

Fanciful retreat for friends & family

Story and photos by Carolyn Morrisroe

At Perivale Lodge, the visiting grandkids leave treasures they find in the woods in a “fairy post office” in a tree as offerings for the local mystical folk. The “fairies” leave trinkets in return — all part of the magical experience that Fred and Jeanie Raffa have created for their family at their summer home in Highlands.

“Everything we’ve done here since we added onto the cabin was done with the family in mind, with the idea of our children and our grandchildren — someday when we had them — being able to use this place,” Jeanie Raffa said. “It’s very much about entertaining friends and family.”

Fred Raffa’s parents bought the 11-acre property out Buck Creek Road around 1972. For several years, the living arrangements included only a trailer and an outhouse, and a creek had to be forded to get there. In 1982, Fred and Jeanie drove by the property and saw a for-sale sign.

“We thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to have a cabin here?’” Raffa said.



Jeanie Raffa and Izzy

So they got 5 acres from Fred's parents and in 1984 they built a rustic two-bedroom cabin — a summer home they would eventually expand to six bedrooms on 28 acres.

“Over the years we just kept coming up and it got to the point where I loved it more and more and by the time I retired from teaching and just started to write, I really decided I wanted to be here all summer,” Raffa said.

Since Raffa retired from her position as a college professor, she spends the summer at the Highlands home, and her husband commutes to his job as an economics professor in Florida. Their family flocks to the house during the summer and for the week between Christmas and New Year's.

“Kids came up a lot, friends and family came up a lot, and we decided we needed to make it bigger,” Raffa said.

Starting in the 1990s, the Raffas doubled the size of the house, adding a master bedroom, family room, garage and garage apartment, an outdoor kitchen on a screened-in porch, and a stable for her horse, Shadow.

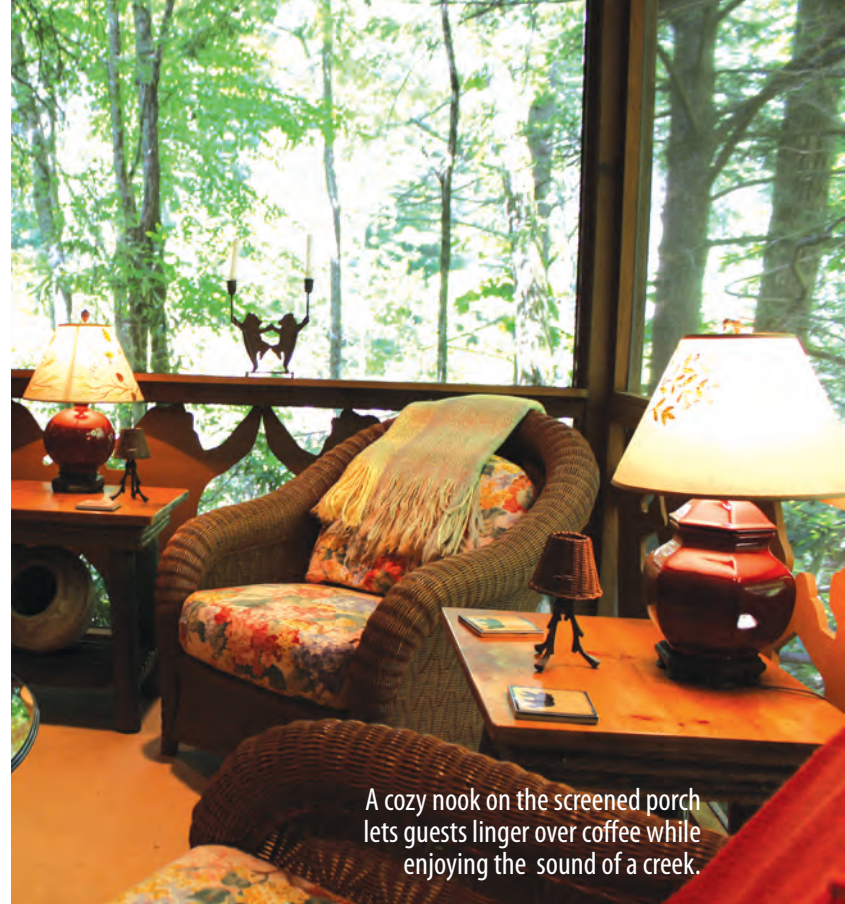
“It's been a work of love,” she said. “It's been slow over time. We only did it when we knew how much we loved it and we knew that we'd be spending more and more time here.”

They also began landscaping the property and called in a local landscape architect for his expertise.

“We got Hank Ross to help us lay it out and decide where to put the stable and where to put the pasture and where to put the gardens,” Raffa said.

In fact, the Raffas have regularly used local craftsmen, builders and artists in all their remodels. Algie Bolick is responsible for building the additions while Gary and Jimmy Houston did rock work inside and out, such as a large pedestal for a bear statue and a custom entertainment center. The home features art pieces by Mase Lucas and Susan Robert, and Tom Lamar — of Winter Park, where the Raffas reside during the off-season — designed the remodels.

“There's so much meaning now for me in this house and this property, knowing everyone who contributed,” Raffa said. “It's been a very rich experience.”



A cozy nook on the screened porch lets guests linger over coffee while enjoying the sound of a creek.



Personal touches such as pots decorated with mosaics by Jeanie Raffa add character and charm.



The Raffas planted boxwoods in the stumps of hemlocks that had to be felled due to disease.

