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American classic



The grand parlor is filled with grand art, including a painting of Saint Teresa of Avila, originally found in a monastery in Venice, Italy.

BY MARTY FUGATE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG WILSON

What makes a classic? There are two key ingredients. First, somebody had to go the extra mile to create a thing of beauty or an engineering marvel. That alone is not enough — history is filled with lost treasures. For a work of timeless excellence to survive long enough to be a classic, someone has to cherish it.

Mike and Kathy Verble balance both sides of the equation. They recognize the legacy of past creators. But they're also creators in their own right. Entrepreneurs, with a touch of artistry.

They're a classic American couple. And they've created a classic home for themselves on two and a half acres in the upscale Lake Club community in Lakewood Ranch. They named it "Magnolia Court" in honor of the 68 magnolias surrounding the property. Built in 2015, it's still

brand new. But it looks like it's been here for decades.

The front courtyard is a visual symphony of Lyman Whitaker's wind sculpture. At the entry, the massive, 13-foot iron doors make a bold statement. They open, and Mike appears. He greets us with a friendly smile and invites us inside.

"Kathy was called away today," he says. "But she's here in spirit."

Our tour begins. Mike tells their story along the way.

Mike was born and raised in Indianapolis. His mother was an interior designer, his father a home builder. Mike clearly learned from both. He met Kathy in high school. They instantly clicked. It was love at first sight, and enough love to last a lifetime. After graduation, Mike built some upscale houses of his own, and then helped his father and brother grow the largest commercial roofing business in North America. Mike went on to found a retail software logistics company, and create a revolutionary product installation division at Home Depot. After "retirement," Mike launched Raintree Music, an upstart recording label. Its catalog boasts hits by Merle Haggard, Shane McAnally, and Darryl Worley. Kathy helmed several innovative businesses of her own.

That's the short version.

Today, Mike would rather discuss his latest accomplishment — Magnolia Court. The Verble's sprawling residence comprises nearly 10,000 interior square feet, and boasts a 1,000-bottle wine cellar, a gym, media rooms, a library and a fleet of classic cars. Outdoor delights include a running track, tennis court and an inventive, custom golf course.

Seeing it all is quite a hike. But it's an enjoyable one.

We amble around, and get a leisurely first impression, and wind up right back where we started.

Home is where the art is

Just beyond the foyer, the grand parlor is filled with grand art.

Below the walnut fireplace, a bronze statue of a Russian Wolfhound sits. Soulful, loving eyes. The piece is heavy. In more ways than one.

"It took four men to lift it," Mike says.

Two voluptuous female figures support the weight of an end table that allegedly belonged to Mick Jagger.

Great stuff.

But the pièce de résistance rises above the fireplace — a mural, framed in a slice of stone archway. A haloed Saint Teresa of Avila walks beside a pilgrim on a dusty road. An elder bows to the holy pair; the rest of the town ignores them. Life goes on, and people go about their business.

"That was originally from a monastery in Venice, Italy," Mike says. "I instantly fell in love with it."

Twin alcoves flank the artwork; each contains an identical antique mirror. Mike bought the



The main hallway is a mini-art museum, filled with treasures from the couple's many travels.



The 1,000-bottle wine cellar is state-of-the-art, home to treasured vintages from around the world.



The beautiful — and comfortable — library is the perfect place to curl up with a good book or watch a bit of television.

pieces first, and then built the walls to hold them. That's his style.

"We found those mirrors in a wonderful antique store in Westfield, Indiana," he says. "Finding one was hard enough, let alone two. The proportions are unusual — it's 36 inches wide by 120 inches tall."

Mike does this a lot.

He can list the dimensions of every room, art object, and antique in the house. Where'd it come from? How'd he put it together? He can tell you that, too.

It's a precise mind at work — the mind of an entrepreneur with an engineering background. Mike built a career inventing solutions for problems people didn't know they had — and improving on solutions they thought were good enough. He clearly takes the same approach with his home.

Examples abound.

Before the house was built, Mike significantly modified its floor plan. The central hallway lost its rectilinear proportions. He replaced it with an archway of Francois stone. Once built, the hall became a literal art gallery.

In the library, Mike customized his favorite leather chair. He widened it by sixteen inches, so his beloved dachshunds could flank him.

"The golf course is my proudest accomplishment," he says. "We'll save that for last."

A place of their own

Mike also designed for privacy. The Verbles love to fill their home with family and friends — but they also love



The large kitchen and adjacent dining area is ideal for this couple who loves to entertain family and friends.



The outdoors includes all sorts of fun for the kids and grandchildren: a beautiful pool and patio, tennis court and the Magnolia Green golf course.

their time together. That's the reason Mike designed the master suite as a self-contained retreat. Once Mike and Kathy are inside, there's every reason to stay.

Expansive windows offer front-row seats on nature's beauty. Soft tones and classic furnishings trigger the relaxation response. A spa-like bathroom, boasting a European-style soaking tub, spacious clothing closets and his-and-her toilets. A wall of fascinating books. And a sweet sitting room where Kathy and Mike can get lost in literature on a lazy afternoon.

