

# MASTERS OF THEIR CRAFT

## TERESA CARTER // DEBROSSE

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Sky-high magnificent buildings, streets teeming with pedestrians, taxis zooming and honking, and pristine storefronts beckoning the passerby – New York City is bursting with life and passion. Each person has a story bringing them to where they are today – and many are continuing to write their stories out of small apartments, on the crowded sidewalks, with two full time jobs, and a mentality that with great risk comes great reward.

Teresa Carter is the creator of DeBrosse, an online knit shop dedicated to the care of Haitian orphans. Tastefully decorated in neutrals and yarn, Teresa's home doubles as her work and living space. It's a peaceful haven of creativity, passion, and purpose with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the teeming city. She spends her days in her little 350 square foot apartment creating new scarves, placing shipments, responding to emails and connecting with a devoted Instagram community. After spending a year working as both a brand strategist and running her own business full time, Teresa eventually made the jump to investing fulltime into her passion and thriving business.

Captured by the orphans of Haiti years ago, Teresa knew her life would never be the same. Upon returning from that first trip to Haiti years ago, Teresa set out to make a difference in the lives of the children she met. What started out as crocheting blankets for the orphanage she visited, eventually became DeBrosse, an online knit shop that donates part of its proceeds to supply two Haitian orphanages with basic supplies.

As she has grown her business, Teresa learned that many of the orphaned children were not given up by choice, but because their mother's were not able to provide for them. Realizing a need to break the cycle of poverty in Haiti, she is working to eventually teach and then employ the Haitian mothers to knit the products themselves.

Teresa may be pursing her dream out of a little apartment in Manhatten, but she is impacting lives a world away. With a beautiful aesthetic, an eye for great design, and compassion for others, Teresa has built a business that tells a story many want to be a part of.

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Teresa Carter of DeBrosse

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### TELL US THE STORY OF YOUR KNITTING JOURNEY. WHEN AND HOW DID IT BEGIN?

My knitting journey started where you might least expect it. I entered a dilapidated, post earthquake shelter in Haiti, alongside 67 joyful, orphaned children. We shared laughs, tickles, snuggles and lollipops.

Leaving them 2 weeks later was a heartache that I had never known. I wasn't myself for weeks, plagued with an overwhelming weight and desire to continue loving them in some tangible way.

So I asked my mom if she would teach me how to crochet. And she did. We didn't leave our pajamas for days. Over the course of the next 9 months, we made over 150 blankets. I packed 6 suitcases and I headed back to where I had left my heart that day.

### WHERE DOES “DEBROSSE,” THE NAME OF YOUR COMPANY, COME FROM?

With suitcases three times my weight, a few dozen creole phrases memorized, and the usual travel-day top knot, I showed up to that same dilapidated shelter. I was 9 kinds of nervous (my husband insists that there are not 9 kinds, but I assure you there are).





Day 2 of my 30 day adventure, I locked eyes with a little boy entertaining himself by finding his balance on top of a sack of potatoes. Between cultural differences, language barriers, and age gaps, making friendships at a Haitian orphanage looks a lot different (sometimes it looks like trying to find your own balance on the potatoes with that 4 year old).

We just got each other. We had a bond. I can't really explain it. He was full of such joy and energy. Energy that teetered on the rascally side to be honest. And nothing has changed 4 years later.

Last summer we practiced floating on our backs in the ocean, learned that the mountains on the other side of the island are in fact not Canada, outswam the sharks (or so he believes) and how to take the most epic slow mo video.

His name is DeBrosse.

#### **WHY DID YOU CHOOSE CROCHETING OVER ANOTHER SERVICE / PRODUCT TO RAISE MONEY?**

My mom had crocheted me blankets as a child, and I wouldn't go to sleep until I had each finger woven into its own stitch. It kept the monsters away and all that.

When I met the children, it struck me that no one was around to comfort them at night. It seemed obvious to me that they should at least have under-the-bed-monster-fending blankets too.

#### **15% OF PROCEEDS FROM YOUR KNITWEAR ARE DONATED TO SUPPORT ORPHANED CHILDREN IN HAITI. CAN YOU TELL US HOW THIS CAUSE CAME TO BE NEAR AND DEAR TO YOUR HEART?**

I learned with time that the children's needs were much greater than blankets. The blanket project however, proved that people were interested. Interested in these children's stories, interested in helping, and interested in being part of what we were doing.

