



When it came time to retire, a North Carolina couple traded in the daily grind for a life brimming with joy and recreation.

BY JESSICA KELLNER
PHOTOS BY STEVE MANN



When the opportunity to retire arose for Marvine Cole and her husband, Knox Worde, they were ready to leave behind the daily grind, but certainly not to settle down. Instead, they replaced their professions with a life overflowing with passions—some old, some new—in their dream home in the wilds of North Carolina's Smoky Mountains.

Marvine and Knox wanted a home that was pared down and less traditional than their former home, but filled with interesting and artistic details.



INTO THE WILD

Both Marvine and Knox are avid outdoor enthusiasts; they met hiking in the New York Catskills. When they moved from New Jersey to the Atlanta area more than a decade ago, they replaced winter sports, such as snowshoeing and ice climbing, with boating. Today, they both “paddle”—Marvine canoes and Knox kayaks, and both guide trips or teach with the local outdoor center—so when it came to choosing a place to retire, they knew they wanted to be somewhere near the water.

Knox and Marvine had traveled to the beautiful Smoky Mountains for paddling trips many times and had friends in the area, so they decided to search there for land. Knox, who worked three days a week as a nurse, would drive out to check sites when he had a few days off. When he found one he liked, the two would return and camp for a night or two to get a feel for the space. Marvine says when they visited the land they now call home, they knew it was right. “We felt it when we first stepped on the land—the sense that there was something about it that felt really special in some way we could never put our fingers on,” she says. “I don’t know if anyone else feels it, but we felt it instantly, and the house went right where we were standing when we felt it.”

Tucked into the side of a mountain, the remote plot is the perfect site for the two. It’s convenient enough for spur-of-the-moment trips down the river. “We’re a half-hour from the local river, so we can just say, ‘Hey, let’s go boating this afternoon,’ and load up and go paddle,” Marvine says. And, surrounded by woodland views, nature-lovers Knox and Marvine feel connected with the outdoors even when they’re inside.

The south-facing plot also enabled them to achieve some of their building-efficiency goals. They wanted to take advantage of passive solar heating and cooling, so large windows all around the home—particularly on its south side—let in the sun’s warmth, as well as the gorgeous mountain views. They also took advantage of the sunny plot by installing a solar electric array and solar thermal hot water panels.

Even the site’s flaws worked in Marvine and Knox’s favor. A partially developed logging site that had since been abandoned, the site was damaged—not the pristine wooded space many homeowners would be after. But because it already had cleared spaces, Marvine and Knox were able to build their home removing minimal trees. “Building the house there actually improved the land,” Marvine says.

The damaged site also gave Marvine the opportunity to have some fun restoring the surrounding land to its native vegetation. By researching native plants via the USDA’s PLANTS Database (plants.usda.gov) and her local nursery, she returned the land below the house, which they call the meadow, to its natural state. “It was great fun to research it, but what’s been really fun is to watch the native plants move into this meadow,” she says. “Every year we see new plants move in, and we can’t remember if we planted them or not.”



CLOCKWISE: The partially cleared site is perfect for solar electric and solar thermal panels—and for Knox’s astronomy hobby. ■ Multiple roof lines create interest and the “compound” feeling Marvine wanted. ■ A boat house provides storage for Marvine and Knox’s many kayaks and canoes. ■ The well-insulated passive solar home includes two wood-burning stoves.

“We felt it when we first stepped on the land—the sense that there was something about it that felt really special in some way we could never put our fingers on.”

—MARVINE COLE

Learn more about architect Chris Larson: chrislarsonarchitect.com



WHERE THE HEART IS

Marvine and Knox interviewed many architects before meeting Chris Larson, an architect from Asheville they clicked with immediately. “We just fell in love with him,” Marvine says. “He has a great rapport.”

Marvine and Knox had a few requirements for their home’s design: First, they wanted something simpler and smaller than their home in Atlanta, which Marvine says felt too big and traditional. “It was a beautiful home, and it had many lovely characteristics, but there were areas that we simply didn’t use,” she says. “It’s hard to keep heat down at floor level when the ceiling is 24 feet tall. Those are the kind of things that drove us to pare down and build something that was more us and more tucked in.”

