



## *Judy Martin*

### GIFTED & GRACIOUS

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"You know when you bite into a cookie, and you get, like, two chocolate chips? Well, I use double the amount of chocolate chips. And butter. I only use real butter."

No, this wasn't the reason we went to Judy and Steve Bennett's home in Grinnell, Iowa, but we weren't the type of folks to turn down freshly-baked, extra-chocolate-chippy cookies. It's hard to recall exactly how the conversation turned to cookies, but before we knew it, a batch was in the oven and would be waiting for us when we returned from Judy's quilting design studio, which was right upstairs. By the end of our visit, sure we got to know Judy Martin (the name she's known by in the quilting world) the quilter, but we also got to know Judy Bennett, the mother, wife, baker and board game designer. Yes, *board game designer*.

"I work on lots of things at one time," Judy explains. "Right now I'm working on a book on Lone Stars, and my husband told me I have to make a traditional one." Understandably, she doesn't want her new designs revealed until the book is released, but she is happy to share some thoughts on her design process. "For this one here, I was having trouble finding nine fabrics of one color, so I went with ombré fabric, but I cut it out in diamonds, and it turned out to be exactly what it was before I cut it out." Coming to the realization that one's laborious creation ended up just as it was before might have driven some quilters mad, but Judy's take on it was







Judy works from her home studio on projects for upcoming books.

much more level-headed. "I ended up re-making it with fabrics from my stash, and that looked much better," she says.

Judy admits to being a perfectionist, and her logical, mathematical reasoning shows through in her work. But she's perhaps best known for her nuanced, imaginative quilt designs—a dichotomy not lost on her. "My family is one of creatives and scientists," she says. "My sister is literally a rocket scientist. She and her husband both work for NASA." While Judy may not study moon rocks like her sister, she is an expert in her field. She's written over twenty instructional quilting books, with

another in the works, and has published over one thousand quilt blocks. Her quilts hang in museums throughout the country and her single-artist show will open this summer at the Iowa Quilt Museum. Through the years she has become a household name in the quilting world, with her peak of notoriety occurring during her time with *Quilters Newsletter*, where she was the editor and designer from 1979 to 1987. "I was a little worried that I wouldn't get the job because I typed about thirty words per minute with thirty mistakes," she joked, "but when they came out with correcting tape, I wasn't as nervous and did much better."



Top Left: Quilter, baker, board game designer? Quilt Show is a hit for quilters and non-quilters alike. Below: Covers of Judy's published books line her studio walls.







Judy shows Rebekah the pressing details on the reverse side of her Lone Star quilt top.



Judy uses specific methods for seam allowance and piecing for flawless accuracy. She presses the outer seam of the diamond sections clockwise to fit the Y-seams together perfectly without bulk.





### *Achieving goals together*

This is the thing with Judy. Not only is she exceptionally bright, she's hilarious. For that matter, so is her husband Steve. They are the best kind of funny, the quick-witted, deadpan, Mark Twain type of funny. Steve, an English major, helped Judy create her website, and you can't read the "Getting to Know Judy Martin" page without laughing out loud. For example: "If there were a village named after me, it would be a place that's off the beaten path; a place more beautiful than most; a place where all the laws and rules are founded on common sense; a place where anyone can achieve their goals if only they take the time to get their seam allowances right."

Sitting at the dining room table with our hot-from-the-oven, ooey-gooley-uber-messy cookies and tall glasses of milk, we delve into the topic of achieving goals, something that Judy and Steve, be it through seam allowances or innate trust in themselves and each other, know a thing or two about.

"I was working in my family's furniture store, and we had sold the stores to someone else," Steve recalls. "I stayed on for a year to help with the transition, and suddenly, you're working for someone else. The year was 1987, and it was the longest year of my life."

After Steve left the store, Judy came to the realization that she, too, was at a crossroads in her career. The constant deadlines of the job grew stressful. "She was putting out fire after fire," Steve recalled. Judy decided to leave her job too. "We had a little money saved up from the sale of the store, but what sustained us was this unshakeable belief in ourselves and the notion that 'If you build it, they will come,'" the quote made famous by Shoeless Joe in the film *Field of Dreams*. Judy wrote her first book of quilt block patterns, aptly titled *Judy Martin's Quilt Block Patterns*, and she and Steve worked to publish and sell it. Since that first book, Judy has worked to write a steady stream of instructional quilting books.



Below: Judy's husband Steve Bennett, son Will, and daughter Kate.



### *The challenges*

"I had my career, and then I had my kids," explains Judy. "We weren't going to have kids," adds Steve. "We had seen how that had tied other people down. We didn't want that to happen. But then one day we thought, 'What do these people know that we don't? What do they have that we don't?'" With a change of heart and open minds, the two made the decision to have children, and over the next two years, they found themselves parents to a toddler, Will, and new baby, Kate. As their family grew, Judy and Steve's emphasis on their business gave way to their commitment to raising their children, a decision compounded by the fact that Kate was born with Down Syndrome and required extra care and attention, at times with the most basic of needs. "Very early on, Kate couldn't figure out how to suckle," Judy recalls. "We had to find a special nipple, and Steve and I would take turns feeding her every two hours, but it took her an hour and a half to finish a bottle. Steve was so helpful during those times." For the next twenty-plus years, the two worked as a team—Judy did the writing, Steve, the business management—while working together to raise their children.

