





# NURTURED BY NATURE

For multitalented Gibby Waitzkin, it's her natural habitat in Floyd that fills her heart and inspires her art.

STORY BY BY CHRISTINA NIFONG  
PHOTOS BY HEATHER ROUSSEAU

**Y**ou might say that Gibby Waitzkin lives in her own world. It happens to be a world of stunning beauty, intentional preservation and clean living, of botany and photography and design. Most literally, it's three buildings and a pond on 30 acres of partly tamed wilderness that lies just beyond the creative nexus of Floyd.

But in reality, it's so much more.

Sarvisberry, as Waitzkin named this outpost for an early-blooming tree found on the land, is the culmination of 60-plus years of creativity, activism, environmentalism, family history — and personal setbacks.

While Waitzkin is celebrated for her art that fuses sculpture, photography and fiber, it may be that Sarvisberry turns out to be her masterpiece.

Since buying the property from her parents more than 20 years ago, she has built a home that's a gem of American Craftsman-style architecture, created a studio-turned guest house entirely from the property's naturally felled hemlock, constructed an environmentally-conscious paper-making studio and art gallery, and landscaped fields of lavender, lillies, cattails, grasses, okra and bamboo.

She's made a homestead in which every corner has been brushed by her artistic eye — even her utility truck is whimsically painted. And the land she lives on provides her with food and the raw materials for her art — as well as inspiration.

Without Sarvisberry, Waitzkin may never have produced the haunting series of photographs printed on hand-hewn paper and

In the studio on her Floyd property, Gibby Waitzkin cooks fibers from plants she grows for use in her art work.





**TOP:** Sculptures hand-crafted from plant fibers hang in Waitzkin's studio.

**ABOVE:** A close-up of a flower sculpted from plant fibers; many of Waitzkin's pieces are recreations of nature.

sealed with wax into reclaimed window panes. Or the larger-than-life depictions of wings, petals and seedpods sculpted from plant fiber and exhibited in shows in Martinsville, Blacksburg and Raleigh, North Carolina. Without her move to this place, it's likely she would never have connected with the architects and woodworkers, potters and fiber artists that have become her friends and artistic community.

"My art and being here in Floyd have really changed my life," says the intense, peripatetic Waitzkin.

But without the chronic pain that cut short Waitzkin's well-connected life in Washington, D.C., Sarvisberry may never have existed at all.

### HEALTH STRUGGLES

Waitzkin's journey has been as twisting and twining as the fibers she features in her artwork.

She was born Jennie Gibson Edwards, named after her grandmother, and raised in Greensboro, North Carolina, the eldest daughter of banker and state representative Ralph Edwards. She was one of four children in a family of privilege, but her health was a struggle, even as a child. She was deaf until age 5; two surgeries eventually restored her hearing. Looking back, she finds the silver lining in her situation: The silence of her early years helped her develop her eye for art.

When she was in high school, her parents bought property in Floyd. They loved the counter-culture feel of the place. "What Woodstock was like in the '60s," she says. Nearly two decades later, they moved to Floyd full time.

By then, Waitzkin had earned her art and art education degrees at the University of Georgia. She'd studied art in Italy, married her first





Those days were thrilling ... and tiring ... and eventually Waitzkin couldn't keep the pace any longer. Over decades, her body had begun to fail her. By 2000, she had sold her firm and turned her attention to getting well.

**A native of Greensboro, North Carolina, Waitzkin settled at Sarvisberry, the home in Floyd she shares with husband Buz, after stints in Atlanta, New York City and Washington, D.C.**

husband and returned to Georgia for post-graduate work in photography, printmaking and paper making.

As a young adult, she taught art in the Atlanta school system, worked on an organic farm and orchard in Arkansas, then met her second husband when they both landed on a team that created the famed 9th Street Community Garden on the Lower East Side in New York.

After the birth of her son and a second divorce, Waitzkin made her way to Washington D.C. She put together a book about community gardens and farmers markets and was then invited to create a similar project for the Carter administration.

