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Whisking Up Something Special

August is always a special month for me because it is my son’s birthday month. As a mom, there are certain memories and traditions that become more meaningful with time, and for our family, one of those traditions is Granny’s gumbo.

Every time my son comes home, there is one meal he looks forward to more than anything — Granny’s gumbo. It is more than just a recipe. It is comfort, family, history, and love all served in one bowl. This recipe came from my grandmother, and over the years it has become something that connects generations of our family together.

There is something so special about the way a family recipe can bring everyone back to the table. It reminds us of where we came from, the people who shaped us, and the traditions we hope to carry forward. For my son, Granny’s gumbo is one of those meals that feels like home no matter where life takes him.

As we celebrate his birthday this August, I wanted to share this special recipe with you. It is one that means a lot to our family, and I hope it brings warmth, comfort, and maybe even a new tradition to your home as well.



From my kitchen to yours!

STEPHANIE MILLER

Granny’s Chicken Gumbo

Ingredients

- 1 whole chicken or 3 to 4 pounds of chicken thighs/breasts
- 1 pound smoked sausage, sliced
- 1 cup tallow
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 bell pepper, chopped
- 3 celery stalks, chopped
- 3 to 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 8 to 10 cups chicken broth
- 1 can diced tomatoes, optional
- 1 to 2 cups sliced okra, optional
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning, more to taste
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- Salt to taste
- Cooked white rice
- Chopped green onions, for serving
- File powder, optional

Directions

1. In a large pot, boil the chicken in seasoned water or chicken broth until fully cooked and tender. Remove the chicken, let it cool slightly, then shred or chop it into bite-sized pieces. Save the broth for the gumbo.
2. In a large heavy pot, make the roux by combining the tallow and flour over medium heat. Stir constantly until the roux becomes a deep caramel or chocolate-brown color. This takes patience, but it is what gives gumbo its rich flavor.
3. Once the roux is the right color, add the chopped onion, bell pepper, celery, and garlic. Cook until the vegetables are soft and fragrant.
4. Slowly stir in the chicken broth. Add the chicken, sliced sausage, bay leaves, Cajun seasoning, black pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, and salt. Add tomatoes and okra, if using.
5. Let the gumbo simmer on low for at least 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring occasionally. The longer it simmers, the better the flavor.
6. Serve hot over white rice and top with green onions. Add file powder at the table, if desired.

From my family to yours, I hope August brings you moments around the table, time with the people you love, and reminders of what truly makes a house feel like home.



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JAYTON MILLER

Writer



WRITING A LIFE BY DESIGN

When people think about writing, they often picture someone sitting quietly behind a computer screen. For Jayton Miller, writing has never been just about words. It’s about helping people tell their stories, communicate their value, and build businesses that make a meaningful impact.

For nearly a decade, Jayton has worked as a writer and content strategist, helping companies educate consumers and connect with their audiences through clear, purposeful content. Today, he writes for businesses across multiple industries, including health and wellness and real estate, but his journey into writing began much earlier than most would expect.

While attending college, Jayton became fascinated by the health and wellness space. Rather than simply consuming content from companies he admired, he decided to reach out to one directly. What started as a conversation led to an opportunity to assist with research and writing projects. That opportunity quickly grew into a full-time position that would shape the next chapter of his life.

For eight years, Jayton worked with the company, developing his skills as a researcher, writer, and communicator. Along the way, he learned an important lesson that continues to guide his work today.

“Good content should provide value,” he says. “If someone spends their time reading something you’ve written, they should walk away knowing something they didn’t know before or with a deeper understanding of a topic they’ve been trying to better understand.”

That belief remains at the center of everything he creates. Whether he’s writing educational articles, business profiles, customer-focused content, or strategic marketing pieces, Jayton focuses on delivering one clear message and helping businesses communicate it effectively.



“I believe in clear communication,” he explains. “A lot of content tries to accomplish too many things at once. The best content is focused, helpful, and aligned with the goals of the business.”

