

FASHION

These boots are made for walking and virtually everything else – Danielle models her handiwork.



BEST FOOT FORWARD

GORWING UP ON A FARM WAS THE PERFECT PREPARATION FOR DANIELLE HOLLOWAY'S SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS: CREATING STYLISH AND PRACTICAL RAIN BOOTS.

WORDS HANNAH JAMES PHOTOGRAPHY SHELLEY PRICE

THERE ARE TWO THINGS YOU KNOW for sure if you grew up on a farm. First, you never get anywhere if you don't work hard – really hard. And second, you always need weatherproof boots: having wet feet makes the hard work harder. That's where Merry People comes in.

Danielle Holloway grew up amid the rolling green hills of South Gippsland, Victoria, on a working farm in Nerrena – and she certainly received the 'work hard' message loud and clear. "I'm the second of four children and we all had jobs to do," she says. "My friends would come home from school and watch cartoons – their day was over. But we'd often do farm work or help around the house."

It was in her 20s, though, rushing to work every morning in Melbourne, that the second lesson really imprinted on her mind. "My office was in the Docklands, which is a really cold and wet area," Danielle explains. "My stockings were continually getting wet, and I knew I needed a cool pair of little waterproof boots that I could wear into the office without looking like I was on the farm."

The idea of making fashionable, versatile gumboots had crossed Danielle's mind years before, when she was going to muddy music festivals with her friends. But by the time she was beginning to seriously consider it again in 2014, she had been working as a project manager for ANZ Bank for years and had acquired the business and management skills to create her dream.

"I thought, 'I'll just see if I can do this as a little side project,' and started writing a business plan and researching materials and factories," says the 35-year-old. She says the name Merry People came from the happy feeling she gets when wearing gumboots. "If you're wearing gumboots, you're doing something happy – working in the garden, at the park with your kids, walking the dog. It doesn't matter that it's raining. You're a fun, practical person who's just getting on with it." But after two years of juggling work and Merry People, it became clear she had to quit her job: "I decided it wasn't going to grow unless I gave this all of me." A timely redundancy meant she could work on Merry People full-time – a decision that was eased by the fact she had >



Funky and functional footwear from Merry People. **BELOW** Danielle with her fiancé Nick Pearce and their labrador Sadie.




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realised she needed more meaning in her life. At the bank, she says, “I was doing well and earning great money, but I felt I was just buying more things, becoming more consumerist. I’m fortunate to be able to say this, but I realised it didn’t matter how much money they paid me – I felt like I was losing myself. I just wanted more for my life.”

Boosted by the knowledge she had loving parents back home on the farm who would always take her back if her business failed, Danielle set out to sell her boots at every farmers’ market she could find. “It was hard driving out to markets and unloading and setting up by myself, but I got to talk to customers all day, which was awesome,” she remembers. “It was probably one of the best things I did, because it taught me so much about my customer – who she is, why she buys Merry People, what questions she’s asking.” All that in-depth knowledge meant that when Danielle won a place at Monash University’s start-up program for entrepreneurs, The Generator, her business was soon booming.

Merry People’s team of eight people has now expanded to the US and the UK, and Danielle has become a mentor herself through Startup Gippsland. As a woman, and particularly as one of the few women of colour in Nerrena when she was growing up (her mother is Indian), it’s an important role, she says. “I wanted to show younger women that women can start a business and be CEOs and hire people. I didn’t see a lot of that growing up, and it can be difficult in the country – you don’t always have the same opportunities as in the city. So I really wanted to show that it can be done.”

And soon Danielle will have another important role – her first baby is due at the end of July. And one thing’s certain: the newest little Merry Person will always have cosy toes. 
Merry People, (03) 7019 4229, merrypeople.com