

BY Mary Fons

Erin Harris

AND HER HOUSE ON THE HILL

Erin Harris is on a mission. She hasn't explicitly stated it, but she is clearly determined to make sure every person in her immediate family, extended family, and maybe the rest of the neighborhood has their own quilt.

She's made progress. Steady quilting for more than 13 years has put a lot of quilts on beds, but hers is a never-ending quest. Cutting, sewing, and pressing have begun again in the studio, since 8-year-old niece Evelyn has requested a birthday quilt. (She probably didn't need to ask.)

Perched on the sofa in the kelly-green drawing room of her 1911 house in Louisville, Erin Harris is fit and chipper as she shares her story. Much of the conversation centers on what she sees as her most important role, that of loving matriarch to her family. That family consists of two young-adult daughters, husband Fatty, and a sleepy cat.

Dedicated quilter and mother Erin Harris at home in Louisville.





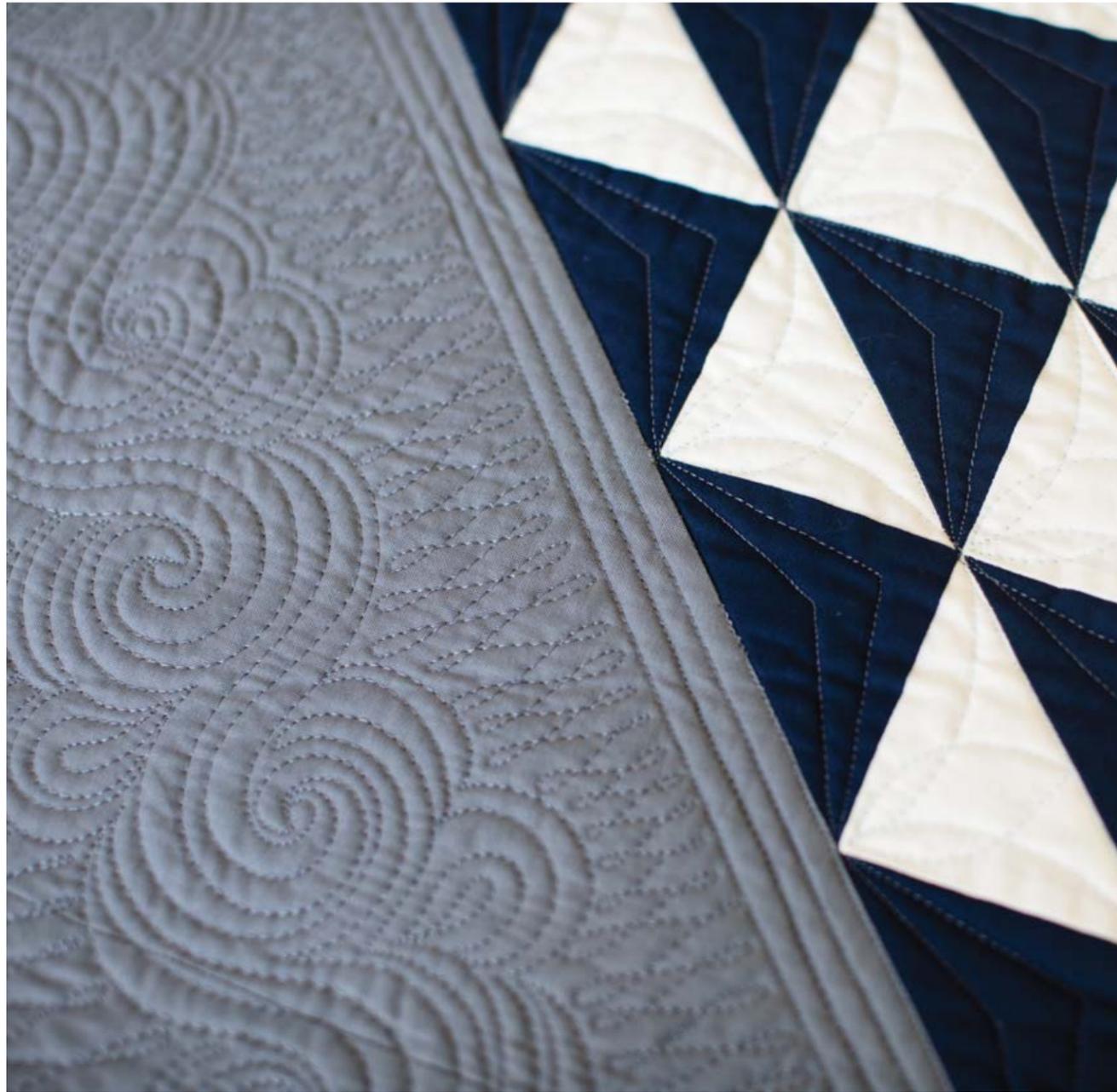
ABOVE: Detail of *Summer Skies*, a quilt made by Harris for her book *Make Your Own Medallion*. Quilted by Natalia Bonner.
 OPPOSITE: *Summer Skies* soaks up the sunlight in Harris's cheery home.

