



A Conversation with Lindsay Sherbondy
Founder of Lindsay Letters

Q. You are the founder, artist and entrepreneur behind Lindsay Letters. Tell me a little bit about your journey to founding your company.

A. I took a calligraphy class when I was little at this program called Whiz Kids, so I already have a background in calligraphy. I would write all of the confirmation certificates for my church, and I remember thinking back then that maybe one day, I could use this skill to make money. Little did I know!

I went to college and got my degree in graphic design because I loved reading magazines like *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Real Simple*, and *Domino*. I went into graphic design with hopes of working for a magazine company. I graduated and went to work for a really amazing firm where I got my full experience working in advertising and marketing and doing graphic design. It was everything that you would picture when you go to school for those things. That experience really shaped how I feel about so many things—I worked with really great people and it was such a foundational experience.

At that time, I started attending my local church and getting re-involved with my faith after walking away for a while and making some bad life decisions. I'm one of those people that when I get really involved with something I love, I want to help. So I started doing some graphic design for a church, and then at the same time, around 2007, my friends started getting married. At the time, you still picked your invitations out of a book at the local bridal shop. It was still pre-Pinterest, but people were starting to get really edgy and creative with their weddings in ways the generation before me had never done. So, it was crazy to me that my friend, Brooklyn, was making all these fun and wild choices for her wedding, but her invitations were going to be so boring. So I offered to graphic design her some invitations, so that got me started there.

I was working my dream graphic design job, starting to do design work for our church, and also beginning to design wedding invitations. My friends were getting married all at the same time, and one friend sees another friend's thing, who sees another friend's thing, and everybody wants it. The first invitation I ever created had my lettering on it—I just couldn't find a font that I liked—and so I wrote some of it in my handwriting and scanned it into some design software that doesn't even exist anymore! I wanted to fill in spaces on the invitations that none of the available fonts would allow me to. At the time, there weren't any handwriting fonts available — it was just whatever came on your computer. I started getting the invitations I had created in the mail, and people ruined them with their terrible handwriting! So I decided that part of my offering needed to be addressing them as well.

So at this time, I wasn't sleeping at all! I started a blog in 2008, as the whole world also started a blog. I documented the creative things I saw, my projects, making mood boards, and everything

started to converge. I became an unhealthy workaholic because it's hard for me not to work because I love what I do.

I decided to work full-time on staff at the church, where I met my forever friends and my husband, Dugan, but the invitation and lettering projects just kept coming.

I had always done custom artwork for people, but somehow one of the first interior bloggers found my stuff on Pinterest, and she asked me to make a custom piece for her for Christmas—O Holy Night. It was the first time I did a piece of art that was just my writing; I mostly did paintings and collage work. By this time, I was pregnant with my daughter Eva, and the blogger needed the piece super fast for a magazine shoot, and so I whipped it out and then went into labor early. I literally finished it and then went into labor. I remember bouncing on one of those balls, in labor, trying to finish addressing some envelopes for a client.

While I was still in the hospital, my phone started blowing up. The blogger had posted a picture of the piece above her mantle, and it was going viral (for that time, probably hundreds of people)—people just loved it; everybody wanted it. I told them that I didn't do repeats; I only do custom work, but a friend asked me to consider scanning the original and making it printable. She would help me with the logistics, and then we'd split the profits. So I agreed, and we made more money from that printable than I did the entire year doing custom artwork and invitations. My husband observed that *that* business model seemed smarter than the custom one, and he was right.

So by the following year, on Eva's first birthday, we were putting the finish touches on the Lindsay Letters website.

Q. How has Lindsay Letters evolved and grown throughout the years?

A. I think all the time about Lindsay Letters and that whole experience because I would never start Lindsay Letters now. One step to another step to another step, it chose me. I'm a really hard worker, and I believe wholeheartedly that God gave this to me as a spiritual gift, but the world has also been so generous with me. The right people have seen my work at the right time and the right place. Every step of the way, Lindsay Letters kept unfolding. It doesn't mean that there weren't many sleepless nights—but one thing led to the next, and here we are today.