So I took this love for both the children and crocheting, and opened an Etsy shop in their name. The plan was simple—sell to the general public, and invite them to support DeBrosse and his friends.

Our latest shipment included 50 bottles of medicine, 536 ounces of infant formula, 778 ounces of soap, and 3,678 diapers. But greater than that, our hope is that it puts orphan care on the hearts of those we meet.

#### **HOW DID YOU GET CONNECTED WITH THE ORPHANAGES IN HAITI?**

The earthquake put Haiti on the map for many people, myself included. It feels so odd to think back on this time, because I really knew nothing about the country or its people...but I just remember feeling for them so deeply.

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About a year and a half after the earthquake, the heaviness woke me up in the middle of the night. Sure I should probably go, but who just goes to Haiti? That's not a thing. I remember starting to pray, but my phone buzzed and like any compulsive phone checker, I grabbed it.

It was an email from Samaritan's Purse, calling for volunteers to Haiti. 2 days later I was approved to take the last spot on the trip, purchased flights and was on my way to meet the rest of the group for the first time during our layover in Miami.

I had no idea that would be the first of 7 trips and counting.

### **ANY ADVICE FOR STARTING AN ONLINE BUSINESS?**

I've found that starting an online business is a slow and steady journey with no silver bullet. And, maybe more importantly, it's a personal journey that shouldn't be compared to anyone else's. My most frustrated and overwhelmed moments are when I try to bypass either of these realities.

### **IS DEBROSSE KNITWEAR A FULL-TIME ENDEAVOR FOR YOU?**

Yes! I transitioned to full-time in January, and I still have to pinch myself sometimes.

Before that, I spent the last 6 years as a Designer and Brand Strategist. I worked both jobs full-time for all of 2015, so I'm now relearning how to enjoy a Saturday. Ironically, I often crochet in my free time because (thankfully) I still find it therapeutic.

### **WHAT IS YOUR BIG VISION FOR DEBROSSE?**

Recently, my husband and I have been really drawn to the idea of investing in the parents, as a more proactive than reactive approach to orphan care. With a bit of nervous idealism, we asked, "What if we taught the mama's how to crochet, and offered them a spot on the team?"

Because it isn't a lack of love that is ripping apart these families, it's poverty.

Orphan care is a much bigger issue than I can wrap my mind around still. I selfishly just want to adopt as many children as I can, and make sure that every forehead is kissed before bed. But the reality is that these children often have families who would love the

opportunity to do just that. In Haitian culture, parents often give their children over to an orphanage in hopes that they will be fed, educated, and given opportunity that they themselves cannot provide.

Can you imagine loving someone so deeply that you let them go, so that they might be better off? Like I said...I can't wrap my mind around it.

We kick off this new venture in July, with a group of 7 women who recently took their children back home from the orphanage. I couldn't be more excited...but of course I am those 9 kinds of nervous again.

### **IS THERE ANYTHING SPECIFIC THAT HAS INSPIRED YOUR DESIGNS?**

I'm a huge fan of clean, minimal, and practical. Living in New York has even drawn this lean lifestyle further out of me as well, seeing as how my apartment is 350 square feet.

So when I design individual pieces and put together collections, I always choose fabrics, textures and colors that come together to create a staple piece. I want my scarf to become your go-to, season after season, as opposed to your special occasion. As of right now, there are no plans for glitter, ruffles, or color :)

### **CAN YOU SHARE ANY TIPS ABOUT THE ART OF BRANDING AND PACKAGING YOUR PRODUCT?**

Sometimes I joke that I started the shop just as an excuse to create packaging. It makes my heart skip a beat (that and a bagel overloaded with cream cheese). Good branding is the difference between asking a neighbor to purchase your weekend craft, and building a sustainable business.

Every brand needs a visual theme. This can be as simple as a color, typeface, paper type, or pattern. You don't need to be a designer to nail something cohesive. When in doubt, keep it simple.

Packaging is then simply an extension of this theme, and probably the most important. I want every product to feel like a gift (and secretly, I want it to be so cute that people don't really want to open it). To do this, your packaging should feel incredibly intentional. Take into account the scale of the product, its material, and any nuances that can be called out.