She loves her adopted state now, but Erin Harris admits she was wary when she and her husband left Chicago for Kentucky to join River City Distributing, the family's beer distribution company. Moving from the country's third-largest city to modest Louisville (the US's 29th largest) was likely going to feel like moving to a small town. But she was surprised how quickly her feelings changed. Harris's family grew to love the place for its cultural offerings and good schools, but also precisely because it did feel more like a small town.

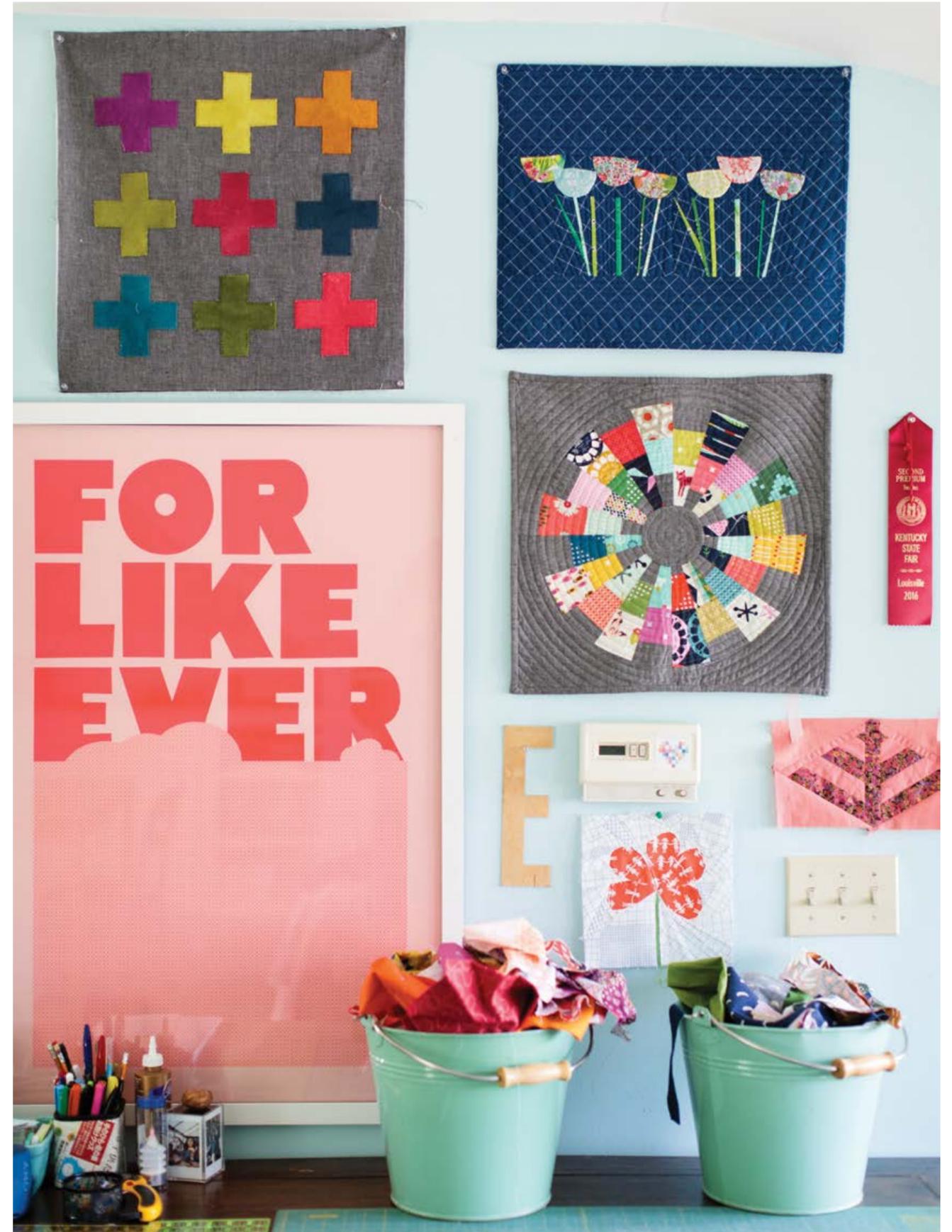
While her husband worked to grow the family business, Harris stayed home with the girls and looked for ways to save money for the household. She decided to dust off the sewing skills she had learned way back in home economics and sew clothes for her daughters. Rather than purchase home decor items, she sewed those too. Once the family was on more stable financial ground,

