

Chris Jones

Just the Beginning

Feeling the warmth of the sun on his face, Chris Jones smiled to himself as sleep slowly subsided, grateful that he was in the comfort of his own bed in his own room. But when he opened his eyes, he realized he was far from it. His stomach sank as his gaze took in the muted interior of the tracked vehicle and the severity of the desert beyond. The Gulf War had brought him here to Iraq, and the dissolution of that fleeting feeling of home was almost more than he could bear. "It was perhaps the lowest I've ever felt," he recalls today. "I knew that if I could get through that experience, I could get through anything. And I knew that once I got back home, I'd never take things for granted."

Several decades later, he found himself in a different foreign land, but this time by choice. He had used the years to transform himself into a talented designer and fabricator, and had been selected to do a project for the Iniala Beach House in Phuket, Thailand. The posh boutique hotel had ten bedrooms, each the work of an esteemed designer from around the world, and Chris had been commissioned to do the adjoining Kids' Hotel, a project that slept fifteen and included a kitchen and play area. "I designed the whole concept, including clothing, backpacks, and books in English and Russian which contained maps of the property for children," he recounts.

When the hotel launched, Chris was invited to the grand unveiling, and was shocked when Mark Weingard, the owner, gave a speech that singled out Chris's contributions. "That was my moment," he remembers. "It was the moment I wished my parents had been alive and present to see. It was such a triumphant accomplishment, and it made me inspired to be even better. In that moment, I knew I could do much more—that this was just the beginning." That promise, potential, and creative power is now unleashed in

Thinkterior, an interior design firm specializing in innovative quality furniture, storage, and play solutions for children that allow a space to evolve through the years in tandem with its young inhabitants.

Though Chris and his partners didn't formally launch the company until 2015, the trappings of Thinkterior first started taking root on February 22, 2002, when his son was born. The parents-to-be let loose their creativity in designing their first child's bedroom, painting the walls and building the bed. Chris, who had been focused mainly on graphic design for some time, felt something in him wake up as he returned to hands-on creative fabrication. "Friends started asking if I could do a room or a specific piece of furniture for them, and I began posting photos of my projects online," he says. "Two years later, I was contacted by a high-end company called Posh Tots, who wanted to use one of my photos on the cover of their catalogue."



Chris's work was featured on the Posh Tots cover two years in a row, attracting the attention of other magazines that wanted to feature his rooms. He went out on a limb and took a trip to Vegas to attend the ABC Kids Expo, the largest children's furniture event in the United States. There, the inquiries began rolling in from companies and clients from all over the world hoping to buy and sell his products. "It was such an interesting niche, specializing in dream rooms for kids and bringing a lot of creative customization," he explains. "I could bring any idea to life, and with sophistication. When I wanted to make a carriage bed for my daughter when she was an infant, I went down to Williamsburg and spent an afternoon sketching carriages as they'd go by. Since coming up with that concept, I've sold a bunch of those."

In this tradition, Thinkterior specializes in

taking the European concept of bespoke builds, where products are one-off custom creations for each client, and lends a modern element of mass production so customers can use similar elements to create unique rooms at reasonable prices. “I can really appreciate the feeling that parents have—all the hopes and aspirations they have for their children, and how everything they do is for their children,” Chris remarks. “When you have a child, your life changes for the better, and you have new purpose. It’s a global phenomenon that connects all of us, yet each parent-child relationship is unique in its own way.”

Chris’s work jumped another echelon when he was contacted by Mark Weingard in 2013 to submit a proposal for the Iniala Children’s Hotel. Mark had already gone through three other designers, but no one had succeeded in translating his vision into a work plan. Chris drew up a proposal in two days, and Mark promptly hired him. “It was my first hotel job, and the first job where I actually flew overseas to implement the vision,” he recounts. “When that wrapped up, I reached out to a contact I had met through that process, Anthony Hughes, who provided over 200 custom pieces of furniture, cabinets, and decor for the hotel and currently runs his own company out of Bangkok. After working together, we knew we spoke the same language, so we decided to partner up so he could fabricate my pieces overseas.”

Tony suggested that they contact Matt Thorpe, who had been the project manager at Iniala and was looking for his next project. Anthony and Matt both lived in or near Bangkok, so Chris flew over in October of 2014 for a week of concentrated brainstorming. They met with two factories which specialized in builds for Ikea, as well as children’s toys. Over four days, the threesome developed Chris’s designs and formalized a revolutionary concept for children’s rooms—a wall panel peg system that allows all elements of a room to be raised and adjusted as children grow from infancy through their teenage years. “The idea was to design a system that grows with the child,” Chris explains. “We also came up with the concept of vertical play, taking traditional games and activities from the floor to the wall.”

Thinkterior’s groundbreaking design concepts draw from Chris’s seemingly inexhaustible fount of creativity, which has been a wellspring of imagination and energy since he was born in 1969 in Washington, DC. His father had

attended the University of Illinois, served in the military, and then joined the Central Intelligence Agency, where he worked for 35 years. He was highly creative mentally and authored a number of books, including *The Thinker’s Toolkit*, which is still used in training for the CIA and FBI. Chris’s mother, a sports fanatic of Italian heritage, worked at the CIA as well, but she ended her tenure when she gave birth to Chris’s older sister.

