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TOWN AND COUNTRY

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HER OWN BRAND OF LIFE

Laura Verallo Bertotto's trailblazing lifestyle is a result of learning to love what makes her different, wearing the right boots, and questioning simply everything. *By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon*

Photographs by *Toto Labrador*

LAURA VERALLO BERTOTTO is a breath of fresh air and at the same time a gust of wind. It is quickly evident that the black pants and white top she wears for our interview represent her direct, well-thought-out opinions, and that her red jacket stands for the fierceness and drive with which she approaches anything she sets her mind to do.

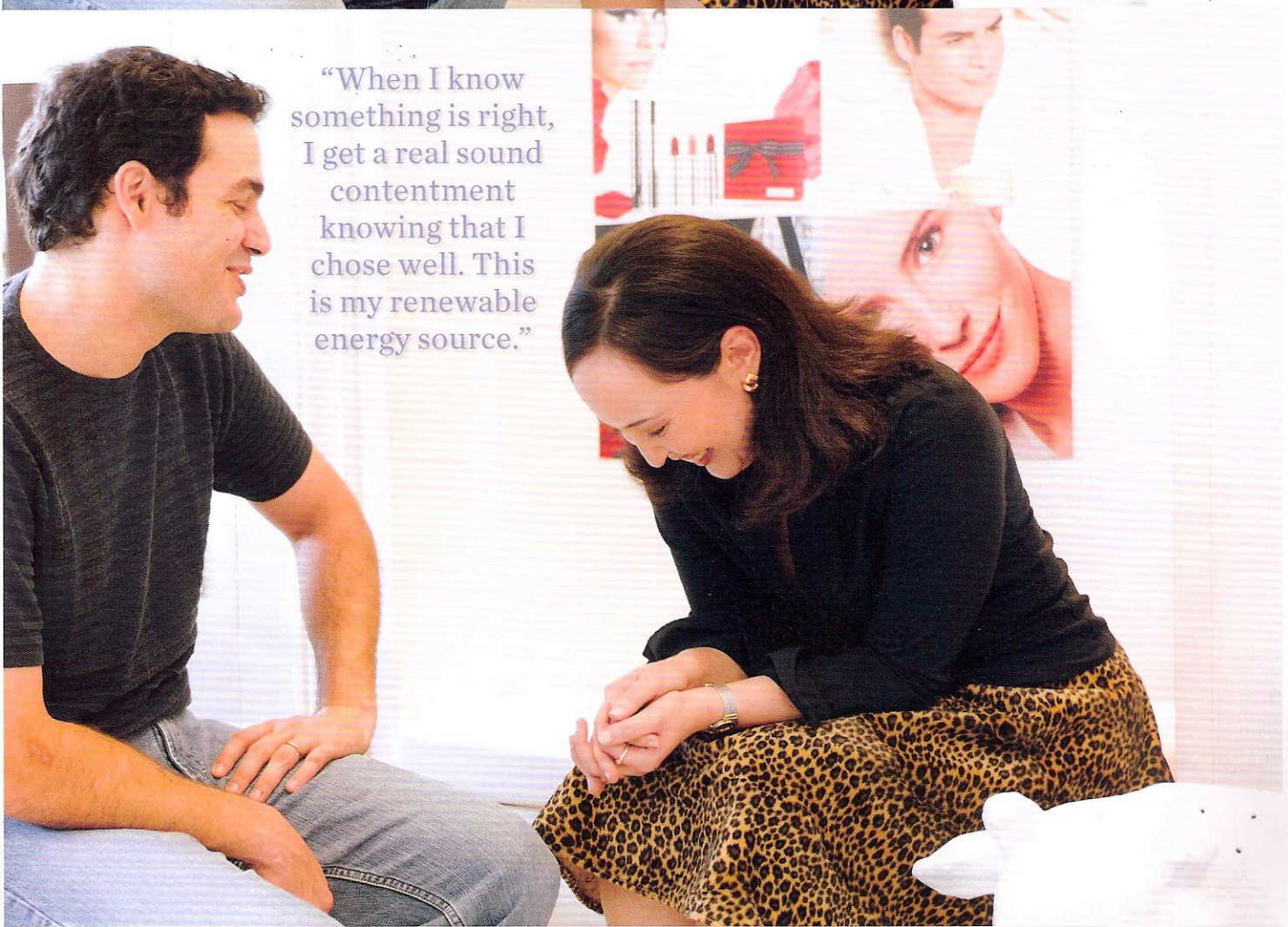
This woman is not just a contradiction: she is a flowing river of contradiction. One moment she is a whip-smart businesswoman who runs a tight ship, and the next moment, she has you in giggles as she contorts her face first into a lizard, then a mosquito (at which point she buzzes), and finally into a velociraptor trapped in his egg trying to be birthed! Bertotto becomes an actress just to demonstrate how she entertained herself while sitting in front of a mirror during her years as an only child.



