

## Home combines art, entertaining with style

Home of the Week: Michael and Lisa Bell

By WENDI WINTERS, For The Capital Published 08/28/10



The home of Michael, Lisa and Carmen Bell seamlessly blends their lovingly renovated residence with their love of fine art and entertaining.

In 2007, with son Carmen on the way, Michael and Lisa found the house they had spent years looking for. They purchased a small bayside cottage, built in 1954, just as it was coming on the market. Though it had an inviting Bahamas blue, amoeba-shaped pool in the small backyard and a view of the bay, the inside needed work. A lot of work. "We gutted both bathrooms," Michael said. "One bathroom had pink fixtures from the '70s and the other one had brown fixtures," Lisa said. That was just the beginning.

Michael, 39, a native of Lyndhurst, N.J., is chairman of the Art Department at Southern High School. In 2004 he was Anne Arundel County's Teacher of the Year, just one of many awards he's earned over the past decade. Inspired by his example and mentorship, numerous Southern High Bulldogs have gone on to major in the arts in college and embark on careers as artists.

Beyond the school campus, Michael is a renowned celebrity artist and muralist. He is as comfortable in a designer tuxedo walking the red carpet at star-studded galas featuring his works as he is in a T-shirt and jeans speckled with paint. On commission, he's painted the stars of iconic shows like "CSI: Miami" and "The Sopranos," and actors from the movie "Goodfellas." In fact, "Sopranos" actor Joseph R. Gannascoli inaugurated a cigar line using Bell's portrait of him on the boxes and bands.



Lisa, also 39 and from Nutley, N.J., is in the process of launching Nave, an elegant, all-natural skin care and cosmetic collection. Like Michael, she wields a brush to create a magical effect, but whereas her husband dazzles with paints and charcoal, Lisa creates art with hair spray, gel and scissors.

The two met in a hair salon. Michael had accompanied his grandmother to her hair appointment, and was semi-aware that she was trying to play matchmaker for him and the owner's daughter, Lisa. He was smitten before Lisa finished putting the rollers in his grandmother's coif, so he asked her out. "It's bad for business to date a customer. I'm not going out with you," Lisa told him bluntly, rejecting his offer.

"I'm not a client," Michael retorted.

"He hung around for two weeks and finally showed up with two glasses and a bottle of wine," Lisa said. "We went out. We got engaged six months later and the wedding was six months after that. We've been married 14 years."

## A fixer-upper

"We were looking for a home for a long time. We were living in Bel Air in Harford County," Michael said. It was a 58-mile hike to Southern High in Harwood, a 90-minute drive in good traffic. Now, the commute takes less than a half hour.

Stepping inside the front door of their bayside cottage, a visitor encounters the first of Michael's artworks, which enliven nearly every flat space in the house. A series of miniature paintings and charcoal drawings on 25 small wooden panels are connected by small chains and hung, in fives, on the wall. Looking around, it takes a moment to realize the room was once a screened-in porch of a summer cabin, later converted to a year-round space with walls paneled with varnished knotty pine.



The Bells updated the porch with a tiled floor and installed a small wet bar. They mixed family antiques with more recent pieces for a retro chic look. In one corner stands an AMI jukebox from the '80s, loaded with 45s ready to blast dance tunes in stereo. Parked on the floor next to it is a child's ride-on toy, a pint-sized replica of a '50s-era Ford convertible, in pristine condition. Carmen's wheels. The room also holds Carmen's vintage red trike.

Inside the central portion of the 1,388-square-foot, single-story home is where the Bells' handiwork is evident. The living room leads to a central hallway that links three bedrooms along the side of the house with the kitchen, located near the rear. The main bath is at the end of the hallway.

The kitchen leads to a small dining area - once simply a mudroom and laundry. Beyond that is the backyard, a fun outdoor bar and party area, an alfresco dining space and a roomy shed that has been converted into Michael's art studio.



