Like millions of young women, Christine Kornacki ’07 grew up with American Girl dolls and books. But it was a book illustration class at the Hartford Art School (HAS) that made her dream of becoming an American Girl illustrator.

“I told everyone,” Kornacki says, “my professors and my agent, that American Girl was my goal.” After graduating, she even painted one of her favorite pieces, Pioneer Girl, with American Girl in mind.

Then opportunity knocked.

“The timing was just right,” says Kornacki. “My agent happened to be in contact with American Girl when they were looking for an illustrator for a new project. I was given the opportunity to do a test painting. When I got the call that they had picked me, I couldn’t believe it. They told me Pioneer Girl was one of the reasons they chose me. I thought it would happen one day, but I figured it would be down the line.”

Kornacki, who was hired to do the project a year after she graduated, may well be the youngest artist to illustrate an American Girl book. The accomplishment so early in her career doesn’t surprise HAS faculty members who saw Kornacki’s obvious raw talent flourish at the University of Hartford.

“Christine’s ability to draw and paint incredibly beautiful pictures reflects her considerable talent and love of art,” says Bill Thomson, associate professor of illustration at HAS and himself a prize-winning children’s book illustrator and author. “But her drive, work ethic, and business skills are also impressive and equally vital to her success in the highly competitive professional illustration market.”

Originally from Simsbury, Conn., Kornacki is the first artist in a family that, she says, “is all business.” She is now based in New Haven, Conn., and has decorated her brightly painted space in one of the city’s trendy neighborhoods with prize-winning paintings she produced while attending the University. By day, Kornacki is a graphic designer with Product Ventures, a packaging and product-design agency. Evenings and weekends, she often works until 2 a.m. on freelance pieces. “I can spend up to 80 hours a week working on a contract illustration,” she says.

In 1986, Pleasant Company (now American Girl) introduced Samantha, Kirsten, and Molly, three historically costumed, 18-inch dolls from different periods in American history. Young girls and their parents were instantly charmed, and over the years the company added more dolls, some historical and others contemporary, and an array of products that revolve around the dolls. Each doll comes with a book that introduces its story.

Kornacki essentially brought to life American Girl’s two newest, prize-winning historical dolls, Marie-Grace Gardner and...
Cécile Rey, who debuted in August 2011. Their story takes place in New Orleans, La., in the 1850s.

“American Girl gave me the descriptions of the characters, but, yes, you can say I created their image,” Kornacki says. “Marie-Grace is modeled after my sister. A friend’s niece was the model for Cécile.” Kornacki’s friend, Aaron Joshua ’07, also an HAS graduate, was the model for Cécile’s brother.

It took Kornacki two years to produce the 25 paintings and 20 smaller portraits that appear in the series. Cécile and Marie-Grace are the first American Girl dolls introduced simultaneously as “best friends.” The six books written by two authors, Denise Lewis Patrick and Sarah Masters Buckey, were published as a boxed set, also a first that presented Kornacki with some challenges.

“Illustrating for American Girl is a highly structured, involved process,” Kornacki says. “I worked on two books at a time. I would read the stories first, which was exciting to me as an American Girl fan. Then I was given instructions on what to illustrate and a packet of historical information to interpret. The hardest part was working on multiple projects at the same time, learning how to manage my time. As I went along, I became more efficient. It’s difficult for realistic illustrators who work in oils. Publishing companies want quick and fast. But it takes a lot of time to do what I do.”

A considerable source of her inspiration is the illustration faculty at HAS. As Kornacki explains, “It was in my senior year that I took the book illustration class [taught by Dennis Nolan, associate professor of illustration] and went through the process of creating a children’s book. That’s how I ended up here. He was such a great inspiration. He would give you direction but let you do what you wanted to do.”

Nolan says he is gratified to see how far his former student has taken her talents and how quickly. “Christine always put in the extra time to make each piece as strong as possible—researching, securing models, building props, sewing costumes, preparing initial sketches and color studies, and experimenting with new materials and techniques with intelligence, fearlessness, and dedication.”

Thomson, Nolan, and Doug Andersen, assistant professor of illustration, all agree that the admiration is mutual. “Christine is a great ambassador for the school,” Andersen says. “She gave a presentation to our undergraduates during the fall semester. She helped them see that things can happen if you make them happen.”

So now that she’s taken care of her American Girl goal, what’s next for Kornacki? “I’m very excited about my current project. It’s a 32-page picture book that is coming out at the end of the year. I also would like to do an American Girl gallery showing and sell some of my paintings. And, of course, I plan to illustrate and write my own children’s book some day.”

You never know where an American girl’s dreams will take her.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Pleasant T. Rowland, founder of Pleasant Company (now American Girl), received an honorary degree from the University of Hartford in 2000.