



NURTURED BY NATURE

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

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You 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



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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."

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.

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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



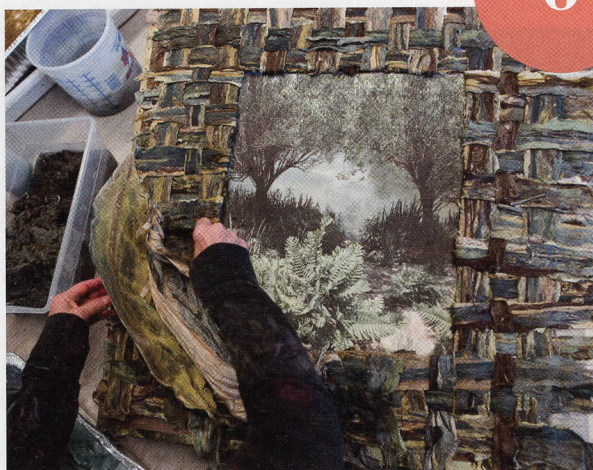
Waitzkin waits until the fibers are dry before she incorporates them into her art.

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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