After nearly a decade with the same company, Jayton found himself at a crossroads. Leaving a stable position and stepping into entrepreneurship brought both uncertainty and opportunity. Rather than seeking another traditional role, he decided to build something of his own.

Launching a freelance writing and content strategy business came with challenges. Like many business owners, he had to learn how to wear multiple hats, manage client relationships, and navigate the realities of self-employment.

Yet the experience also brought something he deeply values: freedom.

“The transition wasn’t always easy, but it’s given me a sense of pride knowing that I’m able to support my family on my own terms,” he says.

Today, Jayton partners with companies throughout the country, helping them communicate their expertise, educate consumers, and showcase the value they bring to their customers. He enjoys working with businesses that are passionate about what they do and believes great content can help bridge the gap between a company’s mission and the people it serves.

Outside of work, Jayton enjoys spending time with his wife, Emily, and their



dog, Willie. You’ll often find him fishing local waters, training Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, or tending to plants and gardening projects. Those hobbies provide balance, challenge, and an opportunity to stay connected to the outdoors.

Looking toward the future, Jayton’s vision extends far beyond business growth alone. He and Emily hope to build a homestead where they can spend more of their time growing food, caring for animals, and creating a life centered around family, self-sufficiency, and meaningful work.

His goal is to continue growing his writing business in a way that supports that vision, allowing him to work primarily from home while contributing to the day-to-day rhythm of the farm and homestead they hope to build together.

For Jayton, success isn’t measured solely by clients gained or projects completed. It’s measured by freedom, relationships, and the ability to build a life that reflects his values.

Whether through writing or simply helping people solve problems, he remains committed to creating value wherever he can one project, one client, and one story at a time. ▀



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Jesse Joe Molinar

BY BETH MCCABE
PHOTOS BY THE STONES
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Jesse Joe Molinar did not plan to become a real estate agent. After years of searching, struggling, praying, and surrendering, he discovered the place where all the pieces of his life finally made sense.

Today, Jesse has a growing career, a powerful testimony, and a deep conviction that God led him exactly where he was meant to be. Before real estate, Jesse had lived many different chapters.

“I’ve done almost everything you can think of under the sun,” he says.

He started working at just 14 years old at a car wash. From there, his work ethic only grew. Over the years, Jesse worked as a firefighter paramedic, in machine shops, in oilfield trucking, in outside sales, in fiber optics with AT&T in Austin, and as an operations supervisor for an oilfield chemical company.

For a long time, he wondered why he could not seem to settle into one profession. After a couple of years in one job, he would start asking, “What’s next?”

His uncle used to tell him, “You’ve got to find your niche.”

At the time, Jesse did not fully understand what that meant.

“I thought, I’m never going to find my niche,” he recalls.

The turning point came after one of the most difficult seasons of his life. Jesse was working in a stressful corporate oilfield position that left him feeling overwhelmed. The pressure was so intense that some mornings he woke up feeling physically sick.

At the end of 2021, he gave notice without knowing exactly what would come next.

“I told my boss, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’m going to figure it out,’” Jesse says.



During that same season, Jesse was also battling alcohol abuse. In May 2022, after a two-day binge, he woke up knowing something had to change.

“I thought, I’m going to lose my life. I’m going to lose my family,” he says.

That week, Jesse sat alone on the couch and had an honest conversation with God.

“I said, ‘God, I give up. I need your help. If I don’t give my life to you, I’m going to end up dead, in jail, or something is going to happen,’” he recalls. “I told Him, ‘I’m going to let You control the ship now.’”

Jesse surrendered his life to God, was later baptized at Crossroads in Odessa, and quit drinking cold turkey. Last month, he celebrated four years of sobriety.

“I give God the credit,” he says. “Without Him, I don’t think I could have done it by myself.”

Not long after, Jesse began working in manufactured home sales. It was there that he started to realize how much he enjoyed helping people with housing. But he also realized he wanted to be in a business rooted in integrity, not greed.

