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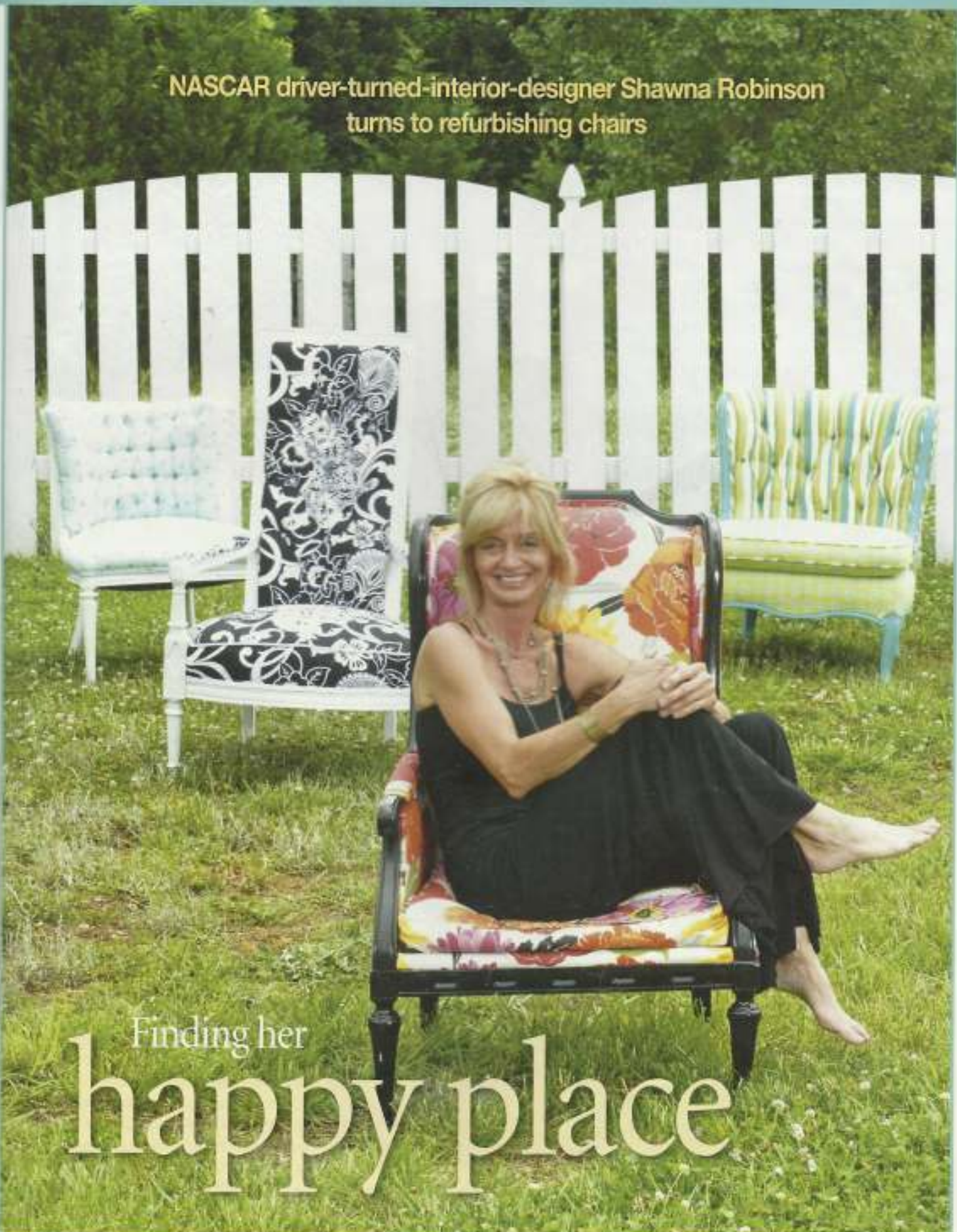
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NASCAR driver-turned-interior-designer Shawna Robinson
turns to refurbishing chairs



Finding her
happy place

PHOTO BY VALERIE JAMES

BY JEN ARONOFF
PHOTOS BY YALONDA JAMES

The armchair that inspired Shawna Robinson's growing business began life like so many others: With a medium-finish wood frame, gold upholstery and a look destined for your great-aunt's parlor.

But when Robinson discovered it at a yard sale, she appreciated its lines. She saw potential. And so she repainted its frame black, reupholstered it with a bold floral print and dubbed it her happy chair – her fun, funky place to curl up, read and relax.

Now Robinson, 44, once a NASCAR driver, now an interior designer, is aiming to spend more time creating others like it. She's selling them under the name – what else? – Happy Chair.