Bertotto at the VMV
Hypoallergenics store in
Bonifacio High Street.



Bertotto with husband,
business partner and
occasional VMV model,
Juan Pablo.



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Our conversation flows effortlessly from semiotics to childhood insecurities to the importance of combating intolerance, to her passion for the boots that complete her outfit. This spitfire breaks into a huge smile, declaring, "I love boots! If you want the sexiness, power and height of heels but don't want to feel as delicate as you might in strappy sandals, boots are perfect. I guess I need the testosterone of the boot."

This imaginative lady had a somewhat unusual childhood, and as she reveals some of its key elements, the roots of what made her into who she is today slowly emerge. As the only child for eleven years of Dr. Vermén Verallo-Rowell, a working single mother without a large extended family, Bertotto spent a lot of time alone, in hospitals, or with adults. She also developed a close friendship with her mother.

It was difficult growing up in conservative Manila in the 1970s and '80s, Bertotto says. Never able to "fit in," she developed defenses to combat feeling like an outcast. She recounts, "I was not as pretty as my friends and I was always running around with my hair unkempt, not knowing how to dress. I compensated by developing my brain and my humor. I evolved into this angst-ridden girl who was 'different' because I liked art, thought Nietzsche spoke to me, and thought myself 'deeper' than my peers."

She recalls, "Growing up, I felt the ideal of the Filipina was not to be smart, insightful and challenging, but quiet, feminine and pretty like a lotus blossom—and I could not stand this." It was not until she got to university, she says, that "I realized a woman could be all of the above."

But the greatest influence on the way Bertotto approaches her life was her no-nonsense mother's firm belief that mediocrity was not an option. She remembers, "I was taught that if you are going to do something, big or small, you better do it really well or not at all." Although growing up with a fear of failure often kept her from trying new things, it is this same sense of "insecurity" that now motivates her to do her best and explains much of her life's successes. "If you ask me to do something," she explains, "I will probably overdo it because I won't want you to think I didn't try hard enough. This is so built into my DNA that it even informs my moral compass. I am so insecure about nobility and compassion that I feel I am letting the universe down if I don't do what I know is right."

At age fifteen, Bertotto was sent to Canterbury School in Connecticut. It proved to be a turning point in her life. Boarding school taught her hard work, humility and the power of reinvention. Although lacking the confidence to make friends in her first year, she soon realized that since no one knew her at the school, she had the perfect opportunity to be whoever she wanted to be. She remembers, "I showed up the next year attitude a-

blazing, had a GPA of 4.2, joined a play, sports teams and the literary magazine!"

From there, she spent five years getting double bachelor's and master's degrees at activist-oriented Brown University, a period that was vital to her growth as it was then that her belief system fell apart. Everything she once knew to be true no longer was. She also discovered a love for semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols in our culture and why they stand for what they do, i.e. why white means good and dark equates to evil. It is the theory of language, which allows students to take apart beliefs accepted as "normal".

For someone who grew up in a society where she was largely taught not to question, majoring in semiotics allowed Bertotto to challenge "truths" academically. She says, "I was no longer just the rebel anarchist. I learned to look back at history to reach conclusions. I think it's vital that people have all the information before forming opinions. I think so much damage has been done in the name of 'causes' that have been sold as unquestionable 'truths'."