"My parents were scratching their head and saying, 'This is our daughter, the art major, working at the White House?!'" she recalls.

By 1985, she had founded Gibson Creative, a design and communications firm that produced top-quality reports and campaigns for such notable clients as the World Wildlife Fund, Gore for President and the Pew Center on Climate Change.

She married a third time — this time to Michael "Buz" Waitzkin, a high-powered lawyer who would take a turn in the White House Council's Office before moving on to represent biomedical startup companies in need of legal advice in an uncharted field.

Those days were thrilling ... and tiring ... and eventually Waitzkin couldn't keep the pace any longer. Over decades, her body had begun to fail her. By 2000, she had sold her firm and turned her attention to getting well.

"You have no idea. I'd had seven surgeries on my feet. Finally, I collapsed. I was 50. I was taking 35 pills a day."



**“My parents were scratching their head and saying, ‘This is our daughter, the art major, working at the White House?!’” she recalls.**

**Gibby Waitzkin makes her way up the stairs in her gallery, which is located on her property in Floyd.**

Arthritis and bunions had brought on the surgeries. But a lifetime of illness and prescriptions, undiagnosed food allergies and nerve damage that morphed into chronic pain had taken its toll.

Waitzkin suffered for another decade before she sought medical treatment at Duke Integrative Medicine in Durham, North Carolina. There, she says, a team of doctors thinking outside the box was finally able to unravel her mounting health problems and put her on the road to recovery.

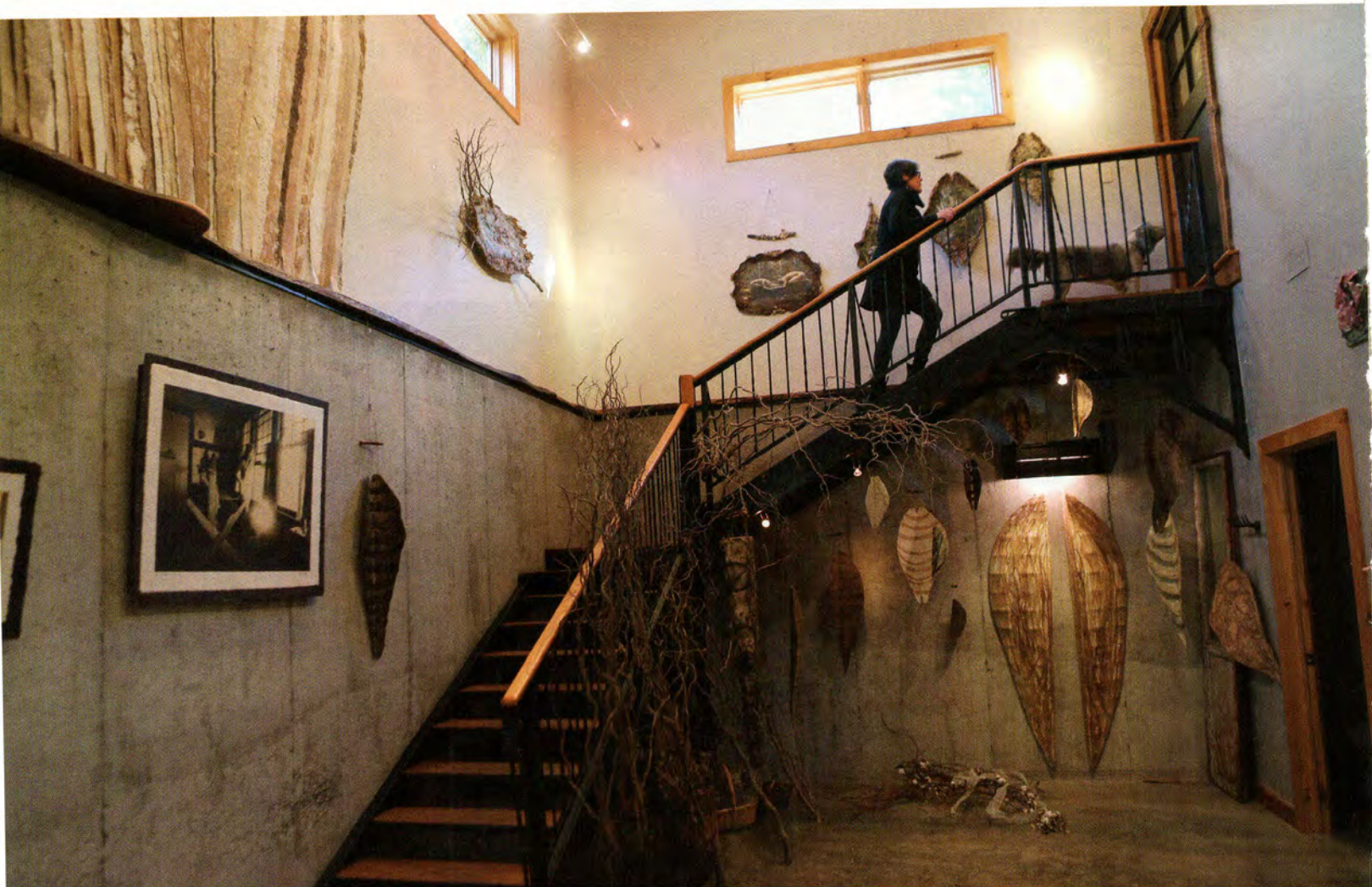
Today, she eats a strict anti-inflammatory diet, avoiding gluten, lactose, tomatoes and peppers. She regularly schedules massage and acupuncture therapies. And she still downs several pills a day.

