

Kathryn: Welcome to episode 39 of Compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Do you get overwhelmed and don't know where to start? Today, Bonnie Christine and I talk about that and more when we discuss becoming a remote surface pattern designer. I wanted to let you know, currently, I am offering free one on one brainstorming sessions, to help you find your location independent path. To book, visit compasspod.com/brainstorming and let's get started. You're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent womxn about their work and the paths that got them there. We get into their stories of struggle and success, finding clients, figuring out what to charge, and of course, we talk money. Join us and take the next step in finding your direction. I wanted to let you know, currently, I am offering free one on one brainstorming sessions, to help you find your location independent path. To book, visit compasspod.com/brainstorming and let's get started. Bonnie, welcome to the show.

Bonnie: Thank you so much for having me.

Kathryn: I like to start with your early life to see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Bonnie: I love this question and even asked my mom if she could remember what I used to say. And you know, I used to dance and sing. That's what I used to do. I think I probably thought I, used to, would be a singer one day. That did not happen. But as a kid, that's definitely all that I did.

Kathryn: How had that changed by the time you left high school?

Bonnie: By the time I left high school, I my, my main focus and goal after high school was that I knew that I wanted to be an entrepreneur. Everyone in my family up to that point had been an entrepreneur. No one had ever gone to college. They all were self-starters. And so I did go to college, but I did know that I wanted to do something for myself.

Kathryn: What did you study?

Bonnie: So I studied business school. I did not decide that I wanted to focus on art until after, after college. So I went to business school so that I could really focus on entrepreneurial strengths. And you know, regretted that decision for a little while after I graduated. I almost went back to school for art and design. But that's really the beginning of my story is that I decided to learn it on my own. And in hindsight, I'm so grateful that I did go to business school because it really allowed me to have the business knowledge and the side of that part of my business, a little bit more understood, I think.

Kathryn: What from those studies really translates to how you run your business now?

Bonnie: You know, at the time, this was like 12 years ago when I went to business school and so I'm not sure it was really set up for even working in the corporate world. But I, I think more so than anything college sort of taught me how to learn, how to learn on my own and how to really be self-motivated. Of course, I did gather some marketing and financial knowledge that has been applied and helpful in my business as well. But I think

the biggest part about college that I really enjoyed was just kind of learning how to be a student.

Kathryn: How did you get into being location independent?

Bonnie: So my goal was always to be location independent. At the very beginning, my goal was to work from home. And so, after college I married my high school sweetheart and we moved back to our hometown and I began working for my mom. At the time she had a quilt shop. I grew up in a fabric shop that she owned and so I went to work for her. And that's really when the dream of becoming a fabric designer set in. The first thing I did was start an Etsy shop and a blog, and it took about maybe a year for that to get enough wind under its wings for me to be able to quit working for my mom at the shop and work full time from home. So, that was the first foray into at least being able to work from home. I sold handmade aprons and tea towels and I blogged and I wasn't making very much money, but I was making just enough to be able to work from home. So that was in 2009.

Kathryn: And how do you describe your job to people who are just being polite when they ask?

Bonnie: This is, that's a hard question to ask. When somebody says, you know, what do you do for a living? Cause it's, it's fairly complicated. So when it is just a polite question I say, I usually tell them I'm a fabric designer and an online educator.

Kathryn: And when you're talking to someone who really wants to know?

Bonnie: I usually will use the term surface pattern designer, which almost always comes with an explanation. So that means that I create patterns and artwork for products all of the world. I create artwork for fabric primarily, but also wallpaper, stationary ribbon, homewares, all kinds of things. And then I also teach other people how to do the same thing online.

Kathryn: You gave us a little bit of the background, but how did you get started in the actual surface design arena?

Bonnie: Having started with a blog and an Etsy shop, really, really, I was able to get my foot in the door with the creative community. And at the time that I really decided that being a fabric designer is what I wanted to do. I had no technical skills. I was, I did not consider myself to be an artist even though I did like to kind of draw and sketch, but I wouldn't have have told people that I was an artist at the time. And so I decided to learn on my own. And this, this was such a farfetched dream. I mean, it was such a big dream that it was overwhelming and really felt like a stretch. Like something I would probably never be able to do. And I remember waking up one morning and realizing that six months had gone by from the time that I had decided that this was my big dream. And it dawned on me that I had still maintained this big dream, but I had really done nothing in order to progress towards making it come true. And so that day I decided that I was just gonna do one thing every single day. That would get me a step closer to accomplishing the big

dream. And that for me is a trick that I still use today. And it's a way to kind of chip away at the overwhelm because on the very first day I knew what I needed to do.

