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MEET AMBER LAFORET

Spreading Warmth One Blanket At A Time



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Amber with her fiancé, Joel, on the side of the road in Idaho.

Photo by Amber Laforet

By Thomas Fitzgerald

Amber Laforet could not wait to get started in life. She decided to make her arrival a surprise to her mom a full six-weeks before her due date. Born at her home located down the road from the iconic Hollywood sign, Amber was delivered breech by a country doctor summonsed to the house after an emergency phone call. She was four lbs., jaundiced, and her mother held her close for 10 days. Her mom named her Amber, after her coloring.

"I feel like since birth I've been jumping into things backwards and just ready to get started!"

While attending Colin McEwen High School, a tutorial studies institution in Malibu designed for students to work at their own pace – many of her classmates were either children of celebrities or famous

themselves – Amber, "influenced by a friend who was a model," signed with Prima modeling agency and became a model as well. This turned out to be a short-lived endeavor.

After quickly growing tired of the industry's notorious nitpicking and critiquing a model's appearance, she quit after six months.

"I was vulnerable and hated being in front of the camera," explains Amber. "My natural demeanor is not enjoying attention from others. I prefer creating something and having the tangible result of my work get the attention, not me."

Self-describing as "shy," Amber remembers playing the role of a toy soldier in the



Amber wrapped up in one of her Vintage Kantha Fuzz blankets on the beach at 27th Street in Manhattan Beach.

Photo by Sarah Lefton, Road Home

Nutcracker when she was in kindergarten. "I turned my back toward the audience during my entire performance," she says. "The experience was a bit mortifying."

A preference to be "on the other side of camera" came at the chagrin of the photographers she worked with while modeling. "I annoyed my photographers by always asking them to let me see what they were doing," says Amber, who purchased her first camera at 17 after she quit modeling and graduated high school early.

With little skill and essentially no experience, an ambitious Amber walked into a high-end custom black-and-white photo lab on La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles and had the daring to ask the owner for a job. When the proprietor asked her how much experience she had with photography or operating a 35mm camera, Amber honestly replied, "none."

Amber aimed high and found herself at the right place at the right time. "The photo lab owner told me to take a basic photography class and come back when I completed it," says Amber, who subsequently enrolled for one at Santa Monica City College. "When I returned to the photo lab, I got the job."

She met many of the industry's top photographers while working at that photo lab and took advantage of the priceless situation by constantly "picking their brain at every opportunity," recalls Amber. "They would let me study their negatives at the light table, and that is how I first learned about photography."

Confident, capable, and with invaluable OJT, after two years on the job, Amber left Hollywood and moved east. After spending about six months working as a personal assistant to a stock hedger in New York City and Connecticut, she relinquished to her sense of adventure and relocated, alone, to Prague, a city in the Czech Republic.

"I had heard that there were castles there," says Amber, who brought with her 100 rolls of HP5 medium format film and her Pentax 6x7 camera. "It was the 90s and artist friends who had gone were comparing Prague to Paris in the 20s – magical. I just had to go"

The Berlin Wall fell in November 1989 and the Cold War ended in 1991 with the

dissolution of the USSR. On January 1, 1993, the Czech Republic became one of two nascent, independent nations – the other new sovereign is Slovakia – carved out of what was previously Czechoslovakia, a Soviet Union Cold War ally located behind the former "Iron Curtain."

While Amber was photographing gypsy children in Eastern Europe, serendipity struck again, this time in the form of a fortuitous encounter with a photojournalist that shared "a stack of life-changing photography books" authored by Dave Labelle, a professor at Western Kentucky University (WKU). Reading these books inspired Amber to attend college at WKU and major in photojournalism.

After four months in Europe, Amber relocated back to the states to stay with her grandparents in New York City and two weeks later found herself in the Admission's office at WKU in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

"My grandmother (now 95 years old) flew with me to visit the school. I remember it was pouring rain and we were sitting in the airport and I was getting very nervous about what I was signing myself up for. I said to my grandma, 'It is a dangerous profession, grandma. I would be travelling to war-torn areas... I just don't know...'" She looked me straight in the eyes, shrugged her hands, and said with a Brooklyn accent, "If you die, you die!" We laughed until tears rolled down our faces."

Impeccable timing allowed her to enroll at WKU's esteemed photojournalism program just in time to begin attending the fall semester two-weeks later as a 21-year-old college freshman with real-world, life experience.

One of Amber's most rewarding university experiences was a summer internship that morphed into a one-year internship in St. Petersburg, Florida, at the *St. Petersburg Times* newspaper. There, Amber learned about visual story telling from then managing picture editor, mentor, and now longtime friend, Sue Morrow. "Sue edited and guided me through a year-long picture story I worked on of a 16-year-old runaway, named Angie."