They also wanted a home that was unique. “We wanted it to be very individual and very interesting, sort of like living in a work of art,” Marvine says. “The house itself needed to have a lot of character. Not so much that we couldn’t clean it easily, but we wanted it to have interesting features about it. That was important to me, the aesthetics.”

Marvine also had a more functional request: She wanted to build a compound with several different buildings to accommodate her and Knox’s crafting pursuits. A lifelong sewer and quilter, Marvine wanted a built-in sewing studio. Knox is a woodworker, and needed a workshop large enough to house his lathe and other large-scale equipment. Marvine envisioned these spaces split into separate buildings. Although that idea was cost-prohibitive, Larson created the home with multiple roof planes—hence its nickname, the “Ten Roofs House”—creating the illusion of a cluster of buildings.

The design gives Knox and Marvine the space they need to pursue their many crafting hobbies. Marvine’s large sewing studio has a walk-in closet specifically designed to house her “stash”—a home supply of fabric and notions. “All fabric people have a stash,” Marvine says. “The nice thing about my stash is that I don’t have to drive. It’s a long way to go anywhere when you live in the country. Here, it’s 40 minutes to the nearest quilt store, and an hour-and-a-half to a larger one. If I want to do something on the fly, it’s nice to be able to pull fabric out without making a trip to the store.”

Having sufficient, dedicated space for her crafts also helps Marvine stay organized and aware of what she has. “I have it color-coded and organized by patterns or prints. I have a basket that holds my patterns and scrap fabric. It’s all pretty well organized. I keep art supplies in there, as well.”

Despite her many hobbies, Marvine was worried about having too much free time when she first retired. So she decided to enroll in some art classes at the local college, including screen-printing, drawing and book arts. She took to book arts, in which books are handmade, including the printing and binding. “It’s handmade books that have been printed by hand or digitally—they’re one of a kind,” Marvine says. “I loved it. So I have my book art supplies in my sewing room, too. My sewing table has two drawers for my art paper. I can do that in there because it’s a ‘dry’ hobby. I would never put a pottery wheel in there.”

But Marvine does have a pottery wheel—it’s in a corner of Knox’s woodworking studio. She signed up for pottery classes to meet people when she moved to the area, and enjoyed it enough to put a wheel in the house. Although her pottery does sometimes have a flaw: tiny wood shavings from Knox’s nearby lathe.

A Chat with Marvine and Knox

What is your favorite room in your home?

Marvine: We both love the living room. Knox likes the sun shining in and the bright, open feeling. I love the architectural details such as the rock wall and the shelves with my favorite pieces displayed.

What has been your favorite outdoor adventure?

We both agree: climbing Mt. Rainier in January a few months after we were married. We learned avalanche rescue, built snow caves and practiced self-arrest with ice axes.

What wildlife do you enjoy outside your home?

We have a wild abundance of winged insects, from bees to wasps to beetles and butterflies. On sunny summer days, there’s an audible buzz around the house. In the fall, they take their last nectar from the wild asters in the meadow below the house.

What is one of your standby winter meals?

Vegetable soup and homemade bread. We often use the veggies we’ve put up, which makes it extra special, and Knox’s bread is a perfect complement.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Marvine has been a sewer and quilter her entire life, a passion passed down from her mother, Leona. Leona visits Marvine for several weeks twice a year, and the two make quilts together. ■ Marvine lays out a quilt pattern on the wall of her sewing studio. ■ A large, “sociable” kitchen is central to many of architect Chris Larson’s designs.





Pet Project

While it may seem that Knox and Marvine's lives are full to the brim, there is still room in their hearts for one more major passion: animals. Marvine volunteers once a week at the local thrift store that financially supports the nonprofit animal shelter. "It's fun and it gives me a chance to get out and do something for the community and to meet people," she says. She and Knox also offer occasional foster care to in-need puppies and kittens—they recently hosted three bottle-fed puppies until they were permanently adopted. Eight cats and two dogs have become permanent residents.