“But you know what?” she asks in her strong, gravelly voice. “I don’t hurt.”

### ART CAREER TAKES OFF

Sunlight streams into Waitzkin’s spacious studio. One of her two fire-house garage doors is rolled up. Wind chimes from the porch beat a steady soundtrack to her work.

Her knobby hands with dye-stained nails knead a messy, drippy mass in the middle of her 4-by-8-foot work table. She squirts a sticky substance into the goop, then finesses and massages it into a wood and brass frame. This glop will become a fiber sculpture, which she can press





# The process: How Gibby Waitzkin creates her art

1



Waitzkin uses Japanese anemone seed pods from her property.

2



Waitzkin cooks the fibers from the plants she grows in her yard and then uses them in her art.

3



After the fibers from the plants are cooked, they are put into water with added formation aid. The aid helps suspend the flowers while Waitzkin works on them. Once cooked, the fibers are acid-free. Some colors are natural from the fibers, others are naturally dyed.

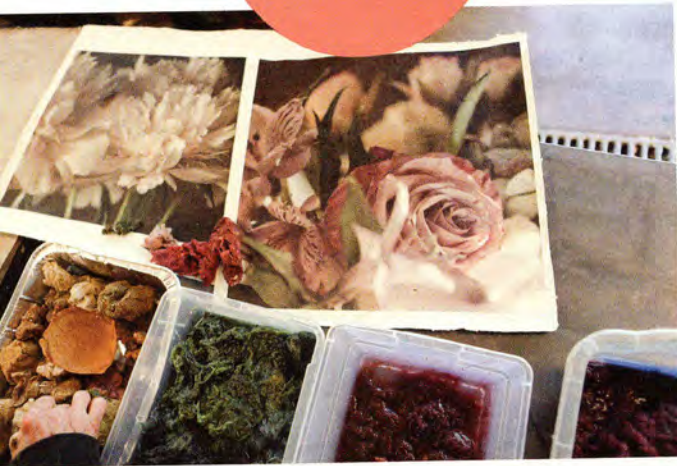
4



Waitzkin waits until the fibers are dry before she incorporates them into her art.