Bonnie: It's the overwhelming feeling of like, I don't know what I'll be doing in six months from now, or what questions I need to have answered. I don't know all that, but I do know what I could do today to just kind of move the needle just a little bit. And so for me, at the very beginning, it was literally just researching what it was that I needed to know. And so the biggest thing that I needed to know that I didn't know was how to use Adobe illustrator. So I set out to learn Adobe illustrator and how to create illustrations and artwork on my own. Took about a year for me to get a grasp on that program. This was in 2011, 2010-2011 and I, I didn't skip a day of doing that one thing. Sometimes it was just 10 or 15 minutes of research. Other days were spent entirely on working towards this dream, but at the end of the year and then at the end of 18 months I was able to look back on tremendous progress that I had made and at the end of 18 months in 2012 I had learned Adobe illustrator made several surface pattern design collections, learned how to make my own book for a portfolio, put together a portfolio, reached out to companies and finally landed myself at Quilt Market International Quilt Market Trade Show where I was able to meet with companies and that weekend is when I was able to sign my first contract as a fabric designer for Art Gallery Fabrics.

Kathryn: When it comes to finding outlets for your work or clients, how do you go about that?

Bonnie: In order to find someone that I would like to license my artwork with, I just pay attention to the products that I love. And usually if it's a notebook or a fabric, every product will usually have a manufacturer or brand attached to it. So, at that point it's just kind of putting your head down and doing your homework about getting in touch with that company, trying to locate the creative director or the art director, and then emailing them, sending them a portfolio, connecting with them in some way to try to see if they're interested in licensing with me. And then if we want to talk about students, my favorite way to do this is just to treat them how I wanted to be treated when I was learning or at least educate them with the same things that I really, really needed to learn at the beginning. So I serve, I serve my ideal student well. I serve them with tons of free content that gets them started on the right path. And then I have a membership and courses that I teach for, for them when they're ready to get really serious.

Kathryn: Tell us about your first major struggle.

Bonnie: So I already told you a little bit about it. For me, learning Adobe illustrator was by far the biggest struggle. It was probably the most intensive thing that I've ever learned to date, but it's also been the best thing I've ever done for my career and my business. It opened up so many doors for me and that is why I'm so passionate about teaching the program now. I really love to break it down and make it understandable and a step-by-step format that allows you to really understand what the program is capable of and how to use it for your business.

Bonnie: How about your first major success?

Bonnie: Yeah. My first major success was definitely signing my first contract as a fabric designer. It was all the feelings and all the tears. It was realizing my really, honestly, my life's biggest dream coming true, so it was, it was a mark in my career for sure.

Kathryn: If you could start fresh today knowing everything you already know, is there anything you would do differently?

Bonnie: I really embrace all of the trials and errors that I have done, the nos that I've heard, I have learned something out of all of them. So I don't know that I would do anything differently. I feel really grateful for the journey that I've been on and even though I have made mistakes, I feel like those are what has really molded my career into what it is today and gives me the opportunity to teach from those. So, I don't have any regrets.

Kathryn: Odds are there's no such thing as a typical day for you. Do you want to give us what a random day looks like?

Bonnie: Sure. You're right. There are no, there are no two typical days. Primarily in the work that I'm doing. It's not typical. Sometimes I'm working on a fabric collection, sometimes I'm teaching, sometimes I'm, you know, working on marketing. But I do have a fairly consistent flow to my day. So I do have two small kids. I have a three year old and a five year old. So when they came along my, my schedule got a little bit more flexible. But typically today I do the, I do the same thing almost every day. I wake up at 7:30, I go work out at 8:30. I try to work out every day, not every day, but most days. And find that this is the best way to just start with clarity and kind of exercise my mind as well so that I can show up for the rest of my day and my work. I am a bit of a geek when it comes to time management, workflow strategies and that kind of thing.

Bonnie: So I'm passionate about working in time blocks and removing any distractions during those time blocks as much as possible. So I usually get to work by 11:00, 10:30 or 11:00 and do about a four hour time block of my day's most important work. So I usually have two or three things in a day that are the most important and I try to sit down and tackle those first and then I'll have a couple of hours to kind of take care of loose ends and check social media and my email and that kind of thing. And so on an average day, I clock in about four to six hours. That's not that much. I had plenty of years where I was putting in, you know, 40 to 60 hours a week. But today I'm able to do more, like four to six hours a day. And then by the afternoon I'm really able to be present with my family and be with them from, I try to kind of turn off work by the afternoon, you know, by 5:00 or so and be present with the family.