Around that same time, the same Scripture kept showing up in his life: Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

His niece shared it with him. Then a customer brought it up while praying about a purchase. Then, on Jesse’s second day working for Betenbough Homes, the same verse was spoken over him during a company Bible study.

It was confirmation.

“It was like God was saying, ‘You’re right where you’re supposed to be,’” he says.

At Betenbough Homes, Jesse finally began to understand what his uncle had meant

all those years earlier. His background in the oilfield, emergency services, construction, trucking, and technology helped him connect with people from all walks of life.

“I told my uncle, ‘I think I found my niche,’” Jesse says.

After more than two years with Betenbough, Jesse began considering real estate. Donovan Earl, who had originally hired him and later started a real estate team, encouraged him to make the move. Jesse took the leap carefully, saving a financial cushion for his family while completing his licensing courses around a full-time job.

Even the course itself felt like a nudge from God. Jesse had hesitated because of the cost, then won a \$300 gift card, the exact amount he needed to pay for the course.

“I was like, ‘What in the world?’” he says with a laugh. “God was like, ‘Here you go.’”

I give God the credit.

Without Him, I don’t think I could have done it by myself.”



Jesse earned his license and entered real estate in early 2025. His first transaction was helping his parents purchase a small ranch in Eden, Texas. From there, his first year quickly gained momentum, closing more than 24 transactions.

“This job is very fulfilling,” Jesse says. “I really feel like God has me here where He wants me.”

He also lives by simple advice he heard from local businessman John Bushman at a Bass Pro Shops groundbreaking: keep things simple and treat others the way you want to be treated. Jesse added

his own third principle: put God first.

“That’s what I try to bring into real estate and everyday life,” he says. “I’m not perfect, but I try.”

Jesse’s wife, Sandy, has been by his side through the highs and lows. The couple has been together 11 years and married on January 16 of this year. They have two daughters: Jessandra, 9, whose name is a blend of Jesse and Sandy, and Harlee, 5, whose name was inspired by Jesse’s Harley-Davidson days.

When Jesse is not working, he is with his family,

cheering on his daughters in soccer, spending time at the family ranch, hunting, going to the lake, or enjoying life outdoors.

Looking back, Jesse no longer sees his past as a series of wrong turns. It was preparation.

The firefighter, the oilfield worker, the salesman, the father, the husband, the man who hit rock bottom and found faith, all of it shaped the REALTOR® he is today.

“I love real estate,” Jesse says. “People tell me, ‘Jesse, you’re right where you’re supposed to be.’ And I believe that.”



This job is very fulfilling.

I really feel like God has me here where He wants me.”



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Nicole Pool

SIMS & GUESS
REALTORS

BY BETH MCCABE
PHOTOS BY THE STONES PHOTO + FILM

“Real estate is always something I loved,” says Nicole Pool.

“Growing up, my mom always had some kind of project going on at the house, either redecorating or remodeling.”



“
The people in this business make me the most passionate. Getting to be part of their vision and their dreams of homeownership gives me so much energy.”

That early exposure left a lasting impression. Nicole remembers a childhood filled with prestigious design magazines—Architectural Digest, Traditional Home, and Veranda—scattered across tables, acting as blueprints for her mother’s next vision. Watching her mother constantly dream, sketch, and envision spaces sparked a lifelong fascination with structure and design. Originally, Nicole assumed that passion would lead her down a traditional path to architecture school or even law school.

Instead, she discovered a completely different calling during her undergraduate years: education.

Nicole went on to earn her Master’s Degree in Education and spent eight rewarding years as an elementary school teacher, specializing in third and fourth grades. While she initially believed her future lay in curriculum development, life changed when she became pregnant with her son, Wyatt. Nicole’s husband, Dustin, is a dedicated pharmacist whose

strict retail schedule leaves no day-to-day flexibility to care for a sick child. Realizing that the rigid structure of a grade-school classroom clashed with her new responsibilities as a mother, Nicole made a pivotal choice in her mid-to-late 30s.