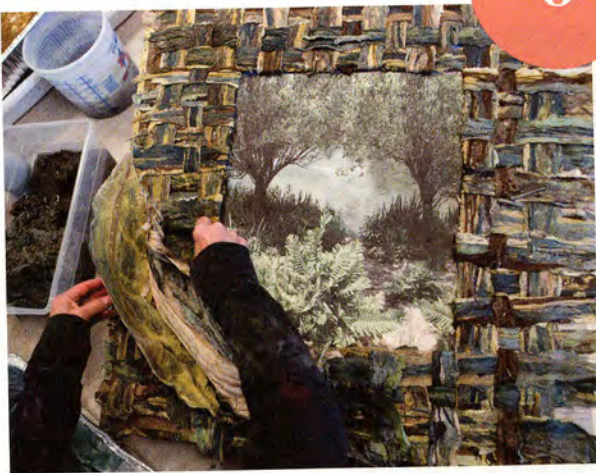


5



Waitzkin embeds her archival pigment prints into the natural fibers.

6



Waitzkin weaves fibers into "Journey Two," one of her works of art. "The weaving to me is very symbolic that we are all connected," she says.

into a texture-rich paper on which to print her stylized photographs or become a 3-D base that she builds from, applying hue after hue and feel after feel of dozens of different fibers.

Surrounding her are her re-creations of nature — giant, curling flowers, enormous seed pods, tiny boats formed from the leaves of cattails. Some leap off the pages they've been affixed to. Others collect in corners, creating unintentional still lifes.

This is what Waitzkin does these days. No morning commute, no office banter, no endless schedule of doctors appointments. Waitzkin digs in the dirt, drinks in the quiet air and transforms nature into art.

"It's one of the things I love about Sarvisberry," Waitzkin says. "It's helped us get back to what we always wanted to do."

After Waitzkin left her design firm in Washington, D.C., she immersed herself in the craft of making paper.

"For two years all I did was work on plants. I was so into the fibers," she says.

But it wasn't until Waitzkin and her husband moved to Floyd that her art career began to soar.

Friend and potter Silvie Granatelli invited Waitzkin to show her work as a guest artist. Waitzkin sold everything she'd brought. It was a watershed moment as Waitzkin began to consider that "artist" was perhaps her calling after all.

"She's a woman that has a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and energy for whatever she takes on," Granatelli says.

In 2010, Waitzkin created 37 photographs embedded into salvaged windows and doors in an exhibit dubbed, "Inside/Out." By the time she pulled the exhibit out of her gallery, she had sold 32 of them.

By 2014, she'd created a dramatic new collection, "Continuum of Being," which took grasses, flowers and other flora from the Sarvisberry property and spun them into stunning sculptures inspired by the circular rhythms of nature: leaf to egg to larva to butterfly and back.

These pieces brought notice from arts institutions such as the Piedmont Arts Gallery in Martinsville, from Meredith College in Raleigh and from collectors scattered from North Carolina to New York to Washington, D.C.

"She's transforming natural elements into something else that is quite beautiful and captivating," says friend and D.C.-based photographer John H. Brown, Jr.

It seemed Waitzkin's moment had arrived.

See Gibby Waitzkin's nature-inspired art at the Peggy Lee Hahn Garden Pavilion at Virginia Tech through the end of June. Her work also can be viewed in the Troika Contemporary Crafts Gallery in Floyd. Contact Waitzkin at 745-6330 for a viewing or demonstration at Sarvisberry Gallery and Studio.



**BELOW: "Dedication," a mixed-media piece, was made from a photograph Waitzkin took and printed with archival pigment on Sarvisberry-blend paper.**

**BOTTOM: Waitzkin spends a lot of time in the gardens at Sarvisberry; this one is located in front of her studio/gallery. She grows the plants used in her work, which is infused with and inspired by nature.**



## COMING INTO HER OWN

Waitzkin is walking to her pond, the place that holds her earliest memories of this land.

As she steps, sporting hiking boots to support her damaged feet, she is talking Monet. "Up until the day he died, he was working on his garden," she says, arms gesticulating, her whole body behind them. "I totally get Monet, you know? I totally jump between my garden and my studio."

