

Joy in Snookville – Feature cover story

By Suzanne Arthur

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The littlest Snook, 4-year-old Ralph, sets down his game of Marble Maze and picks up a blue ukulele. His sister Matilda and dad Aaron Snook have just written a song and he is inspired. Outbursts of creativity are the norm in this house, which sits squarely at the top of (where else?) Snookville Lane, among the rolling hills and peaks of East Asheville.

“We are all pretty goofy in our own ways and love to make each other laugh and ‘get each other’s goat,’ says Simone. “We are also quite competitive when it comes to cards and board games. The kids have inherited our love of games and we play often.”

The Snooks moved to East Asheville from Chicago six years ago. As actors in the Chicago theater scene, Aaron and Simone had easily built a community. With each production, their theater family grew. In Chicago, Aaron completed his MFA in Directing for the Theater. He now teaches in the Drama Department at UNC-A, while running non-profits focused on the performing arts.

But when the theater company closed its doors after 12 seasons, they acknowledged that Chicago winters were too long. Their then 2-year-old “loved playing in dirt and needed more. “They made a list of possible destinations, with Asheville at the top — Aaron grew up in Chapel Hill and his mom had grown up in Swannanoa.

“We were looking to get our bearings, and then find our real home. The house didn’t have to be *perfect*,” says Simone.

Yet perfect it was. “We love it!”

“We live in our own little world on the border of Riceville Forest,” Aaron says. “When the Snookville rentals were built, our long driveway officially became a road. Snookville Lane came to be.”

“I had a garden in Chicago,” he says, holding out his arms. “It was *this* big. We had *one* tomato plant, which grew one tomato, which the squirrels ate.” These days, Matilda enjoys helping her dad in the garden, where they grow “asparagus, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, radishes, lettuce, rhubarb, cucumbers, peas, garlic, onions, squash, and corn. Pretty much anything we can get to sprout!” he says.

“One of our long-term goals when we moved here was to build a community— we’re theater folk and that’s what we do. Being in Snookville can be isolating, but we’ve recently been able to leap that hurdle through a bit of serendipity,” Aaron explains.

With neighbors the Snooks curate a private donation-based concert series on their property during non-winter months. “Every three weeks or so, we host a musician or band, invite our mailing list, and have a blast.”

“The concerts bring together the local community. All donations go to the artists. We raised a lot of money for the one group in particular, musicians, that has been hit the hardest over the past few years,” says Aaron. Those interested are encouraged to reach out to Aaron.

The couple met in the Danish Court in a production of *Hamlet* in Chicago. “That’s certainly where we first started flirting,” Aaron recalls. Simone clearly recalls spitting on Aaron during an audition of *Closer*, but Aaron says he was “spit on by so many beautiful women that day, it’s a bit cloudy.”

Simone attended Illinois Wesleyan University, earning a BFA in Theatre Arts. “I am very excited to be returning to the stage in February with Different Strokes’ production of *Abe Lincoln and Uncle Tom in the White House!*” she says. Simone is also a realtor and enjoys expanding her circle of friends through the real estate business as well.

Sports play a role in forging Snook family memories. Born and bred a Tarheel, Aaron says “I have forced my family into the fandom, and we make trips back to Chapel Hill for ballgames.”

Matilda, at 8-years-old, has the poise of a screen star and the workout ethos of a pro athlete. “She currently takes ballet, jazz, and gymnastics. She’s looking to start the violin/fiddle soon. She just finished a run in the *Nutcracker* at the Diana Wortham Theater,” says Aaron. “Ralph is a prolific artist, even for a 4-year-old. Generally, it’s mixed media with a focus on rainbows and shiny things.”

Other members of the family include Cash, a 5-year-old “comfort retriever.” “By day, he chases bears in Snookville. By night, he is a cuddly cat,” says Aaron. Belle is an 8-year-old golden retriever who was adopted two years ago. “Belle doesn’t care for the possibility of, presence of, or recent history of rain,” he adds.

Travel adds spice to life for the Snooks, and Aaron and Simone’s journeys read like a bucket list, including trips to South Africa, Prague, Budapest, honeymooning in the South Pacific, and a three-month road trip across the US.

Community volunteering offers another sort of adventure for the family. Both parents volunteer at Matilda’s school, Evergreen. Simone as a Parent Ambassador and enrichment helper, and Aaron as a facilitator of the Equity Leadership Team.

Through his nonprofit, the American Myth Center, he is exploring work with puppetry in collaboration with the Vance Birthplace Historical Site for their holiday programs. He has also recently received a grant from the Asheville Area Arts Council to develop a touring show.

Aaron's other nonprofit, A Different Myth, "is a collaboration between the American Myth Center and Different Strokes," he says. "I serve primarily as a dramaturg to emerging black playwrights. I'm currently working with three playwrights, and we'll soon open submissions for our second cohort."

Aaron and Simone, what message do you have for your neighbors?

"Be kind to each other, Everyone is fighting their own private battle, no matter what things may look like publicly. The fabric of our community is empathy, and seemingly small kindnesses can add up to a huge difference in our lives."