Kathryn: When you're licensing that your designs, are there any sort of exclusivity agreements?

Bonnie: There's definitely exclusivity agreements. Typically in a contract for a licensing contract, there will be a exclusivity for the company and typically for the industry. So for instance, if I license a collection of designs for the fabric industry, then I wouldn't be licensing those same designs on any other fabric product. But I could potentially license those same designs on something like wallpaper or stationary or wrapping paper or rugs, you

know, the list goes on and on. So all of that is, should be clear, clearly outlined in the contract, but it is typical.

Kathryn: Okay. But it's, it's usually specific to the design, not necessarily, if you are going to design fabric, you are going design fabric for this one particular company, and that's it.

Bonnie: That is also typical. So if you license with a company then you're generally kind of committed to that company for the whole industry and so yeah, you wouldn't really work if you're talking about fabric or any of the other industries. Say wallpaper. if I license a collection of designs with a wallpaper company, I wouldn't, I would not license other designs with another wallpaper company. You're usually exclusive and kind of committed to one company per industry. Typically.

Kathryn: When you're negotiating your contract, is there typically a number of collections or does that vary?

Bonnie: It definitely varies. I have, yeah, I've worked with a different number of just singular patterns or collections with companies all over. I typically do two fabric collections in a year. For the companies that I do more seasonal stuff with, like rugs or aprons and that kind of thing. It'll be more one off patterns, not one off, that's not the right term, but say pick and choose four to six patterns for a collection or something like that. So it does vary all over the board as you get to work with different companies and manufacturers.

Kathryn: Do you keep up with any kind of continuing education, formal or informal?

Bonnie: I do. And I'm a big believer in being a lifelong learner and always being a student. So I always try to take at least one, one course a year. I have taken three so far this year. I think I'm, I'm up to, to spending around \$10,000 so far this year on my own education. I'm a big book lover. I try to read about one book a month, at least that directly relates to my industry or my business or where I want to go with my business. So for me, it's this cycle of learning, implementing, and then being able to teach what I've learned from that process that kind of keeps my entire brand and career moving forward. So I'm a big huge believer in learning and then implementing what I've learned and then really learning through that process and then being able to kind of turn around and teach it to my students.

Kathryn: What are you excited about right now in pattern design?

Bonnie: You know, I think the thing that's most exciting is the amount of people who are learning what surface pattern design even is. I will never forget the moment that I realized what surface pattern design was and that it was, you know, a real career option. I felt like it just took everything in my life that I loved and wrapped it up in this beautiful career option. And people still, I still see them have that same realization today, but the more years that have gone by, the more and more people have learned about it and the industry is just filled with the most beautiful, lovely people. It's real, it's a real honor to be a part of it.

Kathryn: Now, it's time to get into the numbers. What would you say your income range is and how long have you been doing the work?

New Speaker: Okay. So I started in 2012, so I signed my first contract in 2012 late in that year though, so 2013 was really the first year that I started to see any kind of an income. And now these numbers are raw and you know, business numbers before taxes and all that kind of thing. And they're also including my surface design work and my work as an educator. But in 2013 I made around \$18,000. We, for these early years, my husband and I struggled immensely. I mean, I was not making, before 2013 I was making anywhere between \$5,000 and \$12,000 a year with my blog. My husband was just barely above the poverty line, we were in, in California, with his income. So we, we had one car, we, we really struggled, but he saw, really saw me loving what I was doing and pouring my energy in my heart there. And so in 2013 it started to turn around and every year since 2013 I have been able to double my income. And so for 2019 that puts me at the seven figure mark and I am on track to meet that by the end of the year. So that is where I am today. And it's really been an incredible, incredible last, what is that, six years?

Kathryn: First, congratulations. We don't, we don't often see self-employed artists who, get all of their ducks in a row in that way.

Bonnie: Yeah. Yes. Thank you. Thank you very much. Helping artists get their ducks in their row in this way is one of my biggest life life passions that could sum up what I do is I help artists get their ducks in a row. That's great.

Kathryn: For someone who is looking at concentrating on surface pattern design, what do you think the beginning income range would be?