Sarvisberry is Waitzkin's Giverny, the spot where Monet spent his last 43 years, the site of his most famous paintings, the gardens that were as great a work of art as anything he committed to canvas.

Like Monet, Waitzkin feels she is hitting her stride even as many her age consider slowing down.

"In this weird way, I feel like I'm in my prime," she says. "I'm 66. But I cannot imagine stopping."

She's just come from her studio, where she is working on another new collection. These days she's weaving her fibers, mixing colors and textures and materials in a way that is as symbolic as it is beautiful.

She wants her pieces to say, "we're all connected to each other ... our lives are intertwined. I'm kind of driven about this."

So, no, she is not slowing down.

She's selling her art in Durham at a newly opened studio there, where she's been spending her winters as her husband teaches at Duke University. She's talking to a corporate CEO about buying a second piece of her work for his Sun Valley home. She's got an exhibit at the Hahn Horticulture Garden at Virginia Tech now and plans to work again with the Sarah B. Duke Gardens in Durham.

Her life has led her back to the place she started — to the land she loves and the art that feeds her spirit.

"It's a full circle," she says. And the Alpha and the Omega are Sarvisberry.

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# GIBBY WAITZKIN'S ARTS AND CRAFTS-STYLE HOUSE CELEBRATES THE CREATIVE COMMUNITY

STORY BY BY CHRISTINA NIFONG  
PHOTOS BY HEATHER ROUSSEAU



**TOP RIGHT:** The living room (left) and dining room (right) in Gibby and Buz Waitzkin's Floyd home have an open feel. Much of the wood in the home is from the Floyd area.

**RIGHT:** Double-sided frames along the stairway display pressed botanicals made by Waitzkin. The framing is from Phoenix Hardwoods in Floyd.

**ABOVE:** Waitzkin greets Lyla, a bearded collie, at the front door of her home at Sarvisberry, which was named for a tree that stood above the pond.





To step inside the home of Gibby and Buz Waitzkin is to be enveloped in art. Every wall and surface holds paintings and photographs, pottery and sculpture. The surfaces themselves are often centerpieces: coffee tables made from tree slabs; a bookcase whose range-y edges and swirling grain make it a stand-out; sconces, designed by Waitzkin, that depict the flora and fauna found on her 30 acres — honeysuckle, wild turkeys, water lillies, hawks, cattails, herons.

And yet, this home feels nothing like a museum.

"I don't like precious houses," says Waitzkin with a shake of her dark, bobbed hair. "I like houses you can live in."

Live, Waitzkin does. She eats every meal from a deep collection of plates, bowls and mugs handcrafted by local potters — and dear friends. Her downstairs is dedicated to a whimsical world for her three grandchildren. Her spacious, open living and dining rooms





**TOP:** The pond is visible from the patio, multiple balconies and porches and large windows on the back of the house.

**ABOVE:** Waitzkin converted her original studio into an Airbnb rental.

— centered by a handmade table that can seat 16 — host family gatherings, gallery events and community fundraisers alike.

Perhaps the star of this 4,000 square-foot space is a wide staircase tucked beside the living area. Its railings boast the geometric wood patterns synonymous with architect Frank Lloyd Wright's work. But inside the structure are seven double-sided frames displaying pressed botanicals — black-eyed Susans, rhododendrons, peonies — from Waitzkin's extensive perennial gardens, that are organically bonded to sheets of thick, handmade paper she mixed and formed and pressed.

"Gibby has created this environment that's quite special," says celebrated photographer, friend and former co-worker John H. Brown Jr., who visits from his home in Alexandria. "It's a very magical place."

If eclectic is the main vibe of the Waitzkins' four-bedroom, four-bath abode, the Arts and Crafts Movement is the space's guiding aesthetic, with its emphasis on natural light, simple lines and muted colors.

Decades ago, Waitzkin's grandparents gave her several Arts and Crafts furnishings that are still highlights in the home. They piqued her interest, she says, in the movement's ideals — a coming together of fine art and craft, an appreciation of nature, a prioritizing of hand-made over industrial.