Finally, every brand needs a voice. This flows through your item listing descriptions, Instagram captions, and customer service. A great exercise to establish consistency is to come up with 3-4 personality traits, and then funnel all written content through them.







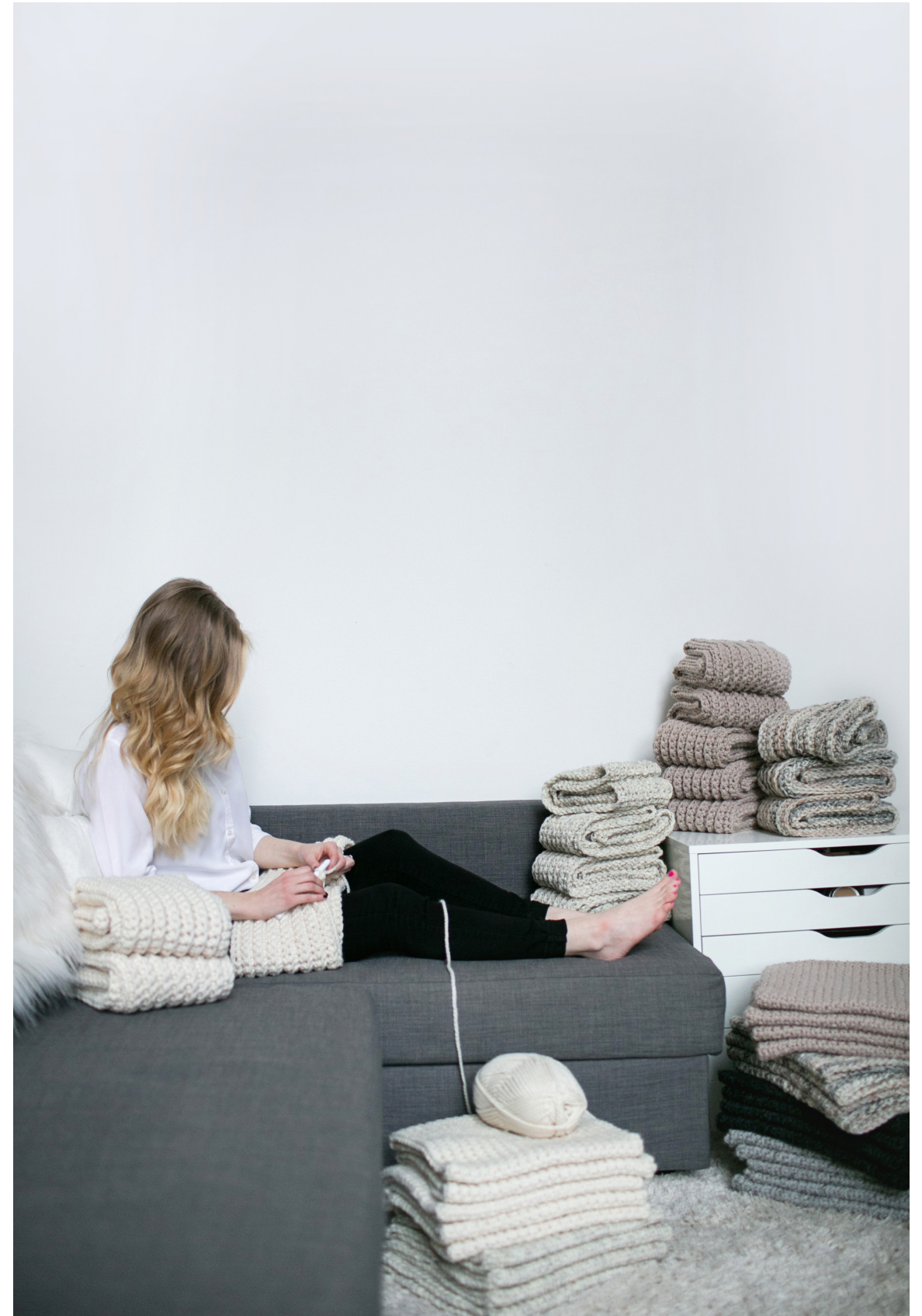








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### **WHICH OF YOUR PIECES IS THE BEST SELLER?**

I can't seem to make my blanket scarves fast enough! I purchase all of my fabric through local vendors in the Garment District of New York. I buy them out of each pattern, and lug the bolts home on the subway.

