

COPPER BIT BOUTIQUE

With a love of small-town life and horses, Michele Barkhurst wants her store to be a welcoming community space

by Christine Knapp



Owner Michele Barkhurst with her horse, Rebel. Photo by M.E. Lucas Photography

There's something about the crisp fall air; the mane of a horse; the smell of a farm; the white picket fence wrapped around an open field with a red barn nestled in the distance. They are all evocative of the small Iowa town where Michele Barkhurst grew up and found the passion that eventually led her to start her business, the Copper Bit Boutique.

"Ever since I was 18 years old, I wanted to own my own business," Michele says, beaming. "I got my first horse, Sandy, when I was eight years old. In the country, we had a tack store. You walked in, and it smelled like leather--new, fresh and clean. I picked out my first saddle there, and I was so proud of it. I want to give that same experience to others. By opening this store, I'm basically going

back to my roots."

The Copper Bit Boutique is a western bohemian-chic boutique. The inspiration for the store comes from this military veteran's childhood memories of farm life (such as chasing after chickens and goats with her playmates), of her travels, and her love of horses.

"I'm a Western rider," Michele laughs. "I love everything about the clothing associated with that style of riding: the fringe, the turquoise colors, the bell-bottoms with intricate designs and the cowboy rags. I just love it!"



A sampling of clothing available from CopperBitBoutique.com

Tired of chain department stores that offer the same brands of jeans and shirts, Michele set out to find designers and jewelry makers with specific styles that suited her tastes. The Copper Bit Boutique offers a wide variety of clothes, equestrian riding gear, leather goods, bold accent pieces, and more.

"The idea for the boutique came from my frustration with shopping," Michele declares. "I'm tall, and the jeans were never long enough. The quality was never great. The items were overpriced. So I set out to change that."

"I visited antique stores and started talking with people about what I wanted to do," she continues. "They asked me questions, and before I knew it, one thing led to another, and I opened my store online with a small amount of inventory."

Plans are set to open the first Copper Bit Boutique storefront in Camden, North Carolina in the coming months. It will be an extension of her already established online business. Michele's love for agriculture, animals and the outdoors will be on display front and center, with a unique blend of small-town and Boho-chic sensibilities permeating the shop.

"People are going to walk into my store and see something different, unique, quirky, and fun," she says excitedly. "I want to provide my customers with the kind of warm, down-home service that will have them leaving the store with a smile while looking forward to coming back soon. Camden is a smaller town, so I'd like to get to know each person who comes through my door. I want people to feel the vibe of this store: low key, laid back, and rustic."

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I want to bring people together."**

- Michele Barkhurst

She also wants people to know that shopping can be a more personalized experience.

"I'd love for a customer to sit down and talk with me, explain their ideal dress or shirt, and let me help them find the perfect piece," Michele continues. "Whether it's the parent looking for boots for the child who just started riding lessons or a woman looking for a new fall sweater or pair of pants with a little Western flare, I can help. As for the merchandise, I'm going to keep changing things up. I might keep top-sellers in the store, but there will be a continuous change of products, so customers visiting the store regularly will always see something new."

Michele's background, which included activity in the local 4H Club during her younger years, was the foundation of her love of the agricultural world and her small-town aesthetic sensibility. Raising animals instilled in her a sense of responsibility. Learning to ride and care for horses taught her the importance of discipline. Through her store and online business, she hopes to convey to others the importance of those principles.

"What many people may not realize is how important horse advocacy is to me," Michele says. "In the store, I'd like to set up a display that promotes adopting horses. Helping to prevent cruelty and the exploitation of horses is a cause that is very near and dear to my heart. My most recent horse, Rebel, truly saved my life. A relationship with a horse- caring for one, riding one- can be very therapeutic. We have to help protect these magnificent creatures."

Having served in the United States Navy as an Interior Communication Electrician, Michele is also committed to providing support to military personnel who are struggling to live with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Convinced that time spent with horses can be therapeutic, she would like to one day sponsor a program through which abused or rescued horses could be paired with veterans dealing with PTSD or children living with disabilities.

"I want my life to have a positive impact on the world," Michele insists. "I want my store to also provide a welcoming space for the community. I have plans to host 'Sip and Paints' and 4H fundraisers. I would love to host seminars for veterinarians and bring people together who share common interests."

Michele is also open to collaborations with artists, photographers, jewelers, and anyone wanting to make a difference.

"Remember, I grew up in the country where you talk to your neighbors, you talk to strangers, and you want to help people out," Michele concludes. "I think the world is getting so impersonal. People are feeling so separate from one another, so I want to bring people together. I'm always open to any new idea that can help make that happen!"

Copper Bit Boutique

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