

From RANCH to RETREAT

A big-city photographer had a vision to transform a storied Burnsville property into a space for contemplation and reflection — a healing place.

written by MICHAEL KRUSE

From the main lodge's porch, guests take in soothing views of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN BUSHER, IMAGERY, DEREK DILDZIO



HEATHER & SEAN BUSHER

WAY UP HERE IN THE MIDST OF the Blue Ridge Parkway, Pisgah National Forest, and the Eastern Continental Divide, sitting on one of the rocking chairs on the long front porch of the great main lodge at this cow pasture that became a campground that became a dude ranch that is now the Mount Mitchell Eco Retreat that he owns and runs with his wife, Heather, Sean Busher tries to explain.

“I wanted a new challenge,” he says.

“I wanted to take on this lifestyle,” he says.

“And we have learned so much,” he says. He has, and his wife and their daughter, too. “About construction. About living off the land. About gardening. About all sorts of things.”

Sean, after all, has always loved the outdoors, often getting out for walks and hikes and weekends with pals in this part of the state that offers such vast, rugged beauty, but he grew up in the city, lived in the city, worked in the city. He was,

by all accounts, a remarkably successful commercial photographer, stationed in Charlotte and shooting for companies and brands with big names — doing it, though, with an artist's demeanor and a signature panache that earned him not just enviable fees but also critical acclaim. "We have it going on," he once said of his firm. "We have a look."

Yet here he was, last year and for months on end, in his early 40s and clad in a hazmat suit and crouched down in crawl spaces, painstakingly vacuuming a thin fur of green mold from every wall, joist, crevice, and corner, sanding down all of the wood and sealing it with polyurethane coats, ripping up carpets and redoing floors, turning the musty cabins into modish getaways surrounded by the same bucolic setting: the sequence of peaks of the Black Mountains, the buzz of the bees and

the chirps of the birds, the tranquil murmur of Clear Creek, and nothing but the stars in the sky when it's dark. Making this the place he wanted it to be. A healing place.

Busher sits still.

"I drive to Charlotte now, and my experience is totally different than what it used to be," he says. "When you're sitting here, in this peace and quiet all the time, and then you start driving back — by the time I get to, like, Gastonia, and hit I-85, it feels like the world's closing in on me."

"If we are going to want to live this new lifestyle, be more spiritual beings, be closer to nature, live off the earth, have this peace, then we just have to do it," he says. "We have to bite the bullet. We have to make changes. And so to say that I want this future life where I'm living off the land and



The retreat is home to two creeks and a spring-fed pond that Heather and Sean share with guests.

Sean works hard behind the scenes at Mount Mitchell Eco Retreat so that his guests can enjoy their visit.

to continue doing what we were doing in Charlotte — it's not going to cut it, you know? It's like, I want that future — so let's do it now."

I'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE. IT WAS 2014. THIS WAS STILL the dude ranch.

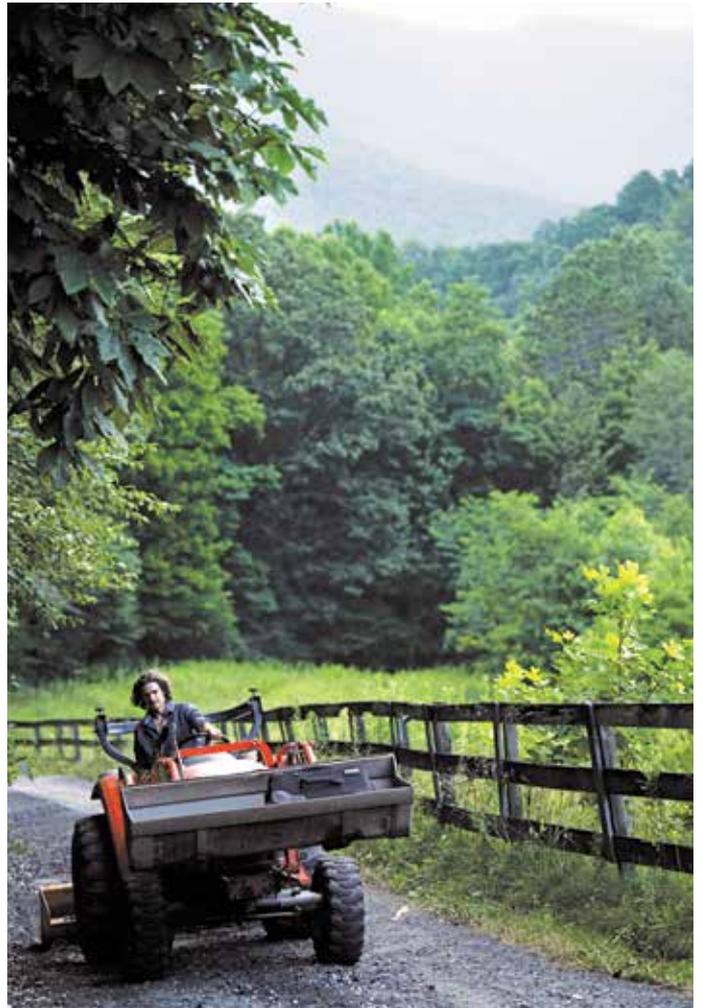
At the time, it was run by a tall, garrulous, gracious man named Rex Frederick. He had been a long-ago college basketball star at Auburn University in Alabama, then a coach, then a mortgage broker, but none of that was what he wanted in the end, and so he drove around these hills and these hollers until he happened upon this spot. He put a stick in the soil. He asked if it was for sale.

