

Every Day Art: The Menzers of Botany Woods

By Suzanne Arthur

East Asheville Living Magazine, Mar 2023

Annie ushers me in through the kitchen and lifts the lid on a large crock pot. The scent of savory spices fills the air. "We like to feed people," she says. "I'm cooking for some friends today. They like to cook for us too -- it's what we do."

"Working at home has its pros and cons," says her husband, Jeff. His art studio is below the kitchen and aromas float downstairs. "It can be distracting."

Where some people see a discarded bicycle chain, an old bottle, or a rusted hubcap, Jeff, who rejoices in repurposing found objects, sees art in everything. A recent exhibit at the East Asheville Library featured his sculptures. The goal, he says, "is to include art every day: In business, cooking, clothing, and relationships."

Living with their multi-generational family, which includes Annie's daughter Jennifer and their grandson Charlie, yields many benefits. "Like having three very good cooks -- because if you are busy, you know somebody else can make dinner," says Annie.

Jeff agrees. "Working with our family business, *The Natural Gardeners, LLC* means often we don't get home till after 6 o'clock, and we're hungry!"

"We specialize in keeping homes beautiful for their owners to come home to. A place to be proud of. Working with flowers, trees and shrubs," says Annie, "we bring the homeowner's vision to life." Fostering Spring ephemerals and reducing the impact of invasive species such as bittersweet and English ivy is a special interest of theirs.

Annie's formal horticultural education took root during the five years she was employed at the NC Arboretum. With the encouragement of her first private client, Annie left her job to start her own gardening business.

"During my tenure with Quality Forward (now GreenWorks)," she explains, "I fell in love with community problem-solving, such as finding ways to promote recycling and prevent non-point source pollution with riparian buffer zone plantings. Now, I focus on promoting pollinator habitats and awareness, planting natives and plants specific to helping our pollinator populations." *The Natural Gardeners* has flourished over the past 20 years.

"Mostly if I have a day off, I go for long walks in the woods. Knitting and making things with my hands is a big part of what I love, but if it's gardening season, that is what I do."

Frogs are everywhere: In the yard, in Jeff's art, on his website, and their company logo. "Frogs are excited about Spring," he says. "They are special because they live in two worlds, in water and on land."

Jeff teaches kids about "reptiles and amphibians, fact and fiction." Through funding from the North Carolina Arts Council and the local Arts Council, he is welcomed by underserved schools, teaching "primarily a mix of art and science. These kids are not getting any of that in a regular school day."

"In addition, I'm invited to teach science and art in organizations such as the Penland kids' camp, in a unit on *beetles, bugs, and butterflies*. The kids learn about insects, but also make clay beetles, and turn found objects into butterflies. We circle the topic. Drawing, painting, discovering all different ways to see."

Jeff and Annie create an educational eNewsletter to promote their gardening business and feature their writing and Jeff's poems. He also sings with the *Wild Asheville Community Chorus*, an a capella choir that is 100-strong.

The Menzer's garden is a *Certified Pollinator Habitat* boasting paw paw trees, milkweed, sunflowers, red hot poker, and more. "Last year with help from friends and neighbors, we raised over 100 monarchs!"

A Little Free Library sits atop its post in the garden. The consummate recycler, Jeff points to the copper roof tiles repurposed from "leftover scraps from someone's new copper rain gutters."

Creating the Little Library had long been a dream of Jeff's, becoming a reality four years ago. "We wondered how successful it would be," he says, as they live on a cul-de-sac. "Not a lot of through traffic. But we get a *lot* of foot traffic. Little kids, toddlers love it."

"We have lost literacy," he laments. "The art of handwriting, of crafting a whole sentence, of sending a letter. Of writing back." Jeff creates one-of-a-kind art cards, a gesture meant to nurture this tradition (see mrjeffmenzer.com). During his battle with cancer, each sender of a card got one back. The cards are a testament to human touch, the vanishing art of putting pen to paper and popping it into the mail.

When Jeff got sick, friends helped build the Little Library. While recuperating from chemotherapy and radiation, when he felt well enough, he was in his studio hammering away on the roof.

"It was just the right thing to do," he says. "When it was complete, we installed and dedicated it."

"Neighbors can always reach inside and get a gift." Inside each book is stamped: *Always free, never for sale*. "That's just a big part of our dream for the community," says Jeff.

Everyone in the Menzer household has an art. "Maybe Charlie's art will be the piano," says Annie. He often plays the family spinet. "Although at the moment he's trying to convince us that soccer is more important."

Charlie, 11, also rides a Onewheel and rock climbs at *Cultivate Climbing*. As a Cub Scout and with the family he enjoys caving, hiking, building fires, and knot tying. His troop has provided food for the homeless population in Asheville. A budding gardener, during Covid he began doing yard work for a neighbor.

For the family, everyday life is punctuated with exciting trips. Annie says, "we all love to travel. Last year Jeff and I went into Canada and biked 125 miles on *le P'tit Train du Nord*, in the Laurentian mountains. On the way and back we camped and visited friends. Each year we go to the coast, near Charleston -- we love the ocean. We also enjoy train travel."

Annie points out the emerging snow drops as we tour the garden, their bright blossoms a contrast to the muted winter palette. Jeff opens the mailbox. With a sigh he pulls out two pieces of junk. "Nothing there."

"This is why I send cards," he says. "Because I love to get them."

Annie and Jeff, what message would you like to share with your neighbors?

"Thank you for making life here so good."