the sewing studio could become a place for more experimentation and play. Harris embraced the opportunity, and she knew exactly what would take over her laboratory: quilts. In the process of making that first quilt, a diehard was born. Harris told us that after she embraced quilting, everything else she sewed "felt dumb."

What some people now call "the quilt internet" — the millions of quilters and quilt lovers connected by Facebook, Instagram, etc. — didn't exist in the early 2000s. Facebook wouldn't go mainstream for another four years, and Instagram was a whole decade away. Blogging was in its infancy too, but it was the blogs that arguably started it all for those quilters who were online. Early quilt blogs like *Film in the Fridge*, *Oh, Fransson!*, and *Harris's House on Hill Road* established the beginnings of the quilt internet. These URLs became landing spots for quilters looking for connection, inspiration, and instruction.



ABOVE: Detail of Harris's quilt *Centerpiece*, quilted by Angela Walters. **OPPOSITE:** The designer surrounds herself with color and modern quilts at home, especially in her tidy and spacious sewing studio.





CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: A Double Wedding Ring quilt made by Harris's grandmother-in-law; embroidery hoops in the sewing studio; relaxing in a sitting room colorful enough for a quilter.



Harris's modern taste shines in *Centerpiece*, with its contrasting solids and geometric quilting.

Like other quilt blog pioneers, Harris was savvy about the power of the internet to create opportunities. She knew that from the comfort of her own home, while she raised her girls and made improvements to her dream house, her blog could work for her. She worked hard on the blog too, posting sparkly, friendly content and accessible how-tos. There were also irresistible patterns offered for free, which quilters loved. Companies that sold patterns scrambled to deal with the growing new model of free content, but they knew that more quilters were headed online and that the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" approach was wise. Harris's content was popular and her work high quality, so book publishers and magazines soon came calling to collaborate on commercial projects.

Dozens of published patterns and two published

books (one of which, *Make Your Own Medallion*, has been widely praised for its simple approach to sewing advanced medallion quilts) prove that a quilter in pursuit of commercial goals can reach them. It takes persistence, as any successful quilt industry figure can tell you. An aesthetic point of view is important as well, and this is one of Harris's strengths. When you look at her quilts, you see simple shapes used in the construction of complex designs and a consistent color palette of perky colors like teal and bubblegum pink. You see the touch of a designer who knows her own style and can communicate it well.

Harris set a second example too: how to figure out a solid side hustle while raising a family. No home, on a hill or in a valley, is complete without a quilt. And right now, Erin Harris is in her Louisville studio, on a mission to do her best work.