Amber graduated at the top of her class at a time when there were predominantly more males than females enrolled in WKU's photojournalism program and in the field in general. She was honored by being named the Most-Accomplished Photojournalism Senior by the mentor and Director of the Program James Kenney.

She earned multiple awards for her portfolio and her runaway project, including William Randolph Hearst, College Photographer of the Year, and several World Press



A Vintage Kantha Full Fuzz blanket hanging in Amber's home natural light studio.

Photo by Amber Laforet

editing awards for an online magazine called *Handheld Magazine* that she launched with college peers.

After college, she landed a job at Corbis picture agency in New York City, working as a picture editor and multimedia producer.

She was married to Vincent Laforet, a staff photographer for the *New York Times*, who shared the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography. "We worked so much in those days, and he was always travelling," she remembers. She chose to put her career on hold to start a family and a month later, at 26 years old, was pregnant with their son, Noah.

Amber found creative ways to stay connected to photography by doing portfolio reviews for other photographers from their dining room table, producing film and photography projects with her husband, and portrait photography from



Amber holding her daughter, Eliana, amongst stacks of vintage kantha quilts just in from India.

Photo by Noah Laforet



Amber, Noah and Eliana in their patio at home.
Photo by Sarah Lefton, Road Home

to a friend and she surprised me by suggesting that we should team up and build headboards, and it just instantly grew from there," says Amber.

In 2012, Head Regal was born, and the company's very first customers were A-list celebrities amongst the likes of Beck and Marissa Ribisi, Julia Roberts, and Pink.

"Head Regal did well from the beginning, and we just went for it without knowing much about what we were getting ourselves into," says Amber, who hired her sewer, Matty, who she found on Craigslist, and who is still with the company today, 10-years later. Matty is one of her closest friends, and Amber says that the business could not survive without her.

Head Regal has never operated from a traditional brick-and-mortar storefront and today sells exclusively from a handful of small, women-run boutiques, direct-to-consumer via the internet.

their home studio. Although her marriage ended, Amber says she still finds Vincent's vast talents to have been inspirational.

Finally, after 15 years away from Los Angeles, Amber and her young family, Noah now 5, and Eliana, 5 weeks old, returned to Southern California, choosing Manhattan Beach to be the place they call "home."

She decided that having two small children and returning to work as a photojournalist or a picture editor was not the right lifestyle for her because she wanted to be there full time for her children.

"A photojournalist needs to be present when moments are happening in a person's life. I tried to go back to my roots after the divorce. I started a project on a single mom and actually brought my daughter with me and would make pictures with her on my hip in a sling, and it just didn't work," explains Amber. "I needed to figure something out."

Now a single mom living in a tiny Spanish casita on the North End of Manhattan Beach, Amber decided to purchase vintage textiles. "I began playing around and ended up making an upholstered headboard out of a vintage kantha. I showed my creation

The first boutique to display and sell Head Regal wares was BLVD, the contemporary lifestyle boutique located in the heart of Manhattan Beach. BLVD agreed to carry

Amber wrapped up in one of her Linen Jellyfish Full Fuzz blankets in Dusty Pink.

Photo by Sarah Lefton, Road Home



A stack of Vintage Kantha Fuzz blankets on the sand.
Photo by Amber Laforet

and sell Head Regal blankets a full six months prior to Amber's ability to deliver her product to the store. "BLVD gave me the confidence I needed," says Amber. "They kept their promise and still carry my blankets seasonally to this day."

This fall marks Head Regal's 10-year anniversary, and for the first time ever she will have a small space for private shoppers by appointment in the White Sands Design + Build building in El Segundo.

About four years into the venture, Amber bought out her business partner. Today, Head Regal still sells their signature product that got it all started - "The Vintage Kantha Full Fuzz blanket." A vintage kantha quilt is made from several layers of saris that are handstitched together with what is called the running stitch, originally handcrafted in India during the 1970s, and purchased from the families in India that own them.

"I go through thousands of photos of vintage quilts from my supplier in India and use my picture-editing skills to select the best ones. Each vintage blanket is a one-of-a-kind, special blanket with a nostalgic feel," reflects Amber, who still today enjoys taking photographs the old-fashioned way - with 35mm film. The company's expanded selection includes denim, linen tie dye, and other Head Regal-created fabrics all backed in what she calls the "softest fuzz ever," which is made out of recycled water bottles.

Year-round, Head Regal donates blankets to people in need and to Harvest Home LA, a shelter for pregnant women and newborns. "My kids have been very

involved and have delivered blankets directly to Harvest Home women for the past five years," says Amber. "The experience has helped me better instill in my children empathy and compassion for others."