In 2019, she took a leap of faith, earned her real estate license, and never looked back.

An Educator’s Heart

“I didn’t think about it beforehand, but the very first time I worked with first-time homebuyers—or clients who hadn’t purchased a property in 15 years—I realized how much they forget about the little steps involved,” Nicole reflects. “I could instantly feel my educator heart take over. I realized, ‘Oh, I am

an educator to these clients.’ That is exactly why I landed here, and it’s why I love this business so much.”

Real estate transactions are notorious for being emotional rollercoasters, but Nicole’s background allows her to serve as a calming

anchor. Depending on the day, she steps seamlessly into the roles of a coordinator, a counselor, a cheerleader, and a fierce advocate.

“The people in this business make me the most passionate,” Nicole says. “Getting to be part of their vision and their dreams of homeownership gives me so much energy. Seeing the excitement on their faces when they realize a house is ‘the right one’ excites me all over again. It never gets old.”

Active Interests

Nicole’s drive and work ethic were modeled early on by her goal-oriented parents, who taught her the value of hard work. However, she attributes much of her mental toughness under pressure to a sport she picked up at five years old: tennis.

After playing competitively through high school and taking a brief hiatus in her twenties, Nicole returned to the court after having children as a vital source of “me time” and stress relief.

She notes that the parallels between a fierce tennis match and a complex real estate negotiation are striking.

- Consistency under Pressure: Tennis requires navigating long, grueling baseline rallies without losing composure. In real estate, Nicole brings that same unwavering stamina to bidding wars and multi-offer deadlines.
- A Forward-Moving Mindset: A single tennis

match can stretch up to three intense hours. “If you lose a point, you have to keep moving forward,” Nicole notes. “In real estate, you have to be tough and possess a thick skin.” When going up against multiple offers, she stays positive and keeps deals moving forward.

Beyond the court, Nicole has spent the last year and a half mastering her new hobby: Mahjong. It’s a great way to relax from the rigors of real estate.

Family First

Nicole and Dustin have been together for 24 years, celebrating 19



years of marriage as college sweethearts.

Today, their children are the center of their world. Their 14-year-old daughter, Olivia, is already taller than Nicole, and they share clothes and jewelry. “Even when she was a toddler, my husband joked she was the smartest person in the room,” Nicole laughs. Olivia has inherited her mother’s athleticism on the tennis court and possesses a gifted eye for interior design.

Meanwhile, their 10-year-old son, Wyatt, boasts a massive heart, a contagious personality, and a natural athletic talent for basketball and tennis. Currently, the family is living in what they call “The Year of the Wyatt.”





“

I could instantly feel my educator heart take over. I realized, ‘Oh, I am an educator to these clients.’ That is exactly why I landed here, and it’s why I love this business so much.”

As a family that loves games of all kinds, the Pools have been keeping a running tally of how many times Wyatt has utterly dominated them at the Mahjong table.

This summer, the kids are even stepping into the family business, acting as Nicole’s official social media assistants. It is a fitting partnership, considering that real estate for Nicole is not a standard 9-to-5 job; it’s a lifestyle.

“During the height of COVID-19, my daughter was with me constantly while I worked,” Nicole shares. “I asked her, ‘Do you feel like my job takes me away from you?’ She looked at me and said, ‘No, Mom. I love what you do. It’s so cool.’ That was exactly the encouragement and motivation I needed in that moment.”

A Bright Future

As Nicole looks to the horizon, her goals remain entirely centered around client care. Driven by a business fueled by repeat clients and personal referrals, she views every recommendation as the ultimate compliment.

“Referrals mean the absolute world to me because it proves that my clients felt deeply cared for,” Nicole says.

In the coming years, she looks forward to expanding her network, building new relationships with local builders, and continuing to do what she loves most: educating, advocating for, and guiding families home. ▀



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