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HEN YOU TURN OFF THE QUIET COUNTY ROAD onto the stretch of gravel and dirt that leads to Clair Allison's horse farm, you forget you're just a stone's throw from the bustling traffic and shopping centers of Highway 280. But while close in proximity, Clairmont is miles away in spirit.

Clairmont, Clair's self-named farm, which sits on 24 bucolic acres in Shelby County, is the realization of a childhood dream. "This is all she's wanted to do since she was two," says Pam Allison, Clair's mom. Inspired by her mother's passion for horses, Clair began riding at three years old and never stopped. "It's hereditary," Clair says of her love for horses.

Clair specializes in riding and jumping hunter jumpers, and she's been successfully competing on the hunter circuit since she was eight or nine. After graduating high school, Clair apprenticed

at Hunter Hill, a Gainesville, Georgia, farm that she trained with since she was 13. "They taught me so much," Clair says. "Horseback riding at a level you can't imagine." She went on to Auburn where she was a member of the equestrian team. In 2003, Clair finished the season ranked second nationally in the Intercollegiate Horse Show National Equitation Finals, a competition featuring the country's best collegiate equestrians.

After leaving Auburn, Clair began her property search in earnest, anxious to open her own farm. After looking at a number of properties, Clair's real estate agent brought her to the heavily wooded site that would become Clairmont. "I always had a vision of having a farm like this," she says. "And I've been drawing barns forever. Some girls plan their weddings; I've been planning for this."

Armed with barn drawings and ideas aplenty, Clair turned to family friend Vaughn Rives, President of Rives Construction Company, and architect Joel Williams of The Williams Partnership, to bring Clairmont from dream to reality. "Clair did a lot of research before starting the project," Williams says. "And she had inspirational photographs of horse stables with the feel and character she was drawn to."

The result of the collaboration is an 8,000-square-foot barn that features 2,000 square feet of living space and a 6,000-square-foot stable. With Clair's vision of combining the residence and barn, Williams was challenged to create a space that was comfortable for both humans and horses. The result "feels more similar to a small church than the typical residence or private barn," Williams says. "Because the residence requires a more intimate scale than the stable, the relationship of various ceiling heights, window and door sizes, and building width for the stable wings and the central residence had to be carefully coordinated to ensure the interior spaces were well proportioned in relation to one another and enhanced the character of the farm." Clair praises Williams' barn design, saying, "It's like he went into my dreams and pulled it out. It's just perfect."

For Clair, working with horses is a 24-hour-a-day job, and the horses are her first priority, which is why she wanted to live in a space connected to the barn. For convenience, Williams designed two balconies on either side of Clair's bedroom, one that opens onto the stable and one that opens onto the front pasture. "With the balconies, I can check on the horses any time day or night," Clair says. And to make the barn more homey, Williams used elements such as the balconies, cupolas, stable and stall doors, material selections, and carpentry details to give it a richer, well-crafted look.

Not content to sit on the sidelines and watch others do all the work, the Allison family contributed significantly to the project. Clair and Pam stained the residence's concrete floors and installed hardwoods, and Clair and her father, Dr. Tom Allison, did all the tile work in the master bathroom. And in pure Allison fashion, Clair and Pam erected the farm's 11,000 feet of fencing—*alone*. "Our blood, sweat, and tears are in this place, literally," says Clair.

As for Clairmont's equine residents, the barn features 18 stalls measuring 12 feet by 12 feet with special rubber matting and an automatic watering system. There is a tack room, and isolation stall for new arrivals, and three grooming bays. Currently, all but four stalls have been reserved, and new horses are arriving daily. There are a number of pastures for wandering and a competition-size riding and jumping ring.

Clair's future plans for Clairmont include training, breeding, boarding, and sales of hunter jumpers, and she will teach both competitive and amateur riders. She also plans to hit the all-important show circuit as the owner of her own farm next year. ○

Pam Allison painted the Clairmont sign from a photograph of Clair's favorite horse, Rushlyn, who was given to her by her former employers at Hunter Hill. "She [Rushlyn] was my best teacher," Clair says. "Horses teach you a lot of things." Rushlyn, the inspiration for Clairmont, died last year and is buried on the property.

For more information on Clairmont, contact Clair Allison at (205) 672-3174 or visit www.clairmonthunters.com.



[OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT AND RIGHT] Clair's bedroom features a vaulted ceiling, large, exposed cedar beams, and hardwood floors installed by Clair and her mom Pam; Clair riding Quest.

[MIDDLE, LEFT TO RIGHT] Riding gear in the barn's tack room; Clair with just some of her many riding competition ribbons; The airy dining area opens to the kitchen and living room with doors into the barn.

[BOTTOM, LEFT AND RIGHT] One of Clair's equine charges enjoys the view from her stall; the exterior of Clairmont.



[THIS PAGE] Clair gets the attention of her equine charges with the popular feed bucket.



THIS PAGE: [TOP] A balcony from the sitting area of Clair's bedroom opens onto the barn so Clair can keep an eye on the horses 24 hours a day. [MIDDLE AND BOTTOM] Clair scoured eBay for decorative items and fixtures for the residence and barn. Both of the hand-hammered copper sinks—in the kitchen and master bathroom—and the decorative iron horse heads are eBay finds.