



Levine at her booth during the first Art vs. Craft fair at Turner Hall in November 2004. In the foreground are her signature messenger owls, which were featured on the HGTV show "That's Clever." MKE FILE PHOTO BY PETER DIANTONI

How Faythe Levine became a craft-making superstar

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PHOTO BY C. TAYLOR

It's hard not to lionize Faythe Levine.

When you get down to it, maybe the 29-year-old artist is really a cat, and she's living all her nine lives at once.

She's co-owned Paper Boat Boutique and Gallery for two years. She founded a craft fair, Art vs. Craft, in 2004. She's the director-producer of the documentary "Handmade Nation: The Rise of D.I.Y. Art, Craft and Design," set for release in 2008. A publisher just greenlighted an illustrated companion book that will be released with the movie.

She plays the musical saw for the band Wooden Robot. She's a photographer, painter, craft-maker and businesswoman.

If this Milwaukee transplant (by way of Seattle, then Minneapolis) did only one of these things, she would still be worth writing about. But she does all of them.

All at once, while working at Hi-Fi Cafe two days a week.

How does she do it? Levine says keeping busy is her nature — "I just don't know how to live any other way."

MKE gives you a step-by-step guide to how she got to where she is.

Step 1

Be born to self-starters and inherit their work ethic.

Levine's mother owns an organic dairy in Washington state. Her father is an astrologer and author who writes horoscopes for Web sites such as MySpace and AOL. Having good examples — who are also incredibly supportive, she says — means a lot to her. "They both work really hard in their fields, and they are why I do what I do," she said.

Step 2

Develop myriad talents.

"A lot of us makers (Levine's word for artists and crafters) have made stuff our entire lives," she said. Lanyards and friendship bracelets were examples of Levine juvenalia.

Growing up in Seattle in the '90s, Levine honed her DIY aesthetic. "Being a part of punk community was always about doing it yourself, altering your own clothes," she said. "It was my gateway into the craft world."

Her immersion in the punk community also enabled her to make important connections. She knows Modest Mouse singer Isaac Brock from house shows. Levine's best friend, Andrea Zollo, is the lead singer of Pretty Girls Make Graves. (Interesting trivia: PGMG's song "Modern Day Emma Goldman" is dedicated to Levine.)

"Instead of doctors and lawyers, all of my peers became musicians and artists," she said. "Ten years later, they've gotten to be famous."

Step 3

Move to a mid-sized city receptive to new artists.

After high school, Levine skipped college and began traveling, taking pictures and meeting creative people along the way. Drawn to the low cost of living in the Midwest, she ended up in Milwaukee in 2001.

"At first I wasn't going to stay, but then I stumbled upon this incredible live/workspace, which was too cheap to not take," she said. She also met her boyfriend, Call Me Lightning singer-guitarist Nathan Lilley. He became the reason Levine stayed in Mil-

waukee. Still, "I realized there are things that aren't happening in this city that I need to have happen for me to live here. So I made them happen," she said.

Step 4

Make your own scene.

The decision to create Art vs. Craft was one of those things. By 2003, right after joining the Chicago Renegade Craft Fair, Levine became consumed by the world of indie craft. She knew a similar event would be well-received by the Milwaukee arts community.

"I love Milwaukee, it's great, and I want people to realize it's not this Midwest pit," she paused. "You can have a supportive arts community without being in New York and Chicago."

Her Flying Fish Gallery in Riverwest established her local reputation, which led her to coordinating the first Art vs. Craft in 2004. Her connections from the craft and music community also helped, as vendors came from all over: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York. Last year's fall event drew 2,000 attendees; this year, more than 3,000 are expected.

Brent Gohde, who heads the arts group Cedar Block and is marketing director at WMSE-FM (91.7), attests to Levine's dedication to the city. "With her connections to that scene on a national level, she brings in artists from around the country to Milwaukee. This puts the city in a positive light, and instead of artists leaving town to find work, it might even bring a few here to live."

Step 5

Invest in where you live.

Putting up an actual shop was another thing Levine needed to do to establish herself and settle down in Milwaukee.