The website looks very similar now to what it did initially, but it's getting better due to customer feedback. We were hearing: *I want more color options, I want more size options. Do you offer frames?* I knew that unless I did something to make my business more sustainable and scalable, my marriage, parenting, and bandwidth would plummet really fast.

I started incorporating my writing into more and more things, and then in the summer of 2014, I was painting with Eva (she was two at the time) and I had to get some work done. I was working on my Christmas collection, and I thought, "I'll just make a couple of quick abstract pieces." Pretty soon, calligraphy struck a boom, and lettering was everywhere. I began to wonder how long I would get to keep doing this as a business, so I just feel really grateful that we've been able to adapt as a business, adding different mediums and products to our offerings.

I think one of my favorite things that I get to do in my business, is that for every collection, we take it on almost like a clothing designer would take on a collection. There are many people who specialize in painting the ocean or in painting portraits, but I'm really trying to create a body of work that appeals to everybody. I want everyone to come to my site and find something they love. Which I realize is a marketing no-no—if you try to appeal to the masses you appeal to no one. But I love getting to create a variety of things. I love the challenge of it, and I love painting new things. I think it keeps things really fresh and keeps content fresh for people who keep coming back for more. Now, there are so many pieces—I think we currently have 17,000 stock keeping units in our collection (including color variations). It's so fun for me because I hope I get to do this forever, so I hope I keep growing as an artist and keep creating new things.

Now we're here, and I can't even imagine doing anything else.

Q. When you officially launched Lindsay Letters as the retail site in 2012, did you ever expect that it would grow into what it has become today?

A. At the time, I didn't know what to expect. When I started, all I knew was that I had to do it. I remember sitting down with my husband and taking out an \$11,000 loan to build my website. I had come to a crossroads about leaving my job at the church; my husband and I knew that the workload I was taking on was not sustainable. All I knew at the time was that I was confident that I could make money back to pay off the loan, but I was worried that that was all I would make. But Dugan was so supportive. He was like, "You can't not do it. We'll always end up here in the same place if you keep asking if you *can* do it. You can't *not* do it."

But from the beginning, it has been bigger than I could carry. It snowballed so fast; it never grew slowly. And I don't want to discourage people by saying that, because the internet is just a different place now. It's crowded. I tell people all the time that I see people online that are so much better at this than me! I always wonder why others don't have larger followings because they're so much more dialed-in, better-trained, and better at this business than I am. Much of my success really is because of timing and the grace of people that had a platform noticing me. So much of it was timing. From the beginning, it just snowballed faster than I could catch it.

So I knew it was going to be a thing, but I didn't ever take the time to design what exactly it would be; I just knew I couldn't say no to the calling that I truly felt God placed on my life.

Q. As an entrepreneur, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced, and what has been most important to you as you've been stewarding this company?

The hardest part was not having the bandwidth or the expertise to handle it all from an administrative and business perspective. I priced things so wrong and I lost money on so many little things that I did. I made so many dumb decisions. I was a really good artist and a really savvy entrepreneur, but there are all different kinds of skill sets as far as time management, and pricing models, and all the things that you need to know, and some of it I wasn't good at. And I felt really, really alone in it. I could grab a friend here and there to help me sleeve art prints or process something, but it felt like it was so big that I couldn't carry it.

The hardest parts have been when I was doing it alone, but as the business has grown and the right people have come on the bus, I feel like we get to work smarter, and it's such a joy to get to

do it with other super smart women. It's always been a main goal of mine to have a team of women. I look at my team all the time and think, "You guys are just really smart, really good at this."