ABOVE: The open, light-filled kitchen is perfect for growing plants indoors and for Marvine and Knox's canning and food preservation. ■ RIGHT: Marvine and Knox can pickles, tomato sauce, and jams made from the blueberries, strawberries and cherries they grow in their yard. ■ FAR RIGHT: Knox has taken woodworking courses at local arts and crafts schools. He gives bowls, jewelry boxes and vases as gifts, and sells them on Etsy (micaknobstudios.etsy.com) and at arts and craft shows.



WOOD WORKS

Knox uses his woodshop to make bowls, jewelry boxes, vases and other small items, which he gives as gifts and sells in local shops and via Etsy. As a young man, Knox had learned to work with wood doing home remodeling, and he decided to transform his skill into a hobby more than a decade ago. "I thought it would be interesting to take a turning class at the John C. Campbell Folk School, so I took a weeklong class," Knox says. "Woodworking is fun. You take a log and that afternoon you have a bowl. You get very quick satisfaction from your work."

A year after taking his first class, Knox bought a lathe so he could create wood crafts at home. "Once you start turning you need other equipment like a bandsaw," Knox says. "I've always had my equipment spread out, some stuff in the garage and some in our old dark basement, which was more like a dungeon."

In his new home, Knox has a large studio filled with equipment—and a wood-burning stove to keep things cozy in the winter. "When the builders first finished my shop, it was such a big area it felt like a skating rink," he says. "Now you can hardly walk around! It's filled with equipment, wood, projects that are drying and others waiting to be finished."

Along with giving Knox the space he needs to pursue his craft, his new home also provides him with an almost never-ending supply of material. In the middle of 60 acres of forest, Knox finds plenty of downed trees to keep him in wood. "When I'm out driving around, I keep an eye open for wood," he says. "Our neighbors had a big old wild cherry tree that the wind blew down in their yard, so I've been going down and getting pieces from that. Walnut is really common around here, and it's beautiful to work with. I use a lot of sycamore. There's more wood lying around than I can use."

WIDE OPEN SPACES

The home supports Knox and Marvine's longtime hobbies, and it has also inspired new ones. One night shortly after they moved to the woods, there was a meteor shower. Knox was intrigued. He'd always lived in big metropolitan areas and had never had such a clear view of the night sky. "After that, I started looking for when the next shower was and learning about the stars, and I bought a telescope," he says. "That was four years ago and since then I've bought several more telescopes and I've started dabbling in taking photographs, as well. Last year I took the freshman astronomy course online through UNC at Chapel Hill."

The wide open space also provides room for Knox and Marvine to indulge another passion: Growing and preserving some of their own food. "Knox's grandparents were farmers in eastern Tennessee, and he spent summers up on their farm



quite a bit," Marvine says. "He has that in his blood. The idea of putting food up and growing it ourselves is something that appeals to him, and to me." In raised beds, Knox and Marvine grow herbs, lettuce and kale. The couple also has two plots in a community garden where they grow more vegetables and garden with friends.

To preserve their bounty, every year they check out a canning kit from their local agricultural extension office and get to work. "We can our tomatoes, and I've made pickle relish and jams every year," Marvine says. "Knox has a small strawberry patch and we have blueberry bushes, so we'll put up blueberries and strawberries. This year was so exciting because the two sour cherry trees we planted made enough cherries to make jam. It's like tasting heaven. And Knox canned some marinated banana peppers, and we've done tomato sauce. We have fun with it."

From paddling and gardening to quilting and astrophotography, Knox and Marvine fill their post-retirement life with learning, creating and pursuing the hobbies they love. But despite its ability to support their many passions, what Marvine loves most about her home is coming back to it. "It's a house I love to drive up to," she says. "I love to be greeted by our home, to feel enveloped by the house, tucked in. We have ourselves nestled in the side of a hill, and the views are to die for."

JESSICA KELLNER is editor-in-chief of *Mother Earth Living*. She hopes her retirement will be as full of learning and new adventure as Marvine and Knox's is.