When Steve was hospitalized last year for a month after suffering a major stroke, the business that they had built together was temporarily derailed. "My writing got put on hold," Judy said. "I had to do his job because it wouldn't wait." As Steve rehabilitated, Judy concentrated on getting orders shipped, the accounting squared, and keeping the momentum swinging forward, but it was the longest stretch she'd gone between books. "Even when the kids were little I was putting out a book nearly every year."





"Capistrano" from Judy's book *Stellar Quilts*. Stitch-in-the-ditch and free motion feathering give the stars a geometric structure and playful movement in the negative space without distracting from the quilt piecing.








## Family First

"At every turn where we've had to make a choice between business or family, we choose family," Steve says. "If that means we don't go to Market one year because we'd be missing something that we should be doing for the family, we don't go to Market." It's clear to us that family—their children and each other—is the priority, even at the expense of their business. But as Steve explains it, it's not so much a sacrifice as it is second nature. "We have always tried to put our family first, and at times it has cost us, but it's not been a decision we've ever regretted."

For two people who didn't initially plan on having children, they sure are proud of theirs. "Even when Kate was little, she was way ahead in reading," Judy explains. "She can memorize anything, and she had a huge vocabulary." Now grown, Kate works at the Grinnell College dining hall, and is the manager for the school volleyball team. "She goes to practice every day and helps gather the balls for the players," says Steve. She lives just down the street from her parents, and like many twenty-somethings, she visits

nearly every day with laundry in tow. Their son Will is a musician, and his band, Will Bennett and the Tells, just released their first album and are beginning to make a name for themselves in the alt-country music scene. Steve gets emotional when he talks about the relationship between Will and his sister. "He's the perfect brother for a girl with Down Syndrome," he says. "He's constantly looking out for her in a way you hope your kids will do, but you don't know if they will, until they do."

It was an emotional ending to the conversation that had stretched over three hours, and as our team drove away, we feared that the topic had ventured too far away from our original focus of Judy Martin, the quilter, and instead, revolved more around the Bennetts, the family. In the end, we decided that they were one and the same, and that the very things that made Judy an extraordinary wife and mother were the same things that made her an amazing quilt designer, with an ability to piece together life's puzzle to create something beautiful. 

## Rocky Road to Kansas

PEANUT BUTTER-CHOCOLATE-MARSHMALLOW BARS  
CONCOCTED BY JUDY MARTIN

### FOR THE SHORTBREAD BASE

- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup butter (1½ sticks), slightly softened
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup brown sugar, packed
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups flour

### FOR THE TOP LAYER

- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup butter (1 stick), slightly softened
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup peanut butter
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup powdered sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup brown sugar, packed
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 egg, slightly beaten
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- $1\frac{1}{4}$  cups miniature marshmallows
- $1\frac{1}{4}$  cups chocolate chips
- 1 cup roasted, salted peanuts

### FOR THE SHORTBREAD BASE

Preheat the oven to 350°F(180°C). Clear out last month's leftovers to make space if you have to, and place a cooling rack in the refrigerator.

Measure all of the shortbread base ingredients except the flour into a mixing bowl. Mix until the dough is even and all butter flecks are incorporated.

Add the flour and mix on low speed until the flour is sufficiently mixed that it will no longer fling itself all over the place. Increase the speed to medium and mix until the dough begins to collect in bigger clumps.

(The clumps will get smaller before getting bigger.) Press the dough evenly into the bottom of an ungreased metal 9" x 13" pan.

Place the pan in the center of the oven and bake for 15 minutes. The edges should be beginning to brown.

Leave the oven on. Put the pan on the rack that you placed in the refrigerator. Let it cool for 10–15 minutes while you make the top layer.

### FOR THE TOP LAYER

Measure the first 5 ingredients for the top layer into a mixing bowl. (If you scraped the bowl you used for the base, you don't have to wash it before reusing it for the top layer. I know I wouldn't.) Mix on medium speed until the dough is even and all butter flecks are incorporated.

Add the egg. Beat on medium speed until mixed in.

Measure the flour and baking soda into a separate bowl. Stir to mix the two. Pour this into the mixing bowl with the other ingredients. Mix briefly on low speed until the flour is nearly all incorporated.

Scrape down the bowl and the mixing blade.

Measure the marshmallows, chocolate chips, and peanuts into the mixing bowl. Fold these into the batter by hand using a wooden spoon or rubber spatula.

Spread the topping evenly over the cooled base.

Place the pan back in the center of the oven and bake for 15–18 minutes. The cookie should be dry on the top, and the marshmallows should be golden. Okay, now you can turn off the oven.

Cool the bars completely on a wire rack and cut into squares or rectangles to serve. If you are rushed, you can cool them in the fridge, as you did with the base.

If you just can't wait for the bars to cool (or if you can't resist a warm-from-the-oven treat), you can let the bars cool until the pan is still warm, but it is cool enough to touch. Then cut a piece from the corner or several along the edge. Wait until the bars are completely cooled to cut the rest. Be prepared to eat the warm bars with a fork: they will be almost like pie and deliciously gooey!