



# HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

It is said that creativity is the vital force of the human heart. But in our fast-paced lives, time to pursue passions remains a distant dream. Not for Niranjana and Bina Nanavati though as **Dhanishta Shah** discovers

**P**ERCHED on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of one of Mumbai's famed high rises, the Nanavati apartment overlooks the spectacular Arabian sea, soaking in the quintessential charm of Bombay. But, even this view cannot distract me from the beautiful house, laden with creativity. Art collected from various sources, artefacts sourced from frequent travels, photographs by Niranjnan Nanavati, paintings by his wife Bina, well-groomed bonsais...the list goes on. It is amidst this curated artistic collection, that I sit down to chat with the couple.

Niranjnan Nanavati was born and brought up in Mumbai. Joining the family business was something that was expected of him. "I am a third generation stock-broker. I joined the family business the year I got married, and till about 2004, when we merged the firm with Edelweiss, I was involved in the business. Now I am leading a retired life and pursuing all my dreams and passions," says Niranjnan. While he has retired from active work, he still manages his investments and is on the board of a few companies. But, now, as he proudly says, his time belongs to him—and his wife!

He is a well-known photographer and devotes much of his time to this consuming passion. His affair with the camera dates back to his college days, when he made pocket money taking photographs of college functions. He did this in partnership with a friend who studied at Sydenham. They printed photographs in the lab of the college (his wife studied at Sydenham as well, and perhaps it was fate...and photography that played a role in getting them together. But more on that later).

"I don't sell any of my pictures. I do this for self-satisfaction. I either gift them or even if I have an exhibition, the money goes to charity," he says. He travels at least five or six times a year. It helps that he enjoys trekking as well. A few of these trips are family holidays. The photography bug seems to have been transmitted to his children as well. His son Chirag and daughter Rachita pursue photography as a hobby. His son-in-law, Rishi, concentrates on insect photography! The shared passion is undoubtedly a great bonding vehicle for the family. He is often found carrying about 15 kgs of equipment which could sometimes be tiring, but he's always up for an adventure. "It's all okay, till your feet move," he says.

As we are flipping through the varied prints of the ace photographer, our conversation turns to the past, and about how they met. "Our marriage was a love and arranged one," Bina quips, asserting that from the time she was quite young Niranjnan always had "an eye on her". When Niranjnan's uncle married Bina's sister the families got to know each other. He started photographing Bina's famed rangolis.

What really sealed the deal was a chance trip to the United States, where their relatives had settled down. Bina and Niranjnan met at the visa office and realised that they were going to the USA around the same time. So they decide to travel together. The rest as they say is history!

Bina sees this period in their lives as the time for pursuing their hobbies together. "Everything has come to us in stages," she says. Brought up in a traditional Gujarati family, she was taught to uphold the values of a joint



Those were the days of manual cameras and film rolls. Digital photography had yet to make an appearance in the world. They experimented with different apertures and speeds, relying on hundreds of metres of film bought for their photographic adventures.

It was not by going to any course or class, but rather by trial and error that he learned the basics of photography. Experience honed the proverbial photographer's eye though he did not know it at that time. His hobby would play a very important role in his life post retirement. In the early days, he photographed anything and everything. Travels, fests, exhibitions, friends and so on, but today, he is known best for his wildlife photography.

It was about a decade back that he started to take a keen interest in the specifics of this genre. "I normally rent my own jeep so I don't disturb others and am not disturbed by others. However, to get a true feel of the jungle, you must travel on an elephant. We did that on several occasions. You can literally follow a tiger to a kill. Elephants with their little ones can be scary. These are all memorable experiences. I have extensively photographed the migration in Masai Mara," he says. In fact, he also dabbled in bird photography which is again a different genre in itself.

family and the importance of being a good wife, mother and homemaker, roles that she performed to perfection. After getting married, her skills of rangoli design, which were evident since she was a collegian, really took wings. We flip through albums of her rangolis, and she takes a trip down memory lane, pointing out the different designs and the meaning behind them. Her in-laws supported her hobby and were very encouraging.

But unlike photography, where images can be captured for eternity, rangoli is a transient art. Isn't it heart-breaking to see her designs wiped away? "Yes it was painful when we had to remove them. I used to cry," admits Bina, even as she simultaneously mourns the lost art of rangoli. But she has found a way to capture her talent in a permanent form. She explores different mediums in art—sketches in pencil as well as ink, watercolours, oil painting and fabric painting.

Besides the talent for making rangolis, she sketches beautifully and writes verses. On their numerous travels, while Niranjnan is busy with his camera, she is occupied with her book and pen...or canvas and brush! In fact, she has also published a book comprising of her artwork and poetry. What's truly wonderful is how the couple supports each other in the pursuit of their hobbies. If Niranjnan's photography involves frequent

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travel, Bina is all set to accompany him, sketchbook and diary in tow. Who knows...inspiration can strike anywhere!

One of the best things Niranjn feels he has done is not force his children into joining his business. The children are doing well in their chosen professions. Chirag runs his own business and Rachita is a graphic designer. Both are married and settled.

Today, the couple live the good life together, totally dedicated to creative pursuits. They look forward to bonding with their grandchildren. They are currently setting up their farmhouse in Panshet where they are running everything on solar energy. They intend to make this farmhouse their daily

home and turn their flat in Mumbai into a weekend home.

I now see their home in new light. The lamp shades bearing Niranjn's designs, the sketches and works in progress strewn in the studio, a complicated Lego structure (yes, one more of his passions) and many more examples show this couple's devotion to creativity. As I leave, I realise that it is not usual to meet people who are actually and truly living their retirement dreams. I am reminded of a famous couplet by Robert Browning... "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in his hand who saith, 'A whole I planned, youth shows but half; Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!'" 📧