Bonnie: I think that the average income range is around \$58,000 a year for just surface design work alone. I think the range is around \$40,000 to \$80,000. I personally know several professional surface designers who are easily into the six figure range, but it takes a little bit of time to get the ball rolling with licensing because you have to start with your artwork. But as you license more and more and more the, the ball really gets to roll and you see a much bigger impact. So one of the best things about surface design that I touched on already a little bit is that you can license your design. You do, you do your designs once and then you can license them over and over and over again on, in different industries. So it really allows your artwork to breathe and stretch and have kind of a life of its own. So, the more you do that with more and more artwork, the more the ball's going to roll.

Kathryn: When someone is first starting out, about how long do you think it would take to get that first contract?

Bonnie: Yeah. This, this question depends on so many factors. It depends on their artwork, how well rounded their collections and their portfolio is. And also what kind of platform they have online. If they have, you know, a following and a signature style, all of these things are the things that I teach about. But for me it took about six months to get my first contract and then it took about another 10 months to get my first paycheck basically

from, from that contract. And so it does take a, I would say give yourself a year to find your first licensing contract and then start to benefit from it. But then once you get that going, then you can really add onto it quickly.

Kathryn: Now I'm curious, why does it take so long from design to paycheck? What's, what's going on in there?

Bonnie: Well, it does take, it can take a bit of time to just to get your first licensing contract. Primarily because art directors are known for, to be busy. I mean it's not uncommon for an art director, for a large company to get a hundred submissions from artists in a week. And so it can take a little bit of time to get feedback from them to hear some yeses, hear some nos. And then you have, depending on the industry and the product, then you have this time of creating the actual product and working with a manufacturer. So whether it be fabric by the yard or wallpaper would probably be one of the quicker turnarounds. But something like home goods, like I do pillows and rugs, they all have to be designed, manufactured, brought back, you know, marketed and sold. And then typically when you license your artwork, you get paid quarterly. So you get paid four times a year. So, by the time all of that has taken place, then you're looking at, you know, somewhere between six and 12 months usually.

Kathryn: Okay. So they're not, they're not doing or they're not paying you anything on spec. It's all based on sales.

Bonnie: Licensing is all based on sales, which is what I love about it. It's income based on percentages. And so when, when I changed, I would actually love to talk about this for a second. So when I was selling handmade goods in my Etsy shop, I remember literally calculating the maximum amount of income that I could possibly make. And that was if I did nothing but make my product every day, and if I sold 100% of them, then I could easily calculate before moving to hiring help and outsourcing, that kind of thing, I could easily calculate my highest income. It wasn't until I wrapped my head around residual income, recurring revenue and income based on percentages that my business was really able to take off and start doubling. So licensing is income based on percentages and it's somewhat residual income too because you do the work once and then you can gain income from it for years and years in multiple industries. And so typically, you get a percentage of wholesale, so you're not in charge of the manufacturing or the actual selling of the product. All you're doing is creating the artwork and licensing it. So then you get, there are different standards for percentages depending on the industry, so I won't get into that. But you get a percentage returned to you from the wholesale amount that has been sold each quarter.

Kathryn: Not to get into the individual percentages like you said, but about what is, what is a range that you would be looking at?

Bonnie: So I think anywhere from four to 15%, something like that. But that's a big range. But it very much depends on the industry. So it depends on how big the company is that you're working with and if it's fabric by the yard or if it's wallpaper and that kind of thing. But I would say somewhere between four and 15% would, would cover most licensing agreements.