Family values

Our stroll continues. Along the way, we see classics of all descriptions. A 16th-century armoire — a legacy from Kathy's mother. A stained-glass door, rescued from a demolished Baptist church in Madison County, North Carolina.

Their house also abounds with photos and paintings of the Verbles' classic family. That includes their canine family.

In the game room, Mike points to magazine covers of three generations of prize-winning Irish Wolfhounds: Smokey, Harvey and Sunny. A father, son and daughter — each won the top prize as the champion of its breed. It all started when they brought Smokey over from Ireland.

Dogs have always been a part of the Verble family. Of course, they love their human members, too.

"Family means everything to us," says Mike. "It's the reason we built this house."

If you build it they will come?

"That's the theory and it's worked so far," he says, laughing. "Heck, we knew our kids and grandkids would visit us wherever we lived. But why not give them something to do while they're here?"

There's definitely plenty to do at Magnolia Court. This family-friendly compound features an outdoor pool and spa area with a state-of-the-art outdoor kitchen for plenty of al fresco poolside feasts. The indoor kitchen is a chef's dream come true. Even when the gang's all here, their three children and eight grandchildren are never bored. Especially if they're enjoying Mike's inventive golf course. He named it "Magnolia Green," naturally.

We head outside to check it out.

A hole in one

Others drive to their favorite courses. Mike built his own. He started with a small putting green for the grandkids. After that, his ambitions grew.

Mike acquired the large, empty lot next door. It was completely flat, but he soon took care of that.

He brought in hundreds of loads of fill to create a contour.

"I wanted to create a functioning golf course," he says. "Obviously, it couldn't be 18 holes! The lot is big, but not that big. My idea was to put a great big green in the middle. I surrounded it with four raised tee boxes

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at varying heights and locations, so each offers a unique approach to the green. It's really four different short holes and lots of bunkers."

The results are pretty to see. The lush landscaping creates a park-like feel. You see foxtail palms and bursts of bougainvillea. Those legendary magnolias sway in the breeze.

Mike points to a vintage bank clock across the green. "Kathy loves that," he says. "It lights up at night like a dream."

Good looks aside, this is clever engineering.

"Water's always a problem in Florida," Mike says. "One big storm could turn this into a lake. You've got to give the run-off a place to go."

His solution?

Mike surrounded his course with what he calls a "dry creek." On the surface, it's a ring of river rocks from Colorado. Below the surface, water drains down through the rocks to a network of pipes. Barring a tsunami, this pretty green will never flood.

The calculation behind this is amazing.

It seems like a labor of love. Is Mike a devoted golfer?

"No," he says with a shrug. "I just love to design things. And I like the classic look of a beautiful golf course."

Machine dreams

Speaking of good-looking classics, the Verbles' garage is a classic car museum. You'll find four-wheeled works of art inside. It's a car lover's dream come true.

Each vehicle is in cherry condition and polished to a mirrored shine.

A vintage Harley chopper — a 107 Road-Glide. Emblazoned with stars and stripes, it's a close cousin of the "Captain America" chopper in "Easy Rider."

A customized Rolls-Royce convertible. White exterior, red top. (According to Mike, it comes with its own Grey Poupon.)

A first-edition Porsche Turbo S Panamera from 2010. Midnight black,



The master suite is a self-contained retreat, with expansive windows that offer front-row seats on nature's beauty.

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Mike has an impressive car collection, but his favorite is this Corvette 99Z06, which looks as pristine today as it would have on a showroom floor in 1963.

as shiny as a moonlit lake. Only 8,000 miles on the odometer.

That's only a sampler — and Mike loves them all. But his pride and joy is the Corvette 99 Z06 — a gray-blue, split-window, fuel-injected Stingray. This all-American speed-machine looks as pristine as a model on a showroom floor in 1963. The Beach Boys sang its praises in "Shut Down." According to Mike, it's worth singing about.

"Only 1,099 were made," he says. "1,097 of those have either been wrecked or remodeled. As far as I know, there are only two in the world that are 100 percent original. This is one of them."

These beautiful machines are right at home in the Verbles' vast garage. It's a place of honor without pretension. The walls are packed with roadside souvenirs any good old boy would love. A Quaker State Motor Oil sign. A Texaco sign, redecorated with a blast of buckshot.

The walls also speak of Mike's love of music. Photos of Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan, and other music legends. Eddie Van Halen's electric guitar stands in a glass case — a signed legacy from a charity auction. (It's silent for now. You can almost hear the power chords.) There's also a signed, acoustic guitar from Darryl Worley, one of the country music stars who got a start on Mike's label.

"Darryl's a good friend," says Mike. "We wrote a few songs together — and seeing his career take off makes it all worth it. I'm still in the music business — that's the one business I've not retired from."

Mike frowns. That sounds like something a big shot would say.

And that's not who he is.

He wants to make that clear.

"Kathy and I started out our married life in a small, rusty, old trailer," Mike says. "We had no air-conditioning, no phone, no TV. Over time, by working really hard and taking risks, we got where we are today. Kathy and I built these different businesses and enjoy a good life together. But we never forget where we came from and what it took to get here. Each day is a gift, and we never take it for granted."

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