Where once Robinson's life was filled with the kind of racing that involves fast cars and a track, she now spends her days darting around to other destinations. She's perpetually on her way out the door of her Charlotte home, whether it's to check on the race shops she's decorating or to ferry around her children, Tanner, 13, and Samantha, 11.

Amid that bustle, she hasn't had much of a chance lately to sit in her own happy chair. But she's aiming to change that, and bring vintage-inspired, shabby-chic bursts of color, whimsy and cheer to others in the process.

"I have so many great ideas," Robinson says. "But not enough time."

Petite, slim and tan, the Iowa native speaks rapidly, openly and personably about the many projects she's juggling, cigarettes in her voice. ("Sorry, bad habit, it's a stress thing!" she explains, extinguishing a Marlboro in the driveway as she heads toward her studio.)

She grew up the daughter of a stock car racer-and-promoter father and a mother who loved antiques, sewing and hanging things on walls. Though racing initially won out as a career path, Robinson never abandoned the creativity her mother imparted.

A few years after moving to Charlotte in 1994, Robinson painted a Winnie the Pooh mural for a friend's nursery. That friend, in turn, held a party that drew members of the NASCAR community, who took notice and began to spread word of Robinson's talent.

More jobs followed, even as Robinson returned to racing in 1999, after having children. In 2002, she became only the second woman to compete in the Daytona 500, finishing 24th. She left racing in 2004 and has since devoted herself to design work full-time, though she says she's still passionate about the sport.

Race-world connections have helped Robinson land plenty of clients. She's designed home interiors and workspaces for Dale Earnhardt Jr. and his sister, Kelley. In recent months, she has worked on new race shops and offices for Kasey Kahne and Martin Truex Jr., both in Mooresville; three rooms at driver David Stremme's house; and a renovation of Ernie Irvan's farm, outside Charleston.



All of those jobs, however, involve carrying out other people's visions. The chairs, she says, are her own. And, unlike sofas – which she also works on, but tend to be more of the neutral linchpin of a room – chairs allow more fun and freedom to shine through.

"The chairs are really kind of a part of my personality," says Robinson.

The friend for whom she painted the mural 14 years ago – her best friend, in fact – sees Robinson in the chairs, too.

"I think she's started to listen to herself inside," says Lisa Dawson Fix, a teacher who lives in Spartanburg. "Being a decorator, you have to please your clients. You have to assume their personality. The Happy Chair stuff, that is her."

As a driver and a person, Fix says, Robinson was totally determined and never scared, yet also feminine. As a designer, she possesses the talent to mix and match unconventional patterns, colors and fabrics. "She can do anything," Fix says.

Robinson scours antique and yard sales to score solid, affordable old chairs to refashion for the Happy Chair line, then spends more money and time on bold, colorful fabrics and trims.

Examples in various stages of transformation sit in her garage, including a pair of chairs with aqua-painted frames and aqua, lime and white print upholstery. Other models have featured hand-painted fabrics or hand-sewn applique cutouts.

Those she's produced so far have ranged from \$150 for the simplest model to about \$2,500 for a sofa. She's sold them largely via e-mail and at the Interiors Marketplace in Charlotte. Many customers have been younger homeowners who can't drop \$3,000 on a chair, but can afford \$650 for a "fun, fabulous piece you can't find anywhere else."

Each piece has its own name and personality, she notes, sitting at her laptop in an expertly assembled girly-funky workroom, which features a pink dresser and rug, a framed Marilyn Monroe poster, a sewing machine and a 1988 NASCAR Charlotte/Daytona Dash series Rookie of the Year trophy. An agreement to lend some of her artifacts to the NASCAR Hall of Fame sits nearby.

She flips through photos displayed on the Facebook page she's used to reconnect with race fans and fellow drivers. "Lady Di" looks like a throne. "Blush" is a plush pink sofa. "Rock Hudson" is upholstered with black linen, leopard print and vintage pictures of hunky firefighters, with metallic piping.

She also likes that she's recycling old furniture, which tends to be higher quality than can be found affordably at most places these days.

"They have a life," she says. "I'm rebirthing them, too."

Robinson would love to have someone to help her market the chairs and work on them more. But for now, it's just her. And she has other places to be, too – like picking up items for the Mooresville race shops and checking on progress there.

She rolls down the door of the chair-filled garage, hops in her black Dodge Durango, and she's off. | **LN**



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Find a happy chair

Learn more about Shawna Robinson's Happy Chairs – and visit her studio by appointment – by emailing happychair@att.net. A Web site is in the works. Some chairs are also on display at Interiors Marketplace, 923 Providence Rd., Charlotte. Robinson can also help people re-do chairs they already own.