For Waitzkin, celebrating her local community has also been key. Most of the wood in the home — from frame to exposed ceiling to flooring to furniture — was harvested nearby. The stone in the fireplace is from the Floyd area. As are most of the home's creators — its architects and lighting designers and furniture makers.

Waitzkin's love of nature is a constant presence. A wide porch at the back of the house overlooks a pond dug by her father some 50 years ago as a place for his family to gather and play.

Today, the house boasts a view of 20 years' worth of landscaping by Waitzkin — rock gardens, flower gardens, vegetable gardens, a curve of fern and cattails that hugs the pond's edge.





**ABOVE:** Waitzkin made the panel (back center) in the master bedroom from assorted grasses and bamboo from her yard. The frame was crafted at Phoenix Hardwoods in Floyd, and Waitzkin collaborated with designer Joan Weissman on the rug. The art behind the bed is by Christian Peltenburg Brechneff, an artist and old friend of Waitzkin's.

**BELOW:** The Waitzkins' kitchen includes mahogany- and maple-stained cabinets and honed granite countertops.

"This house, it lets us hover above the pond," she says.

The Waitzkins built the home in the late '90s — they dubbed it Sarvisberry, the local name for a tree that stood sentry above the pond — as a place to get away from their high-powered life in Washington, D.C. But after Waitzkin's chronic illnesses worsened, she and her husband began to consider a move to Floyd.

In 2000, they constructed an art studio for Waitzkin, almost exclusively out of hemlock trees on their land that were killed by an infestation of an aphid-like insect, the woolly adelgid. By 2006, the couple had decided to settle full time in Floyd and undertook an addition that redesigned the

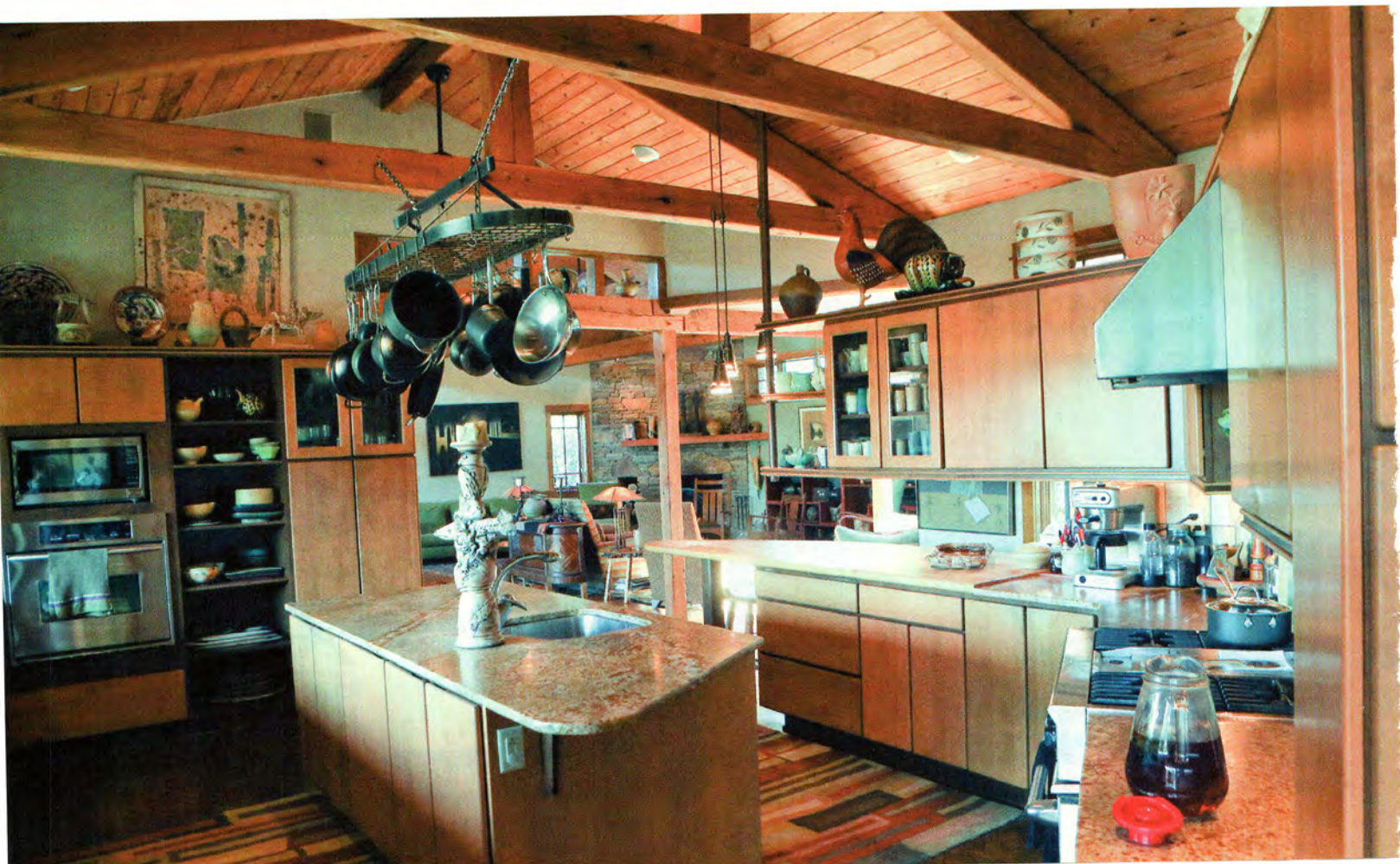
house's kitchen, created an entryway with fewer stairs, enlarged a bedroom and added storage.