My team is all women in their thirties, and nobody is without heartache in their life. I feel like we've all walked with each other through some really, really, really, hard stuff. My business feels like a family. I feel so supported in that they all love my kids - Eva and Phoenix - and they love me; they love being able to offer the world something beautiful and with integrity, because they know that it matters. Their gifts are what have helped them to get through their hard stuff. Their gifts of writing, making really great business decisions, photography and styling, administration—those are the things that have helped them get through their own hospitalizations and deaths of their parents. I feel like there's just so much heart behind it—I can't even describe in words the amount of heart that powers the business.

I would also say that integrity is just really, really, really important. Integrity in our pricing structure, integrity in how our own team is compensated, and integrity in our products. We're always trying to find the balance between giving someone the best value, and also being sure that it's made in a way that we feel comfortable with providing.

I don't know how it looks to somebody from the outside, but when I look at it, I feel really proud that one person and then their friends were able to be scrappy enough, and want it enough, and have enough heart and vision, that they could make something like this.

Q. A couple of summers ago, your daughter had an incident that resulted in a traumatic brain injury and changed everything for your family. Those who are unfamiliar with her story can read it [on your blog](#). Tell me about how your work and your company have helped you navigate this new season of life.

A. As I play it forward, I think about how God knew what Eva was going to need. The way that my business is set up now, and that my husband can work part-time at our church doing what he loves, and that we're both able to be home with our kids. We have such a unique schedule that we can care for everybody.

Even the fact that Lindsay Letters has afforded me the space on the internet that I have, it's meant so much for Eva—the exposure for people to be able to pray for her, and the generous support we've received from the Lindsay Letters community... I could never quite understand why God gave this to me for us to carry, but after Eva's accident, I remember sitting in the hospital one day, thinking, *Oh my gosh, this has nothing to do with me.*

I got to be used in such a way that I can see that the plan was unraveling years and years before Eva ever fell off a golf cart. As soon as I shared her with the world, we got this outpouring of support for which I am so grateful. "I'm praying for you" always felt like such a trivial thing for me to say, but to be able to put your head on the pillow and rest at night knowing that your child is being covered in prayer, it's just been so invaluable to us. We've walked through so much hard stuff as a family, and to know that people are still praying for her, and to hear people say, "whenever I walk by "Sweet Beautiful Girl," I think of Eva and I pray for her"... Just to hear that, I realize that for years, I've been planting little seeds of prayer for Eva... *Oh God, that's what you were doing this whole time.*

Lindsay Letters has been such an emotional gift for me, at a time when everything feels like it's falling apart and everything is hard, to be able to go and do something I love. Not just painting, but reorganizing the website navigation to writing product descriptions—I love it all—and to be able to dive into something that I truly feel the Lord in when I can't feel him anywhere else, has been so cathartic.

We're starting to build a house for Eva right now because our current one isn't working— her wheelchair is gigantic, and it doesn't fit anywhere, and I know that we're only able to do that because of where we are with Lindsay Letters. God's been orchestrating this from the beginning. Every time I felt so alone, and every time it felt really hard, every time I made a stupid business decision, and I felt like I was suffocating—so many sleepless nights—it was because He was going to rescue it.

After Eva's accident, I was able to bring on my business manager full-time. Laura, our creative director, stepped in because I had to be gone for who knew how long. We had to take out a loan to hire Laura, and we were able to pay it off. We needed people to be able to come in and step into my space, and because of the exposure we got, we were able to pay for that.

So God did surround me with people, but it took ten tough years of wanting to quit all the time. Now I know that Lindsay Letters is truly a gift—not just financially, to support Eva and for prayer—but it's also a gift of being able to do something that I love that's easy for me. Making things is the easiest thing I do.

Q. What advice do you have for other entrepreneurs who want to start their own business?

A. That you're not going to have enough money to quit your job until you quit your job.

My husband and I moved to Arizona in 2014. He hated his job, I was working all the time and staying home with Eva, and we were also living with my mother-in-law while we were looking for a place. I told him that if he quit his job, I thought I could make enough money to sustain us. We were in a really unique situation. We didn't have debt to pay off or cars to pay off, or anything like that. I thought we could do it. We had been living off his salary, and I had been spending my Lindsay Letters money on Eva and shopping at Anthropologie. So that's an important thing to know—and I guess that's the advice I have for other people starting businesses—is that you're not going to have enough money to quit your job until you quit your job.