Designed for family

The Raffas have filled their home and property with special touches infused with personal meaning, starting with the name of the house. Raffa said “Perivale Lodge” echoes the London suburb in which they once lived, but also is composed of “Peri” for a Persian fairy, “vale” for a small valley, and “lodge” for a temporary habitation.

The expansion of the cabin to a spacious mountain house allows ample



A guest room offers a place to display a hat collection in a creative way.

room for a family of 11 (grandparents; son, daughter and spouses; and five grandchildren), along with extended relatives and friends to congregate. A light-filled living room gives onto a room with a pool table and instruments, so the whole family can play music together. The family calls it the morning room, as the rising sun streams in the windows.

The original cabin had one big open loft upstairs with just an enclosed bathroom. The family has since walled off three rooms — the master bedroom, a guest bedroom and the grandkids’ room. When they added on, Fred and Jeanie Raffa placed four twin beds in a room under the eaves in the hopes of grandchildren, before they even had any. In time, they were happy to have five grandkids, so they had to add a bunk bed to the room, a cheerful space with handmade quilts.

Two more bedrooms used by the Raffas’ son and daughter when they visit are situated on the first floor. One is called the “Hat Room” because they decided it would be fun to display items from the family’s hat collection and lighten up the mood in the room. The family sometimes dons the chapeaux for croquet games and dinner parties at home.

Off the main kitchen, a large screened-in porch features an outdoor kitchen that Raffa said helps to ease the flow of traffic in the main kitchen when entertaining. A family-sized dining table is made from the twisted wood of hemlocks felled on the property after they died. A cozy seating area is Raffa’s favorite spot in the house, where one can sit and hear Little Buck Creek rushing by.

The lower portion of the porch walls is made up of wooden dancing bears that mimic dancing bear candle hold-



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ers in the porch windows. Raffa said the candlesticks were the inspiration for the motif, and the builder had a high school shop class make the wooden cutouts to line the porch.

Bears appear frequently in the interior design of the Raffas' home, and Jeanie Raffa said they have special significance to her, as bears have been an important aspect in her writing and thinking.

"We have kind of a bear theme going on here," Raffa said. "I mean, now everybody does, but at the time we thought we were so original. It's personally very meaningful to me. There's a lot of symbolism."

Personalizing the property

Shaping the property to fulfill the family's dreams is an ongoing process. Raffa said they continually take on new projects to improve the space. Over the years, these have included a croquet court, a basketball court (in garnet and gold because they are Florida State University fans), a stable and equestrian arena, a



A pew bench made by Algje Bolick brings grace to the morning room under a Navajo rug.

platform for a teepee, and tree swings built by a friend. Now, the grandkids are building a fort at the top of a waterfall.

"We just keep adding on," Raffa said. "It's like we have a project every summer. It was fun."

Raffa has great respect for the natural

beauty of the Highlands area, and the family has incorporated garden designs seamlessly into the existing woodland. A memorial garden provides Raffa a place to honor and remember her mother, and features the concept of yin and yang: A maple tree represents the masculine, and

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a hydrangea bush represents the feminine. A stone lantern crafted by a friend overlooks the garden and provides the opportunity to light candles.

One new outdoor project is a creekside garden with a gathering of benches, including one that was painted in happy colors by the Raffas' grandchildren. A metal globe sculpture serves as a fire pit and creates a focal point when they bring friends down to the intimate nook for cocktails during summer twilight.

Into the dense rhododendron forest, the Raffas have established nature trails to help traverse the property and offer paths for exploration and contemplation. They built a trail to Fred's brother Tony's house, built in 2004 on 2 adjacent acres, and two loop nature trails around the property. Raffa said the trails help connect her with nature.

"I just go through cutting and looking and just enjoying the property," Raffa said. "And it gives me plenty of exercise."

The Raffas keep a close eye on the health of the environment on their land.

"Now that we've built our trails, we're very careful not to disrupt any native



The Raffas put in four twin beds in a room for grandchildren before they even had any. When they had a fifth, they added a bunk bed.

species if we can help it," Raffa said. "We're just trying to keep it beautiful and ecologically healthy."

Part of that effort has been trying to save their hemlocks from the wooly adelgid that has been killing the conifers across the region in recent years.

"We started out treating our hemlocks down here — about 100 hemlocks we treated in this lower area to protect them from dying, and we still have several that are in pretty good shape," Raffa said. "I just can't bear it that some of the biggest, grandmother hemlocks that were huge up on the top of the mountain, we just couldn't treat every one and we've had to cut some down."

The Raffas endeavor to give new life to the hemlocks they lose, using the wood of some for furniture, planting boxwoods in the stumps of hemlock trees, and giving back to the community.

"Our builder has given tons of firewood away to people who couldn't afford any in the winter," Raffa said.

Their Highlands home provides more than just a summer getaway for the Raffas. It offers respite from city life and the chance to be immersed in a more nat-



A nature tray in the living room provides a space for guests to place treasures they find on the property.

ural environment, which Raffa sees as especially important for the children in the family.

"I tried to teach my kids and grandkids the names of trees, and we play little games to get them to know how to play in the country," Raffa said. "These are city kids. My kids are city kids. They never played outdoors much when they were kids. So this is their chance to really see nature at her most beautiful."

Perivale Lodge celebrates the togetherness of family and friends, serving as a living backdrop on which to make magical memories.

"We would have weekend parties with friends from Florida who would come up and spend long weekends here and cook together and go hiking and things," Raffa said. "It's very much a communal, family kind of a place. The property is really special."

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