The couple ripped out the ubiquitous shag carpeting and installed hardwood floors. In a back dining area and a bath, the stained pine paneling was retained, as were the pine-paneled ceilings and skylight. But dated wallpaper in the hallways and bedrooms was scraped off, and Michael textured hallway walls to resemble stucco.

Living room walls paneled with the knotty pine were painted white to brighten the space. The home's builder cut two narrow windows in the rear living room wall on either side of the chimney flue, providing a view into the kitchen. Built-in bookshelves beneath the windows hold art history books and handmade terra cotta sculpted vases. Warming the room on cold days is a Federal Airtight wood stove.

Against one wall, in a juxtaposition of old and new, the family's flat-screen TV rests atop a rustic wooden trunk set into a wrought iron stand. A suede, fawn-colored couch and armchair topped with '60s-style op art pillows set a cozy mood.

### Trading spaces

Bathrooms and bedrooms underwent major changes as the Bells settled in.

"We flipped the main bath and master bath," Lisa said. "We pulled out the bathtub in the main bath and installed a shower. The fixtures in there were magenta pink."

The bath is now done in earthy, Tuscan shades of brown and sand. The sink is a frosted glass bowl resting atop a wood cabinet. In renovating the master bath, the shower was removed and a tub replaced it. The wood paneling was retained. The floor and tub half-wall were faced with large Italian tiles.



"Lisa's dad, Bill Molinaro, is a mason, born in Naples," Michael noted. "He ripped out the sinks and tub and put in the floors. He's an old school, 'Whaddya hirin' somebody for? I can do it for ya!' kind of guy. He moved in for a while and did it for us."

When the bathrooms were being renovated, the Bells rethought the floor plan. The master bedroom and bath became a guest suite, and the Bells moved into the front bedroom. "We have a lot of guests visiting, so we let them have their own getaway back there," Michael said.

In the new master bedroom, the couple hung a mural-sized portrait of Lisa. Meanwhile, Carmen's room sports a Thomas the Tank Engine theme. Above the headboard is a framed series of superhero sketches that Michael drew at age 5. They were entered into an art contest, Michael won first prize, and his art career was launched. Alongside the bed is a portrait of Carmen as a sleepy newborn, held in Lisa's arms.

The guest bedroom has walls painted rust and cream. Matching highboy and sideboard dressers are vintage 1960s hipster. The Bells rescued them when they were being discarded by a relative.

The kitchen was renovated, too. The countertops look like granite, but are FX Formica. The cabinets were refurbished with dark paint and a new set of brushed stainless steel handles. The family's love of Italian cuisine is evident - there's a large glass jar filled with home-dried rosemary. One cabinet holds a supply of tantalizing, home-bottled, chunky tomato sauce.

Next to the kitchen and down one step, the mudroom has been converted to a charming dining room. The washer and dryer are hidden behind a wooden folding door.

### **Backyard view**

In the backyard, a patio dotted with tall potted plants rims a pool. In one corner, a wide, thatched umbrella shelters an outdoor dining set. An overhang attached to the shed shades the festive, glass topped bar and keg-erator.

From nearly every spot in the yard it is easy to drink in a vista of the bay a few hundred yards away. No surprise, the backyard is a popular spot for entertaining. The Bells host a lot of 30-something soirees, family get-togethers, barbecues and pool parties.

Inside the sturdy shed is Michael's studio. Wall space is devoted to his "Wall of Fame" - photographs and head shots of celebrity clients and friends, many inked with affectionate notes to him. The photos are interspersed with Michael's paintings, sketches, press clippings and family photos. A cream leather couch provides a good perch from which to take it all in and watch the artist at work. And, though Michael paints in the space, it is as squared away as an Army barrack.

"We did the house bit by bit," Lisa said. "We'd save up and do a room. We'd save some more and do another room, 'til we got it the way we wanted it." "It's comfortable," Michael said. "And Carmen loves it."

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