



VERMONT VOICES

Story by Kathleen James
Photos by Ian Mackenzie

High Ideals

At 2,125 feet, the iconic house on Northeast Mountain in Wells offers artistic inspiration to its new owners.

I FIRST HEARD from Felix Kniazev in three ways, all at the same time. I walked into work one Friday morning last summer and got stopped by a colleague before I could reach my desk. “Some crazy guy called,” he said. “I’m not sure what it’s about, but he said to check your messages.” On my voicemail, an enthusiastic monologue in what turned out to be a Russian accent, inviting me to meet him the next day. And an e-mail: “We are artist who move to Vermont, partly because of your great magazine that we always buy in Boston. The house that we buy is amazing...”

Felix had attached a digital photo and a brief history of a house I recognized, as would anyone who’s driven Route 30 between Pawlet and Poultney or looked east and up from Lake St. Catherine. Whoever Felix was, he now owned the house on Northeast Mountain. Visible for miles, it looks like a concrete silo, or maybe a scientific observatory, and it’s been a high-profile icon in the small town of Wells since it was built three decades ago at 2,125 feet on top of the Taconic Range.

We met the next morning at the Wells Country Store and headed off in Felix’s minivan. I’d brought along a photographer to document the day (best-case scenario) or to protect me if Felix turned out to be nuts (worst-case scenario). I didn’t get scared until Felix stopped the van on a dirt road that disappeared, hairpin style, up a steep slope and into the trees. “We need maximum speed or we won’t make it,” he said—or something like that. I was too busy checking my seatbelt to listen. Felix crushed the accelerator and gravel spun out from the tires. One mile, two death hallucinations and hundreds of vertical feet later, we were at the top. Felix’s wife, Olga, offered me tea while



Artists Olga Julinska and Felix Kniazev with their sons Max (left) and Kyle (right) at the family’s Vermont home and studio. “The mountains put you in your place,” says Olga. “They give us creative power.”

While their parents work in the studio, Max and Kyle tackle some serious landscaping on the summit.



Driving along Route 30 between Pawlet and Poultney, or looking east from Lake St. Catherine, it's hard to miss the house in Wells.



their young sons, Max and Kyle, played with plastic trucks. This was good. Life was normal up here, in its own weird way. I've been around some, but I can't say I've ever been to an art studio owned by Russian émigrés in a silo on a summit with 360-degree, 50-mile views.

FIRST, THE HISTORY of the house. In 1977, Bob Vanderminden started building a road up Northeast Mountain, on an 800-acre piece of property owned by the Mettowee Lumber Company. That's the land-management division of Telescope Casual Furniture, the company Vanderminden's family has owned since 1903. Vanderminden was 22 at the time and had spent most of childhood exploring the mountain. Naturally, he wanted to build a house on top. So he bought ten acres and right-of-way from the family business and did most of the road construction himself, including the drilling and blasting.

The neighbors pretty much thought he was crazy. Two years later they thought he was even crazier when he built a six-story cement

monolith on the summit and moved up there with his wife. They raised three young children on the summit—Rob, Adam and Jennifer—until their divorce; after that, the kids came on weekends.

Though it's hard to believe, the building has the usual amenities. A well-drilling company hit water 540 feet down, and Bob put in a septic tank. For years, the house was powered by a wind turbine and a propane generator; Vanderminden later hired a private contractor to bury power lines along the road. The phone was set up as a point-to-point radio link and tied to a line in Poultney.

A circular staircase leads up the interior of the tower, from the ground-floor kitchen to three bedroom levels and an observation room on top. In 1981, Vanderminden added a wooden building around the base of the tower that contains several living rooms and a big garage.

A man of few words, Bob sums up his 21 years on the summit like this: "It was a pretty cool place. I liked living there." His son Adam has way more to say. "Growing up, we'd tell people where we'd live, and

Felix and Olga co-founded Art Department in 2004 with a seven-dollar box of clay. Their handmade creations, including custom clay houses, are now sold in 400 galleries and gift stores nationwide. At right and below: The artists at work in their studio, the former basement garage.

they'd say, 'No, you don't.' They didn't believe it. Or kids would point to the house and say, 'See that? That's my house!' People always wanted to come up and check it out."