- Kathryn: When you're negotiating your contract, is there room to negotiate the price or is that standardized?
- Bonnie: I think that is fairly standardized, but I also think that everything is negotiable. So, there's no harm in discussing the percentage that they are offering. There's no reason why you can't ask for more and you know, see what they say. So I, I have done, I have done both. I've, I've heard no, you know, before when I've tried to negotiate, but I've also heard yes. So I, I don't feel like there's any hard rules around that.
- Kathryn: What do you do to keep your income stable if anything?
- Bonnie: I do. So for me, the licensing, you know, we're definitely kind of talking about both sides of my business here. The licensing for me is very stable, it's quarterly and it is fairly reliable. On the education side of things. I do run a couple of courses. I run one really large course a year and February called the immersion course for surface designers. But the thing that probably keeps my income the most stable is a membership that I offer and that would be the best source of recurring revenue that I have active in my business. So I have a membership for aspiring or established artists and surface designers called Flourish. And it is a, I've been doing this membership since 2012 since late 2012 we have just over 1700 members today and it's just, it's an incredible community. So the difference primarily between my course and my membership is that in my course I'm acutely focused on surface design and developing surface pattern designers, but also teaching Adobe illustrator from the ground up.
- Bonnie: Flourish, in my membership, is really where we're able to apply everything that there is to apply in an online business. It is surface design focused, but I have many just creative entrepreneurs in there as well. It's where I get to talk about building a platform and an audience and email lists and serving your community. We talk about licensing. I have swipe scripts for emailing art directors. We have, we have a master list of licensing companies that you can reach out to and that kind of thing. So the membership is set up to receive content four times a month, so one time a week. I do monthly live Q and A calls for members and the members really just, it's honestly, it's just one of the most magical communities that I've ever witnessed. Everyone is just incredibly supportive. They champion each other, they help each other. If there's ever a question that gets posted in the group, it's immediately, you know, answered by, by fellow members or myself. So anyways, that is Flourish in a nutshell. And it's also definitely the thing that is most stable in. My business members pay a monthly fee, it's \$27 a month. So, it's also incredibly affordable. Or there's an annual option that that lets members save a little bit.
- Kathryn: So we talked a little about Adobe illustrator. Are there any tools or gear you would recommend beginners start with?
- Bonnie: I do, and there are a lot of tools out there can be a little overwhelming, but to get started you really don't need much. You need a pencil or a pen and a sketchbook and then you do need Adobe illustrator. You don't necessarily need a drawing tablet like a Wacom. tablet or an iPad. Those things come in handy. But I of course didn't have an iPad when I was working and starting out. I did have a Wacom tablet, which I used. But

there are plenty of ways to design without those two things. So really, you need Adobe Illustrator and a drawing device and a camera or just your phone camera works great as well. I do have a list of my favorite tools and supplies. You want to check that out? It's bonniechristine.com/tools-supplies and I list all of the things that are essential, that you must have, which are those three or four things that I've just mentioned and then all of the things that you can play with, you can have if you want. I will say that there seems to be a bit of confusion around an iPad versus Adobe Illustrator and at this point an iPad cannot replace a good old computer with Illustrator on it. Illustrator's not available for the iPad and so if you actually want to be able to deliver files in a professional manner, you usually do end up having to have a computer with Illustrator on it.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to get into surface pattern design?

Bonnie: My biggest tip is to dream big and to start doing that one thing every single day. That just moves you towards that dream and for a lot, a lot of the time it may just be sitting down and Googling, you know, the next thing that you need to do. Just doing some research or reaching out to someone and asking them questions, but if you can just commit yourself to doing just one small thing every day towards accomplishing the biggest, scariest dream that you can put words to, then you're not going to believe the amount of progress and ground you can cover at the end of six months, 12 months and 18 months.

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Bonnie: Well, I have three, three things on the books that are big and exciting. Flourish only, my membership, it only opens twice a year and so it opens in October and in April so the next registration period for Flourish will be October 25th then the immersion course is only once a year. It's a big course, it's 10, 10 weeks long and it's, I liken it to like a college course for Adobe Illustrator and surface design. We open enrollment for that on February 18th and then the, another really exciting thing that I have going on this winter, fall/winter is that I am working on a planner for creatives, a 2020 planner for creative entrepreneurs or surface designers who really want to, really want to hone their skills for time management and workflow. And so that will be coming out in November and I'm, I'm really, really excited to offer it.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Bonnie: You can find me anywhere that you can find [bonniechristine](http://bonniechristine.com), I'm [bonniechristine](http://bonniechristine.com) on Instagram, my website is bonniechristine.com. You can find me on Facebook as well, and then you can find all of it on [bonniechristine](http://bonniechristine.com), but the website also for Flourish is surfacedesigntribe.com.

Kathryn: Bonnie, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Bonnie: Thank you so much. It's been an honor to be here with you today.

Kathryn: If you want your own location independent life and are eager to take that next step, join us in compass insiders where every week I send you actionable tips, inspiration, and motivation so you can take that next step towards going remote. Join us now at compasspod.com/insiders Did you enjoy this episode of Compass? If so, please take a moment to write a review. Leaving a review helps other women find us so they can find their direction too. Thank you for listening to Compass. You can find today's show notes at compasspod.com/039 that's compasspod.com/039. Join us next week when we talk with Britt Sheflin, hypnotherapist.