I think it's such a total myth, and it's expected for women specifically, especially women that are home with their children, to think, “okay, once my kids are in bed or taking naps or in between everything else I have to do, starting at 9pm, I'm going to try to make \$30,000 a year and then it's a real thing” or “I'm going to work all day and come home and sew handkerchiefs at night and then hopefully make enough money to prove to my spouse or myself that I can quit my job.” That will never happen! That's silly to think that that's possible.

Q. What role does your faith play in the art you create?

A. I don't think that I can separate my faith at all. There's a story behind every piece. And I feel like in this business, for all of us, I speak on behalf of my entire team, you can't separate out our spiritual lives from our work lives.

I also feel like creating work is one of the only ways I can be worshipful these days. I don't know how, but I can't sing a lot of the songs that I used to be able to sing with confidence, but I know all of that will come back. I can't wait to be able to participate in church like I used to be able to. I attend worship services out of obedience, but the way that I worship now, or the way that I know God is real is in part because I look at something I make, and I know that deep in my soul, it came from Him. I know it's powered by the gift that He's given me. I feel like this is my act of worship. I really do believe that it's helpful to people, and that might be silly, but I believe it.

Q. You write on your website that as a person who struggles with anxiety, you're keenly aware of the importance of the things you surround yourself with, and art is no exception to that rule. Talk to me about how you've noticed that play out in your own life and your hope for the art that you put out into the world.

A. It doesn't matter that you have an amazing Victorian home with crown molding, and you paid more money than you should have for it. It's not about it being clean or fancy or expensive, but when you put some art, like a song or something you read, and it hits you, I think it provides people with a bright spot in their day, and I think that matters.

I remember being a new mom and being in Eva's nursery. I had the worst time nursing and felt like I was doing such a bad job, but I loved how I had decorated her nursery—it was just so cute! Of course, it didn't make up for my shortcomings, but it made me happy, and it made me feel like I was deciding the tone of the environment that she was going to be in for as long as I could, and that felt like it mattered.

It's almost like how you style your space is like a meeting agenda: this is what I would like for this place to feel like. I'm not in control of everybody's temper or everybody's mood in this space, even my own all the time. I'm not in control of all of the other things that happen in here. But this is me telling my home how I want it to feel and function and then using it as a barometer to gauge how it's going. *Does it feel peaceful, does it feel comfy and cozy, does it feel energetic and happy, how does that feel?* It helps you resettle into what your intentions were going to be. And that makes me feel like I'm doing something good for the world.

Q. Every year, you release a seasonal holiday collection. The holidays are quickly approaching—tell us about your 2021 Christmas collection.

A. Other years for our Christmas collection, I feel like I've considered all the things that every other person could want, but this year, we specifically decided to create a collection full of things that I want to put on my walls. It's called Cottage Christmas, and I wanted it to feel very nostalgic, familiar, and cozy. As people are starting to figure out what life looks like post-covid and timidly step one foot out into the world again, we wanted to create a Christmas collection that feels warm, cozy and comfortable.

It's interesting too, because I feel like people are un-decorating a lot more for Christmas. So instead of going out and buying all the themey things, they're using things like sprigs of

evergreen and little twinkle lights. It's really great, but my challenge has been to make that into art. So that's what I tried to do in this collection.

Our creative team makes a mood board for each art collection. What we are doing is using spaces, items and textures to inform the art. We're not trying to create art for the people who own the idyllic snowy Christmas cottage with an ice rink out front. What we're trying to do is to put how that experience makes you feel—the nostalgia and warmth—into a painting, so that the people who live in a mid-city apartment or a warm southern climate can purchase the art that makes them feel that way.

