trademark and I'm lucky because people are aware now that they are my thing."

Beyond her illustrations, Becca hosts small courses for aspiring creatives and small business owners. Her classes Etsy for Beginners, Achieving Success on Etsy and social media workshops are Becca's way of giving back and staying connected with the community. "Most people are daunted by the idea of opening online shops," she says. "There are just so many hoops to jump through and information to absorb so these courses are just about breaking it down."

Ultimately though, Becca's heart lies with her first love, illustrations. Her excitement when discussing upcoming projects is infectious. "Making new things and getting a good response to my products is the best feeling," she says. "I'm so lucky." Her current infatuation is fruit and vegetable pun cards. "There's something really relaxing about sitting down and drawing fruit," she explains. A canvas of fruit may be taking it back to basics, but Becca's playful wit and cute designs breathe new life into the age-old concept.

The alphabet cards, her very first product, have her customers well and truly hooked with more than 20 cute designs currently available. The trip to Australia to visit her boisterous board-gaming family certainly seems to have paid off. In tribute to her where it all began, following much good-natured ragging from her Aussie uncle, Becca is this year introducing an Australian alphabet range of cards, prints and giftware. With the release of her very own alphabet board game, mug sets and a new series of calendars in the pipeline, the sky really is the limit. In typical Becca fashion though, her feet remain firmly planted on the ground. "I haven't got a massive end target, I'm just happy to see where all this takes me," she says. "I would love to have my own shop and studio space one day, providing money allows. For now I feel so lucky to make a decent living doing what I truly love."

**Becca Griffin illustration products are available for order on [beckagriffinillustration.co.uk](http://beckagriffinillustration.co.uk) or on Etsy now. [etsy.com/au/shop/BeccaGriffin](http://etsy.com/au/shop/BeccaGriffin).**

