

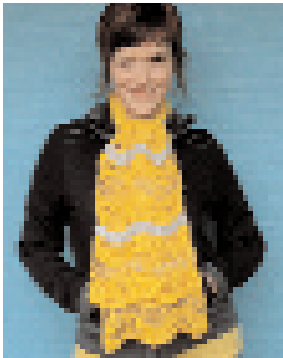
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Q+A

Vickie Howell and
Adrienne Armstrong share
the green way.



AtomKnit Garden



The story of my introduction to Adrienne Armstrong is one of serendipity. One of the yarns in my SWTC line is called Rock, with the colors named for musicians I admire. During the development process, my husband said, "You have to name the green 'Billie Joe,'" for Billie Joe Armstrong, guitarist and lead singer of the punk band Green Day. It made perfect sense, not only for obvious reasons but because I was, and am, a huge fan. I had a Green Day demo tape from the early '90s (from a free show they played at Hollywood High School) that I literally played to death. I saw the band live in L.A. when they opened at Lollapalooza. A California girl, I consider them my hometown band. Why not give them a little yarn shout-out?



I had no idea at the time that Billie Joe's wife, Adrienne, was a knitter. Flipping through a magazine, she saw an ad mentioning the "Billie Joe" yarn and contacted me. I sent her a bunch of yarn and goodies shortly after, but what she doesn't know until now was that the original label misspelled Billie Joe's name. Sweet Mary, how embarrassing! We had corrected labels printed just for the yarn I was sending Adrienne, hoping like crazy that she would never see the typo. We continued e-mailing and soon became fast friends. Adrienne's an amazingly kind, thoughtful, cool and hilarious woman. Because of her I got to do my first Habitat for Humanity build and was led to an organization for needy girls in India, where we both now sponsor daughters. My life is richer for our friendship.

Adrienne and her family are huge eco-activists who do a lot to spread the word about environmental responsibility. Recently, we chatted about her continuing efforts, sustainable living and the fact that craftiness and thinking green aren't mutually exclusive.

VH: Let's chat about how and when you started knitting.

AA: I learned from my mom when I was about 14, but I never completed anything—I'm not sure Mom did either—and then I lost track of it for a while. Then about five years ago I took a class and I thought it would be fun to try again, especially because I was traveling so much. It seemed like a great way to pass the time. I started knitting on long plane rides to Europe and on long bus rides on tour.

Do you still do most of your traveling by bus when you're on tour?

We do, especially in the U.S. and in Europe if the tour is long enough. It's a very relaxing way to get around. You don't have to rush to the airport or go through security. You can just get on a bus after a show and drive through the night and wake up the next day in a new town.

Do you still knit with your mom?

I knit with friends—I'm always trying to get

them to join me on knitting nights out. That usually falls through, so I'm pretty much a solo knitter until I go on tour and am with other people who knit—mostly because I've taught them.

So you're a knitter seeking other knitters? Absolutely.

You mentioned the other day that you threw a knitting party as a fundraiser for your son's school. How did that go?

That all came about because I was teaching my younger son Jacob's class how to knit. I started the classes when he was in first grade.

Were they receptive at that age? I'm dealing with that now with my own second grader.

It's interesting, because in first grade they were all very excited. Some of the best knitters in the class were boys. By second grade they had really gotten in to it, knitting during story

time or recess. We all had a lot of fun. Then the school asked me if I would host a fundraiser. I've also taught a few of the teachers to knit, so there are a lot of knitters on campus. I've done it for two years now.



Your comment about the boys is interesting: It mirrors what Annette O'Toole told me about her own experiences in the classroom when her kids were young—that hands down, the boys were much better at knitting at that age. It's frustrating to hear that and then have to deal with the stigma against anything crafty for little boys and men.

There definitely is this preconceived notion of what the boys should be doing and what the girls should be doing. We went away last summer with some friends, and the kids were watching a movie. One of the guys came out and said, "I can't believe they're sitting there knitting. That's a lot different than when I was a kid." Maybe it has something to do with kids' energy levels. I know for myself, knitting is a way to direct energy and focus when I'm trying to sit still. My kids and my community seem very open to nurturing that.

Do you enjoy knitting certain types of projects more than others, or is it more about the process?

It's a bit of both. The process of knitting is very soothing. I find great comfort in it when I'm on an airplane. I'm very much an instant-gratification knitter—I like doing things like wrist warmers and hats. I'm working on a felted purse and three pairs of wrist warmers right now. I'm big on the wrist warmers

because they're fast and really beautiful and easy to knit and make great gifts.

I find that people actually really dig homemade gifts.

I think making gifts is a way to bring gift-giving back down to something that comes from the heart. I try to make sure that my kids give homemade gifts. It's more personal, more heartfelt.

I also think that it brings the heirloom factor back into it. We don't get a lot of things to pass down anymore.

Everything is so disposable.

When you get something homemade, you know it took thought and time. It's the opposite of disposable.

That's actually a great segue into this column's main topic. I know that you and Billie Joe are conservationists and that you've done a lot of work with the Natural Resources Defense Council. Would you talk a little bit about what you do with them?

Mostly we try to help raise awareness. The NRDC is such a powerful organization that they can actually lobby for change and see progress made. When you're working with an organization like this, one that's diverse in terms of what it focuses on—clean air, clean water, global warming, oil consumption—it's really encouraging to see that people are capable of making changes.

You worked on a video for them, didn't you?

I did one for them, and so did Billie Joe and Green Day. In fact, Green Day and the NRDC have a website called www.greenadaynrdc.com. When you become a member, you receive e-mails that you can then send to your congressman or to corporations; basically these people are flooded with letters. That's how change comes about. You as an individual can be very powerful, just working from your own home. Sometimes environmental issues or political issues feel so overwhelming and out of reach. People get frustrated and begin to think, "This is way too big. How can I ever affect something like global warming?" The NRDC gives you a way to be completely and easily a part of

the movement for change.

Did your work with them influence your decision to open your new sustainable-living shop Atomic Garden [located in Oakland, CA]?

Yes. I've been interested in fashion and clothing since I was young; in fact, I thought I would be a clothing designer. But I've had such a hard time with the industry in terms of mass consumption and turnover of trend after trend. I felt like I wanted to do something that had more of a soul. My friend and I thought it would be so great to have a place that supported small businesses, women-owned businesses, women's co-ops.

Can you explain the term "sustainable living?"

To me it means knowing where the things you use came from and where they're going—things that are not disposable, that have substance. We can focus on sustainability in our community by supporting the craftspeople in it, and in the environment by supporting products that can be or are recycled or reused and production processes that do not pollute our rivers and oceans with toxins.

Does your eco-consciousness ever cross over to your knitting?

It often does. I'm attracted to natural fibers. I've become something of a yarn snob, so I'm totally addicted to cashmere. I'm very tactile—for me it's all about the feel and color.

Do you have any suggestions for what crafters should look for, or stay away from, when they're trying to create sustainable projects?

I think crafters are already in the right frame of mind. They are working with their hands and taking the time to craft, so they've already crossed that line into sustainability.

Vickie Howell is the author of *New Knits on the Block* and *Not Another Teen Knitting Book* and has her own yarn line, The Vickie Howell Collection, with South West Trading Co. For more information, visit www.vickiehowell.com.

For more information on **Adrienne Armstrong's** shop, go to www.atomicgardenoakland.com. To hear the audio version of this interview, visit to www.vickiehowell.com/podcast or the Hobbies section of iTunes.