During her last year at Brown, Bertotto decided she would remain single until she reached a place where, she says, "I never felt freer in my life. I could breathe for the first time. I got to like who I was." It's not surprising that soon after making this discovery, she met Juan Pablo Bertotto, an Argentine whose relaxed nature proved him to be the perfect husband with whom she could continue her trend-setting life.

One of the most important lessons her time in America taught her, Bertotto says, is this: "It's tempting to keep blaming the world for whatever it is that has you dissatisfied. Past experiences are valid in making you who you are, but how you are defined by those experiences and move forward is all you. Taking responsibility for myself was one of the biggest steps I had to take. It was liberating, strengthening, and it helped me make better decisions in all aspects of my life."

She eventually started on a Ph.D. in ethnic studies at UC Berkeley, with the goal of becoming a professor of cultural theory. In 1998, however, her stepfather, Glendon Rowell, Ph.D., became ill and her mother requested her to return to the Philippines to help with the company they had started, VMV Hypoallergenics. Her personal experience with the brand led her to commit to it completely. She explains, "I had terrible acne as a child and was one of the first to try out my mother's formulations. That the brand is really honest, uncompromising and changes lives really got to me. I remember how hard it was on my self-esteem to look so bad as a young girl."

Sharing the helm of VMV with her husband since 2004, she has seized the opportunity to help the brand grow into the "big



britches" she always felt it could be. Although VMV had historically relied on science as its competitive edge, Bertotto believed this was not the entirety of the brand. "We really do help people," she says. "Our clients are the most desperate in terms of skin problems. They can't use anything else." Aside from being the only validated hypoallergenic brand, VMV offers "skin safety" as a lifestyle. "Our brand is not easy, not immediate glitz. It's a complicated, funny little duck of a brand. I mean, who makes scentless shampoo and flavorless toothpaste?" Bertotto adds.

One of the greatest challenges in building this lifestyle brand has been addressing skin problems of highly allergic patients without making the brand too medicinal. VMV's brand image attempts to wed characteristics which are not natural partners—

the company wanted it to be approachable, friendly, educational and unintimidating, a brand that produced solutions from serious science but was still cuddly and welcoming.

The design of VMV's latest boutique at Bonifacio High Street reflects this straddling of worlds. Because the brand is very personal to her family, Bertotto decided to introduce bits of the family into the store. She explains, "The shaving line is because of my husband, and the baby line, because of our baby. I wanted the new store to be clinical but with a big, heaping spoonful of New England—my stepfather's family is very WASP—and a touch of Juampi's family farms in Argentina."

Bertotto's most recent accomplishment has been motherhood, a chapter which she enjoys more than she ever imagined, yet one which came with shadows that she speaks of with characteristically refreshing candor. For eleven months, she says, she had nightly panic attacks but she eventually learned to relax and to focus on being in the moment with Madison, her baby. "Now, when I am with her, I'm with her, not worrying, not anywhere else," she says.

Her bout with the baby blues also took a toll on her marriage. Therapy helped her to rebalance herself and reconnect with her husband. Laura's path to healing culminated in a recent trip to New York City with both Juan Pablo and Madison. The trip was especially poignant for the Bertottos because it was their first time to travel with their daughter. "Some people," Laura declares, "need a spa to feel better but I need a trip to New York. It's bigger than you, no matter who you are, and it puts everything in perspective. The most relaxing thing is just strolling up and down the street, smiling and chatting with random people every now and then. It's not to make friends, it's just connecting with another person."

Perhaps the power behind Bertotto's success is that, like her brand, her character blends qualities that are not often found in the same person. Or perhaps it is that from thought to action, she has instinctively spent her life pushing boundaries. The belief that the unexamined life is no life at all may have started for her at school, but her belief that one has a moral obligation to constantly think, question and analyze, even if it causes one to grapple with challenging truths, remains her life's greatest passion.

Bertotto reveals, "I suppose this is why I still want to be a professor. I want to help teach how I was taught to think." Her own eloquence explains the power that truth has in her own life. "When I know something is right, I get a real sound contentment knowing that I chose well. This is my renewable energy source."

I am not sure there is one answer to explain how far this lady has come. All I know is that if she ever becomes a professor, I would sign up for her class. ❖



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