Another beneficiary of Amber's charity is Deity Animal Rescue, an organization that saves dogs and other animals from death

row. Instead of discarding quilt-making waste and by-product, that material is made into blankets for dogs.

"Head Regal has always been a give-back business," says Amber, who has hosted many sales at her home where proceeds support Grand View Elementary PTA or a local family in need.

"Eliana has been at my hip since she was 2 years old, accompanying me downtown and watching me create and run my business," says Amber. "She has always just been my road dog. If she was sick and stayed home from school, I'd bring a wagon with a pillow and a blankie and she'd just come with me where I needed to go. She has always been such a trooper."

Eliana, now a middle schooler, has participated in the MB Junior Lifeguards program and plays beach and indoor volleyball. Creative, like her mom, Eliana designed a pair of pants when she was 10. Today, two years later, she has completed participation in the nine-month long Young Entrepreneur Association (YEA) program sponsored by the Manhattan Beach Chamber of Commerce. The youngest member of her YEA group, Eliana developed a business plan, pitched it to investors, and founded a skate culture teen-clothing line.

As for Amber's son, Noah, he is now 6' 3" and has just entered his senior year in high school. He played goalie for the boys' soccer team and has been in the Biotech program since his freshman year. His challenging academic schedule includes several AP courses. "I haven't been able to help Noah with his math or biotech homework for years. I always tell people that he did not get that part of his brain from me!"

Amber met her fiancé, Joel, thanks to yet another well-timed happenstance. Not a social-person, per se, and never one to make a big deal over New Year's Eve or attending a party to celebrate the event, Amber decided to travel to Sun Valley, Idaho, to visit a friend and her family and attend a New Year's Eve charity function.

About four minutes prior to the clock striking midnight and 2019's arrival, Joel walked up to Amber and complimented her on the white hat she was wearing.

"I'm standing against the



Kids at the beach aka our front yard in the north end of MB.

Photo by Amber Laforet

wall, alone, being a wallflower, and I had just put a spring roll into my mouth, and the man of my dreams walks up and says "Hello," and compliments my hat," laughs Amber, before gently suggesting the story of how she and Joel met may not make good material for a magazine article. "I waited for Joel to look away to take the spring roll out of my mouth and put it in my glass. Within 30 seconds, Joel had me laughing and at ease."

The year 2018 was a good year for Amber, and 2019 even better. And she didn't need to wait long. By a few minutes after midnight, Joel and Amber quickly discovered that they had an awful lot in common.

Both had been divorced for about seven years, and both were uncompromising in putting their children before everything else. Joel co-owns Reflex, a ski pole company resurrected from the 1970s, with seven of his best friends. Somehow, they both managed to endure the long distance between Idaho and California, and make a success of it.

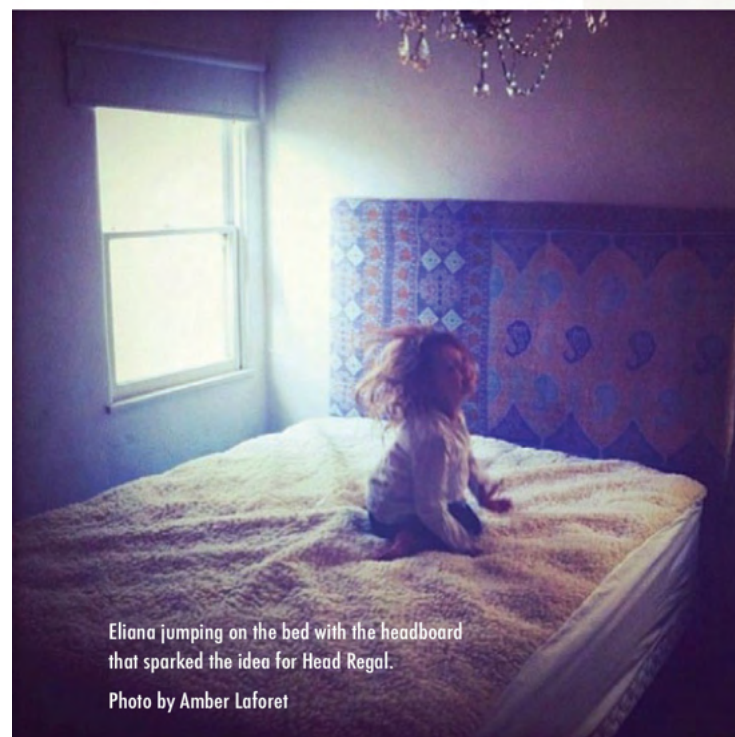
A picture of Amber in the photo studio at Western Kentucky University, as a sophomore.