Outside of blanket scarves, I launched a marbled gray infinity scarf that made it under quite a few Christmas trees last year. It's such a fun one to make because the yarn works up in a different pattern every time.

### **YOU HAVE SUCH A STRONG INSTAGRAM FOLLOWING. WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST FACTOR IN GROWING YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITY?**

I started Instagram because, well, businesses should be on social media right? But then all these relationships started happening. For the first time I met girls who loved yarn, worked Saturdays, and shared the vulnerabilities of running a small business. And so we started to do life together in some ways. I even attended one Instagram friends wedding earlier this month, literally meeting her for the first time at her rehearsal dinner.

I'm always looking for new opportunities, friendships and inspiration. During my usual waiting-for-the-train-feed-scroll, I came across a family living in Uganda, waiting to adopt their little ones. I shot her a quick email and asked if we could send 15% of sales her way until they finished fundraising. We wishfully joked about meeting one day, but until then we'd just follow each others journeys on Instagram.

But here's the real beauty of social media. On the evening before Giving Tuesday, I committed to giving 100% of sales and invited 4 Instagram/Etsy friends to join me. We prepped our posts, and by the end of Giving Tuesday, not only did 15 other shops organically come alongside us, but we exceeded the families fundraising goal. Grab some tissues and be sure to read Keary's reaction.

We were all strangers, who just came together on Instagram to support yet another stranger. It really moves me to think back on it. So I have no advice on gaining followers, engagement, or magic hashtags. For me it's been a journey of figuring out how to use the platform to the benefit of others, and then all else just seems to fall into place.

### **HOW DID YOU END UP IN NEW YORK CITY?**

My husband and I moved to New York City for my job at the design firm actually. We were living in Atlanta at the time, and 3 weeks before our wedding, my boss casually pulled me aside and said "We're moving to Brooklyn. You should come too." It really was almost as simple as that. After 2 days of praying and overcoming the nausea of New York rent, we announced to our friends that we were off. We're now coming up on our three year anniversary with no plans for more square footage.







“My next big adventure is definitely teaching the Haitian mama’s to crochet, and writing the rest of this story with them.”



#### **WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING ABOUT THE BIG-CITY LIFE?**

I think New York offers so much opportunity to do life with people that you wouldn’t normally cross paths with. And because we don’t have our own cars and homes, you actually spend your day with the people around you. It’s a super challenging lifestyle (think: waiting in line just to get INTO the grocery store), but I think we all feel like we’re in this together, so there’s a real sense of community.

#### **ANY HIDDEN TREASURES IN NEW YORK CITY WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT?**

There is a little dessert place on the Lower East Side called Sugar Sweet Sunshine (say that 3 times fast). They have what they call “Chocolate Chip Deliciousness.” I’m pretty sure it’s chocolate chip cookies that have soaked overnight in cool whip. It’s out of control.

#### **DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE TUNE TO LISTEN TO WHILE WORKING?**

Yikes. I’m a little off brand here, but I’m actually in a 90’s hip hop zone these days. The beat keeps my energy up, because even my smallest product is 990 of the same stitch, over, and over, and over...

#### **FOR THE CURIOUS AT HEART, HOW MUCH YARN DO YOU GO THROUGH IN A WEEK?**

I never feel like I get through enough to be honest. I probably go through 20 to 30 skeins of yarn a week, and 50-100 yards of fabric when I’m adding new patterns to the shop. In the meantime, the rest of the yarn just decorates my apartment.

#### **HOW CAN PEOPLE PURCHASE YOUR KNITWEAR?**

The best place to shop the full collection is on debrosse.com. Last year I had the privilege of selling at Renegade Craft’s New York holiday market, and fingers crossed I’ll be there again this year.

If you’re in Chicago, you can also find my work in the lovely shop of 2 Penny Blue.

#### **WHAT WILL YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE BE? WHERE CAN WE KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR YOU?**

My next big adventure is definitely teaching the Haitian mama’s to crochet, and writing the rest of this story with them. I’ll be sharing the whole journey in the form of little squares on Instagram.



