

BARN RESTORERS

In Love with Barns

This couple turned their shared passion for saving America's old barns into a thriving business.

By Christine Barnes



A fresh coat. An employee paints a window.

Every barn has a story. My husband, Tim, and I have made a business out of learning them.

About 3 years ago, Tim and I left careers in corporate America and started Barn Painting & Advertising Inc. Some of our friends thought we were crazy to leave good jobs for what can be 14-hour days of physically exhausting work. Sometimes I am so tired, I'd rather sleep than eat. In the summer, our workweek can be 70 hours, and we're lucky to get a few hours' sleep each night.

But to stand together, hand in hand, looking at a completed barn and knowing that we made a real difference, is a feeling I would not trade for the cushiest job in the world. I love working with my husband.

We take great pride in our work painting barn exteriors. Over the past several years, we have met folks from all over the country. We are dedicated to helping make farms across America come to life again.

Courting in the Country

Tim and I were engaged 72 days after we met. He was visiting from Pennsylvania, and came to Michigan see the Michigan State-University of Wisconsin football game.

We had a lot in common. I knew the night we met that it was fate. We courted long-distance.



The Cherry Hill barn, before and after.

When we did see each other, Tim and I had limited time together. We went on long drives through the countryside of Pennsylvania and Michigan and realized we both loved barns. We took black-and-white

photos of them and started a photo album. Each barn commemorated a trip or visit.

After we were married and I moved to Pennsylvania, we blew up some of the pictures, framed them, and hung them in our living room. These pictures became the focal point of our decor.

The more time we spent admiring these barns, the more aware we became that many of them were in dire need of preservation and paint. In fact, about 90% of the barns we saw in our travels needed work.

We started painting barns on the weekends as a hobby. Soon, our hobby became the family business.

Taking a Chance

Originally, our focus was barn advertising. Then one day we decided that we needed to paint the whole barn exterior to reduce our costs. Tim went to a local Standardbred horse farm and asked Ed Sponseller, the maintenance supervisor, if we could paint one of their barns.

Ed asked whether we had any references or had ever painted a barn before. Tim replied, "No, but I am sure we can do it. We are hard workers."

Ed said, "Well, you didn't lie to me. I'll tell you what. Go over to the barn and give me a price. If I like it, I will give you a shot."



Christine's mother, Suzanne Mayhew, paints

trim on a barn door with an artist's brush—a job that took 3 hours.

At the time, we worked full-time. Tim was flying as a registered nurse for a privately held helicopter transport company. I was working as an accountant for a nonprofit patient advocacy group. We began painting that yellow barn on nights and weekends.

It wasn't easy. We set up scaffolding instead of renting a boom lift. One day, the temperature was 96° in the shade. We left our truck running with the air-conditioning going full blast. Every 20 minutes or so, one of us would climb down, run to the truck and sit inside. I don't think we've had another day as hot as that one.

We were so busy in the first 5 months that Tim quit his job and did all the prep work, like scraping and power-washing, during the week. I came out to help on weekends. For the first 40 barns, it was just Tim and me.

By the following spring, we had both quit our jobs and were painting full-time. From start to finish, it takes about 5 to 7 days to paint a barn. It's physically exhausting, and by the end of the day we're covered in paint.

We now have nine employees and recently expanded to include painting silos, grain bins, farm homes and fencing. No job is too big or too small.

When we started, I was afraid of spiders, heights, bees, snakes and mice. But after painting more than 100 barns, nothing bothers me.

The Old Family Barn

We're in the country just about every week, painting barns of all shapes, styles and colors. Our favorites are the ones that have remained in the same family of farmers for many generations.



Christine and Tim, paint-spattered and happy.

One barn that sticks out in my mind is Cherry Hill, which is owned by the Hansen family in Ludington, Michigan. Agnes Hansen, the family matriarch, grew up on the farm and was in a nursing home. Her son vowed to restore the barn in time for her to enjoy it.

The job was considerable. The barn needed carpentry work before we could paint it. It took us about 6 days and 130 gallons of paint to finish the barn.

When the family brought Agnes home to see the restored barn, there were very few dry eyes. "The barn has stood in her 'work clothes' for many years," said Marcia Hansen, Agnes' daughter-in-law. "Now she is ready to greet visitors."

We got to know the family pretty well. Meeting three generations of Hansens and all of their neighbors and friends marked our hearts forever.

Preservation is an important part of what Tim and I do. We network with barn-preservation experts across the country and spend a great deal of time educating our customers and the communities we serve.

Someday, we'd like to publish a coffee-table book about the barns we've painted across America, the stories behind them, and all the people that Tim and I have met along the way.

Working with Tim is my favorite part of the job. My husband is hardworking and kind. Week after week, from March until December, we scrape, wash, prime and paint barn after barn. Sometimes he will paint a message like "I love you" or "BPA" (our company's acronym), and it makes me laugh.

When we are side by side in a JLG lift 45 feet in the air, looking out across the countryside at all that God has created, I cannot imagine being happier anywhere else. I am a lucky woman, and I know it.

Photos Courtesy of Barn Painting & Advertising Inc.