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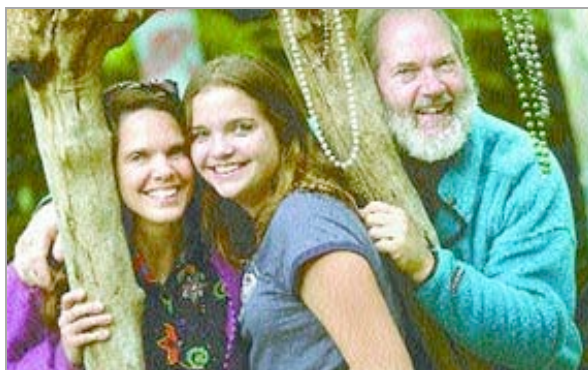
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Having a ball

story by constance mears | photos by frank varga



Left: Belinda, daughter Teresa and Ranger having a ball. **Right:** Man overboard. A 36-foot Chris Craft sits parked in the back yard under a tarp. The 1957 cruiser is equipped with a waterbed for overnight guests — a no wake zone.

In an exotic land called Rangerville, a big-eyed, pool-toy whale rides the grassy waves, emitting a purple ball onto the lawn. Mayor apparent, Ranger Kidwell-Ross, jumps into a game of can-you-guess-what-the-whale-is-doing. For the record, she's doing what everyone does in Rangerville. She's having a ball.

It would be hard not to in this wacky, unpretentious world. Even if yard sale yard art is not your cup of tea, one can't deny the exuberance that runs rampant, waving its plastic arms and legs, through the two-and-a-half acre property.

The population of Rangerville varies, but includes Belinda Chambers and daughter Teresa. Belle, the family's mixed breed mascot, doubles as a less-than-credible guard dog. And then there are the robots, Barbies, puppets. And, yes — flamingos.

The property is a funland labyrinth in which visitors are drawn one way or another, although, granted, it's hard to miss the 1957 36-foot Chris Craft, parked as it is, right on the lawn. But most women, the Rangerites agree, definitely notice the Shoe Tree, arbutus Imeldas. It's hard to say what's more succulent, the shoes — or the plants they hold. Belinda whispers that the "open-toed" shoes have the best drainage. Another hot tip.

If appropriate is the word guiding most garden planting schemes, appropriation is Ranger's. Among the winding paths skis become slats for benches, a bowling bag a planter. Nothing is sacred, or maybe it all is. Anything — flippers, telephones, springs, toys — can find new life here. Funzilla, a gargantuan lighted assemblage of random objects, towers over



This seven-car pile-up stops traffic in the back yard.



Word play, puns and pundits inspire garden art such as the exotic Shoe Tree.

the art walk, a path where garage sale masterpieces hang on cedar trunks. Genius among the genus.

Funzilla may be 20 feet tall, but the biggest act of transformation has been Ranger himself, morphing from a three-piece-suited VP for Business Law Marketing to a long-haired, work-from-home editor of a national trade magazine — who occasionally shows up as Mr. Turquoise, the clown.

“He’s eclectic,” Belinda said. “When he dies, they’ll call him eccentric.”

It is a paradox of serious fun that infuses the garden. There is an element of intentional chaos, a method to all the madness. Under the zany camouflage, most of the creations have a purpose — they provide habitat for flora or fauna, add lighting or simply levity. It lacks the despairing randomness found in junk piles of the hapless. All this coloring outside the lines is very much on purpose.

To drive a point home to himself, Ranger leaves an occasional branch hanging in the way of a path. On purpose.

“Most people spend their lives dreaming about vacation, wishing it was colder, hotter,” he said. “They want to live the dream.”

What Ranger wants to remember, to embrace, is that the hot and the cold and the branches hanging down are life. There is no some day more perfect than today. And the hanging branches help him remember to appreciate it.

So the garden has relentless surprises — peeking out of corners, brightening the landscape and the mood. The look and the lifestyle are not common enough to appeal to everyone. Even Belinda said the wackier aspects are “an acquired taste.” The process is ongoing, requiring vigilant garage sale attendance.

“It’s a social event,” Ranger explained of the weekly search and rescue missions.

Belinda, who home-schooled her four children for years, met Ranger while working as an environmental advocate. She has developed an eye for what Ranger likes, such as the antique barber’s chair she hauled home from a garage sale. Although suffering with fibromyalgia for some time, Belinda has recently taken up macro-nature photography, assembling an impressive portfolio in short order. The established garden provides an endless supply of subject matter.

Sons Keith, Eric and Greg have moved on, but not before constructing a substantial rock waterfall. Everyone, it seems, gets into the act.

Ranger’s niece, when asked by her parents where she might like to go for vacation, suggested Rangerville. Smart gal, considering the five-starfish accommodations — choice of a one-unit campground by the pond or a waterbed below-deck on the Chris Craft.

The installations are social events, too. An outdoor studio is stocked with paint, bric-a-brac, unfinished



Snowboards find new purpose as an imaginative bench.



This zippy number is in need of a haircut. Next year — bowling for Columbine?



Can I have a show of hands? Who thinks planting a cactus in an innertube might lead to trouble?



A spinosaurus contemplates taking the plunge. Belinda Chambers’ sons built the rock pond last summer.

pieces — ingredients for afternoon “art parties” where guests join in the fun. An elaborate rendition of Mother Earth and Pegasus was crafted of wire shelving, cloth and artificial flowers during a summer gathering. A propane tank is on the docket for a yellow submarine reincarnation. Whatever the next project may be, they’re bound to have a ball.



Does the name Mr. Turquoise spring to mind? This bench is painted in Ranger's favorite color.



Belinda took up photography last fall. Her photos, such as this one entitled Rainstorm in Red, can be seen [online here](#).



Must be time for bowling.

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