So that's what we try to do at Christmas. I hope you see a painting and think, *Oh, it's cozy here. It feels familiar here.*

Q. You offer a wide variety of hand-lettered prints and canvases, as well as art, calendars, shirts, printables, and now candles. Tell me about how your product offerings have expanded over the years, and how you decide what to carry in your shop.

A. We recently released our candles, and they're doing really well so far. I hope they do great; not because they're that profitable, but because they just add to the whole experience. We're so excited to be able to offer those!

Art is so great, and the main love around here, but we've developed such a faithful following of Lindsay Letters fans, and you can run out of wall space. That's the main motivating factor—you can run out of space! We know that art can be an intimidating thing to buy as a gift, and so we want our clients to become life-long clients. A way to do that is to give them other product options and ways to support our small business. We call our customers clients, because it feels so individual, and we want them to be life-long clients.

I don't want to create a tension where you feel like you have to replace your art all the time. I hope you buy a canvas, put it on your wall, and love it so much that you never want to change it. That's my hope as an artist, but also a terrible business model, which is another reason I wanted to diversify my portfolio.

My mother-in-law is my biggest fan, and I remember going to her apartment back when I was mostly doing word art, and she had my art everywhere. There were words EVERYWHERE. It was totally overwhelming. I had to cut her off completely. That's one of the reasons I tried to expand into doing some vintage pieces, typography and different styles of painting and illustration... I want it to create offerings so that clients who want to be life-long clients can do that without having to buy more of the same thing. They want more of the same customer experience and quality, but with something different. So that's why the expansion of art, and different styles of art, and calendars, but also the expansion of other gifts and goodies. We have pillows and blankets, and this Christmas we're doing tea towels, a mug, candles, some vinyl stickers, some foil and letterpress art prints.

I also think that providing customization options in terms of colors, sizes and framing is a gift that we want to give to people that are coming to shop with us. They do get to make it their own. The frames are important to us because I don't want to give anybody a project to do. When I was just selling art prints, my good friend said that she'd never buy an art print because that

meant she then had to go get a frame for it. And I hadn't thought about it that way, but that was the basis of offering framed art prints. If you trust me and my business and liking my art, then I'm going to offer it to you in different ways, so that you can pick the best fit for your home.

And not every day is a 24x30 canvas day; not every situation needs that. That's why we also like to offer options for quick gifts that you only want to spend \$10 on. It's one-stop shopping that we can offer uniquely to people. There's nothing else you need to do, our art even comes with the nails you need to hang it.

We also started selling our mini prints this year, which are kind of like an introduction to art. They're canvas abstract minis, little tiny 8x10 canvases, available at a lower price point, and a way to offer people to "try" the art in their homes on a bookshelf. They're great for those people that are hesitant to put holes in their walls.

Q. What gets you excited to wake up in the morning and go to work? Why do you do what you do?

A. I love getting to create. I just love it. I love getting to create as a service. As an artist, I really, truly love thinking about the client first. Most everything I do is created with the client in mind. So I think that what helps me get up in the morning and gets me excited to do what I do is that I am really making artwork as a service to people. I get to make what they want to see in their homes and in their spaces, and so that feels really, really, really satisfying.

And then I love being able to support my family. My kids love that I'm an artist. I love that we talk about it. I love that I get to tell them that I dreamed of being this, and I get to be this. It's so cool, and I feel like it's amazing. It took hard work and a lot of faith and sacrifice, but I get to do it! And I want them to know that they can chase after their dreams, too.

I also love my work space. We call it The Girls House—it's downtown, so cute, and it's just so fun to get to work at a beautiful, fun, pink house with my friends. It's such a light; everyone that walks in the house just loves it. I wanted to create a space that people could come into and feel inspired. It's so fun to get to wake up everyday and go to The Girls House and just focus on fun, pretty things and people. I just love it. It's exactly what I would have ever dreamed to get to do.