These days, Buz Waitzkin leads a Science and Society program at Duke University, so the couple has a loft apartment in Durham, North Carolina, as well as their Floyd property.

But Waitzkin says the land, the community and her home at Sarvisberry will always hold her heart.

"This place kind of surprised us," she says. "We had no idea we were going to love it so much."

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Artists are creative by nature. Not only is their creativity manifested in their art, but often, in the way they live, their surroundings, their homes and their aesthetic. So it is with Gibby Waitzkin, photographer, sculptor, paper maker and fiber artist.

The first time I heard about Waitzkin was about a year ago. A friend had toured Waitzkin's home when it was open for the annual House and Garden Tour of Floyd County. Knowing I'm always looking for interesting homes that express the personalities of their owners, my friend insisted it was a must-see.

Soon after, I was talking to

Pat Sharkey, Floyd County's director of tourism, and she also mentioned Waitzkin. Seeing Waitzkin's home, studio, fiber art and the unusual way she creates it would be well worth the trip up the mountain, Sharkey promised.

Waitzkin graciously agreed to let us into her idyllic domain. So off we went, writer Christina Nifong, photographer Heather Rousseau and I, to Sarvisberry, the 30-acre retreat Waitzkin shares with husband Buz on the outskirts of Floyd.

Waitzkin, a diminutive dynamo, gave up a high-powered career and big-city life with its fast pace and stress almost

two decades ago to move to Sarvisberry and attempt to restore her health. It's here, on land that has been in her family since the 1970s, that Waitzkin is in her element — nature.

I hope you'll be inspired by Waitzkin's creative spirit, passion for her craft and lifelong love of the land, which Nifong has so masterfully captured.

We've also visited the landscapes of some urban dwellers — those without natural sources of water like Waitzkin's beloved pond. Our feature on garden fountains showcases some of Roanoke's interesting water features. What their owners like best about them



**Elizabeth Hock**  
THE ROANOKE TIMES

might surprise you.

In this edition we've also included results from our first Reader's Choice balloting. Voters picked their favorite things in five Southwest Virginia communities. You can find their choices and see if you agree with them beginning on Page 40.

*Elizabeth Hock*