Aside from a year spent in Pennsylvania when his father attended the Army War College, Chris spent his formative years in Fairfax, Virginia. There, he enjoyed playing sports and fantasy games with his friends, but his primary passion was building models. For a period during his boyhood, he had almost 40 model airplanes hanging from his ceiling—detailed replicas he had pieced together with precision and skill out of balsa wood. “The first gift I can remember receiving was an erector set and blocks,” he recalls. “The set came with plans, which I followed, but I also liked to build my own models and creations without the guidebooks. From the time I was in sixth grade, I always had an Exacto knife or a small paintbrush in my hand.”

In seventh grade, Chris enjoyed silk screening on shirts and convinced his art teacher to let him pursue his interest instead of following the curriculum of the class. He was always painting the tiniest details on the small toy soldiers he played with. Perhaps the pinnacle of his young design days came when he signed up for a fantasy diorama contest in Wisconsin. He created a snow cave model so impressive that his father loaded him in the car and drove all night to the venue in Wisconsin, where Chris presented his work and won Best in Show as the youngest contestant there. “It meant so much that he took the time to do that for me,” Chris recalls. “It was one of the first times in my life where I felt like I had only just begun to tap my potential.”

Chris always loved holding odd jobs, and landed his first as a paperboy for the *Washington Star*. He started a lawn mowing company as a child and later trimmed trees for neighbors, but his most momentous early work experience came when he joined the Reserves during his junior year in high school. Aside from having been very patriotic from the time he was a small child, he was intuitively drawn to the regimented, detail-oriented perfection of the military, which spoke to his precise and meticulous artistic side. “It was one

of the first great decisions I made growing up, setting me on a path that built my character, mental capacity, and life skills," he recalls.

Chris completed basic training and started drilling with his unit during his senior year, earning a paycheck that would help cover the costs of college. Upon graduating, he joined the West Virginia National Guard, which allowed him to enroll at West Virginia University with in-state status and a substantial scholarship. He contemplated majoring in art, while his parents urged him to pursue a course of study in wood science engineering. Through that time, he continued his design work, building a triple-decker Roman galley trireme ship model for his dorm room during his freshman year. After struggling through chemistry and biology classes his freshman year, he transitioned over to the university's design school.

Then, during his junior year, he was pulled out of school to serve overseas in Desert Storm in 1991, a transformative experience that cemented his lifelong love of athletics and catapulted him into a period of reflection about his future. Upon returning, Chris decided to work a brief stint as a designer of training aids and tools for case officers in the CIA's Office of Training and Education. It was a positive experience that he tucked under his belt when he was awarded an academic scholarship to complete his Bachelor of Fine Arts.

When he graduated, Chris resumed working with the CIA, but the monotony of the daily routine was an assault on his creative drive. With that, he left to work brief periods at several local design firms before joining forces with a friend to open his own design shop, MediaWorks. Chris also launched KidTropolis, an interior design firm specializing in creative rooms for children and families. This was later renamed MyTropolis to incorporate all of his design and creative capabilities including corporate identity collateral and online presence, along with his expanded interior and fabrication offerings. It was 2015 when he decided to partner with Tony and Matt to launch Thinkterior, where he now focuses on maximizing his talent for organization, creativity, and concept.

And as Chris has felt many other times throughout his life, this is just the beginning. The three partners are busy introducing the world to their vision and quickly garnering new corporate

and residential clients across the globe. The firm is also committed to expanding its philanthropic endeavors as it grows, planning to focus on children's charities in Thailand and worldwide. "When it comes to design and fabrication, it's the smallest details that matter," he remarks. "That includes the physical details of our projects, the details of our management style and company culture, and the details of how we give back. In all aspects, Thinkterior adheres to the highest levels of integrity, value and meaning."

The Chinese philosopher Confucius is quoted as having said that, if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life. It's the philosophy that guides Chris's life, and the explosive combination of creativity and entrepreneurship has led to ventures beyond Thinkterior. Chris is also responsible for the launch of another company, BONKGear, which produces athletic apparel with QR codes that link the user to online workouts that rotate every 24 hours. A reflection of his passion for physical activity, the company is focused on physical fitness and supporting athletes at all levels as they train for successes that include running a 5K, completing a marathon, or passing the Army Physical Fitness test. "I love athletics and staying healthy," he affirms. "I love the process of making something out of nothing, creating a product that people can really enjoy."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Chris encourages the pursuit of a wide array of possible interests to give each individual the best chances of finding their bliss. "I'm incredibly lucky that I found the thing I'm supposed to do in life, but there are so many people in the world who stay unhappy because they aren't doing the thing they were meant to do," he acknowledges. "You might be the greatest guitar player in the world, but you don't know if you don't try."

Finding the vocation you love ties intimately to the past, and can often be traced in the pursuits a person loved as a kid. In this sense, staying connected to one's inner child can be a key to happiness in more ways than one. "You're never too old to be a child," Chris avows. "Adults aren't so different from kids when you really think about it—we just have more expensive toys. We're still kids at heart. People forget that and get too caught up in other things, which is why it's important to step back and have fun in life." Chris lives this

philosophy with his wife, Susan, who he met at a birthday party when he was 21. She's remains an eternal believer in his work and vision, and along with their thirteen-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter, they help keep each other young.

For Chris, staying young at heart means leading a life of joy and gratitude that shows in sharp relief against the memory of those days he spent so far from home during the Gulf War—a time memorialized on his keychain by the tiny rear fuse from the first rocket-assisted projectile he fired. It means doing what he loves, loving what he does, and never really working a day in his life, even when the hours are long and the tasks are grueling. And above all, it means staying connected to that inner creativity that has fueled him from the very beginning, living life knowing that its potential is nowhere near tapped.

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