Adam spent most of his time outdoors, hunting and picking berries and scrambling around the slopes. When he was older, he and his buddies would put on dirt-bike helmets and four-wheel around the mountain in an old Jeep with a skull-and-crossbones on the hood. Adam remembers coming home one winter night from a swim in his grandparent's indoor pool. The car died at the bottom of the hill and the family hiked home in a snowstorm, wearing swimsuits and sneakers, with socks on their hands and floormats for makeshift coats. "We hiked 45 minutes uphill, so we were plenty warm," he says. He also remembers the weather: the purple haze of St. Elmo's Fire illuminating the house, the windows shaking and the toilet water sloshing in 100-mile-an-hour winds, and the time he snuck out during a windstorm with a piece of plywood, trying to fly. "I got blown over," he says. The hardest part? "Well...January, I guess."

In 2000, it was time to come down. With the kids grown, Bob moved to Saratoga and put the house on the market. And there it sat until 2007. "Waiting for us," says Olga.

FELIX KNIAZEV and Olga Julinska were born and raised in Russia. They moved to the United States at different times and for different reasons. Olga's mother took a job as a professor at Boston University; Felix came to hang out with a friend. In 1999, they met at a fine-arts trade show in New York City. At the time, Olga was working as a book designer and also making her own prints and lithographs. Felix's career, a bit harder to classify but full of pep, included selling his kitsch-art paintings on the Soho streets, organizing events to promote the Manhattan electronic-music scene, and producing amber jewelry inspired by the movie



Jurassic Park. Olga explains it best: "Felix is a catalyst," she says. "He makes things happen. He helps people do things. He's all ideas." (Case in point: I had never heard of Felix Kniazev when I got his first phone call. Less than 24 hours later, I was drinking tea in his concrete house at 2,100 feet.)

The couple worked on cruise ships for a few years and then moved to Boston, where Olga earned a master's degree in graphic design at BU. (Felix's degree, from Moscow University, is in aviation engineering.) In 2004, Olga got pregnant and it was time to get serious. "We were sort of desperate," she said. "We had no money and we needed a big idea. We're both artists. So we decided: ceramics. And we bought a box of clay for seven dollars."

They founded their company, Art Department, and started making refrigerator magnets. Long story short, and skipping the part about how they met the Dalai Lama, artistic talent (Olga) plus off-the-charts energy and marketing skills (Felix) has added up to success. That's a bit simplistic—Felix is also a talented artist, and Olga has plenty of business acumen—but it's clearly a powerful yin-yang package. Art Department ceramics have appeared in the Sundance catalog, in *Better Homes and Gardens* and on the coveted "O List" in Oprah Winfrey's *O* magazine; their handmade creations are sold in



more than 400 galleries and gift stores nationwide, including Neiman-Marcus and Anthropologie. They also sell direct to customers through their Website and are developing a line of miniature buildings, city landmarks writ small in clay, for Gump's San Francisco. The most popular Art Department objects are handmade clay houses in various architectural styles or custom-made to replicate, say, your childhood home.

By 2007, they were ready to expand. "But not in the sense of doing

more,” says Felix. “We wanted to do other things, to work with wood and metal and glass. But our studio in Boston was too small, and in the city we don’t have access to these materials. So we started looking. We looked all over the United States. We looked in the Caribbean and in Europe. But we couldn’t find the perfect place. Then a friend said, ‘You should go to Vermont.’”

The night before they were planning to drive up, Felix found a listing for the Wells house online. “It seemed pretty crazy and the description was vague,” he said. “You know: ‘In need of a lot of work.’ We couldn’t even tell if you could live there. But we had to see it.” Felix and Olga loved Vermont, which they say looks and feels a lot like the rolling forest of rural Russia, and they were amazed by the house. They closed on New Year’s Eve 2007, and on New Year’s Day they bundled up the kids and hiked to the summit in a blizzard. “It was freezing, but we were so happy,” says Olga. Last summer, they moved some kilns up from Boston and converted the garage into a studio; they now spend summers and weekends in Vermont and hope to make a full-time move soon. The house is pretty rugged, and they’ll need to buy a plow truck or a snowcat to deal with the road in winter. But they’re not daunted. They’re going to make it happen.

For Felix and Olga, the house on Northeast Mountain is much more than a quirky retreat in a spectacular setting. It’s about high ideals, big projects and seeing for miles and miles, across the mountains and into the future. The house is raw material waiting for creative inspiration—like that seven-dollar box of clay they used to start their company. Felix is already working on a list of potential collaborations with neighboring artists and writers. He is brainstorming ideas for events, talking about turning the place into an artists’ retreat, and thinking about transforming the mile-long driveway into an art and sculpture hike.

“As artists, we’re surrounded by the tranquility and power of the Vermont landscape,” says Olga. “The mountains are enthralling. They put you in your place, and you realize how insignificant you are. But you also gain strength and courage. The mountains give us creative power.” ■

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