Photo courtesy Amber Laforet



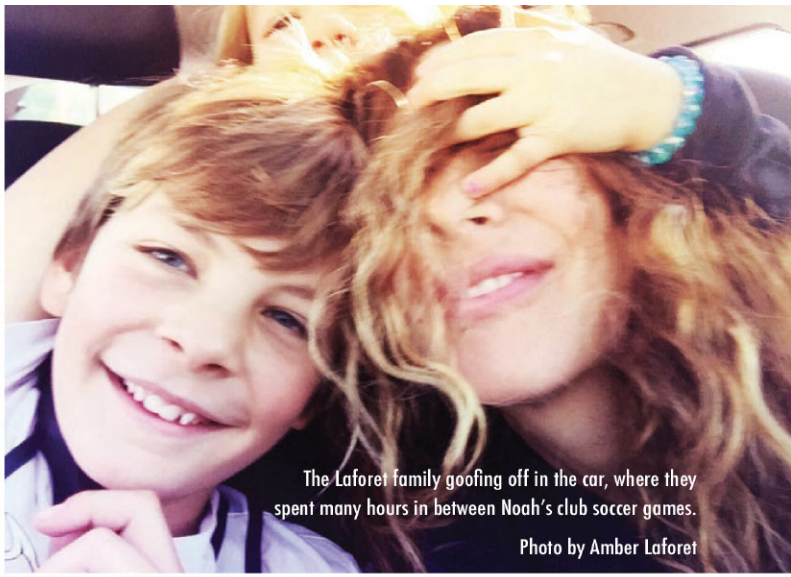
Eliana jumping on the bed with the headboard that sparked the idea for Head Regal.

Photo by Amber Laforet



Amber on the Charles Bridge in Prague, on her 21st birthday where she made a wish to find her love in Prague. Little did she know, that was photojournalism at the time.

Photo courtesy
Amber Laforet



The Laforet family goofing off in the car, where they spent many hours in between Noah's club soccer games.

Photo by Amber Laforet

Amber and Joel's wedding is planned to take place in summer 2022 with an outdoor ceremony in the valley of Bald Mountain in Sun Valley, Idaho. Both Joel and Amber are undecided on where they will live after matrimony but they are currently happy living a beach-mountain lifestyle in two different states.

"Right now, neither of us is willing to change the lives of our teenagers to fit our preference," shares Amber. "We will do what feels right as time goes by."

Until then, Amber, Noah, and Eliana will remain living together in the Tree Section of Manhattan Beach. Their Craftsman home was previously occupied for decades by an artist who was a sculptor and a painter.

The home's huge second-level loft with tall windows now serves as the Head Regal workspace, a natural-light studio, and a hangout space for teenagers. "This home is heaven-sent," says Amber.

Amber says that Manhattan Beach is threaded into every aspect of her family's life and compares the community to the "running stitch," the iconic stitch used on her vintage kantha quilts.

"The running stitch is a beautiful metaphor for the Manhattan Beach community. It begins at the quilt's center and remains one continuous stitch as it moves all around the blanket in the pattern of a square," says Amber. "The running stitch reminds me that we are all connected, and each one of us is individually amazing."

Amber's life has not been without grief. About 15-years ago on the day after Thanksgiving, her brother, Gregg, 19, drowned off the North Shore of Hawaii when a wave caused by a tsunami on the other side of the island at low tide struck him in the back while he stood on the cliff in front of their family's vacation rental.



This picture of photographic print worn with kisses, shows Amber with her brother, Gregg, and two-year-old Noah in front of the Louvre museum in Paris, France just months before he died. It is placed on her mantle where incense and a candle burn for him often.

Photo by Amber Laforet

The tragedy provided perspective. "Our family changed forever, and my children have been raised with awareness that a moment can turn tragic in a second," says Amber. "They know to not take life for granted, to live truthfully, lovingly, and in the moment."

Perhaps that is why Amber has turned to blankets. Especially during the pandemic, it has turned out to be a source of comfort for so many of her clients. A few years ago, one of Amber's friends, the poet Tyler Knott Gregson, was kind enough to write a poem that could be stitched into every one of Head Regal's blankets.

Although Amber seemed hesitant to share her personal story in a magazine article, she was very enthusiastic about ending the article with the poem that best describes her work and life philosophy.

***"COVER ME IN STILLNESS,
IN GRACE, IN JOY.
COVER ME, AND FIND
YOURSELF HOME."***

Amber and the kids at Knott's Berry Farm in between rides. One of their favorite things to do when the kids were little was go to amusement parks where they held annual passes and went frequently.

Photo by Amber Laforet