I remember riding a horse named Rocky on paths cut through thickets of rhododendrons.

"It's a good atmosphere in which to reconsider the modern obsession with short-term goals."

I remember the family-style meals and the scent of cooking bacon wafting through the cool morning air. I remember the cheap drinks at the tiny bar. I remember that my cell phone had no service.

What I remember most, though, was reading through the well-worn copy of a book about the reasons for vacations at ranches. "Ranch life is



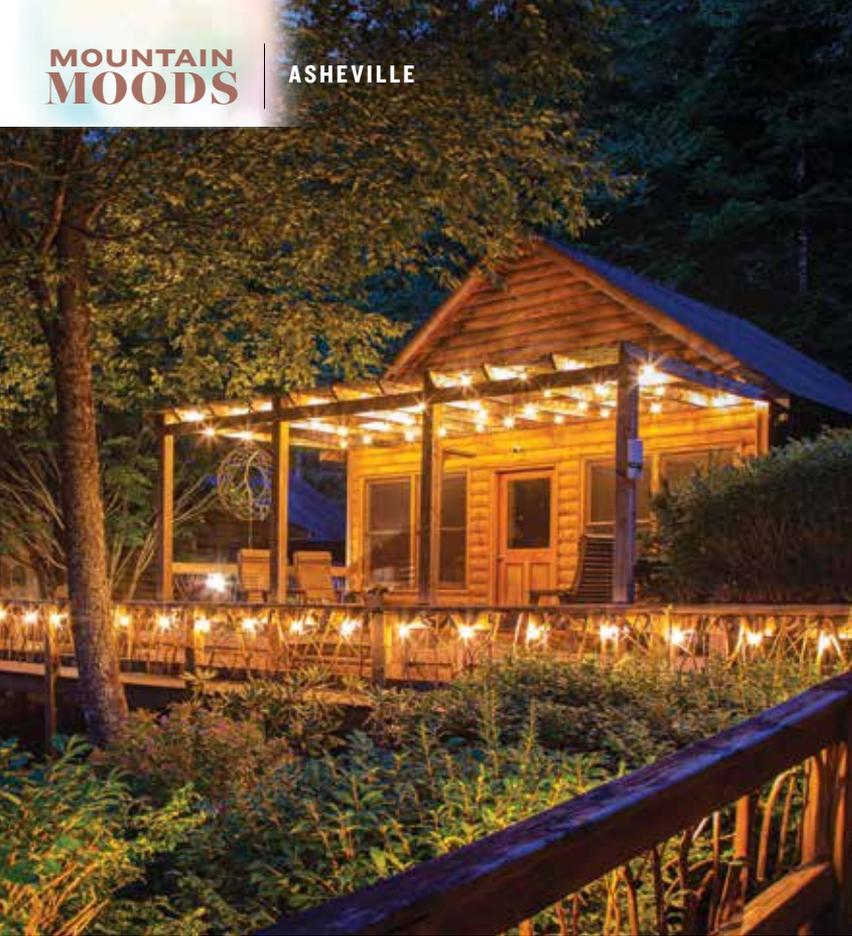
the antithesis of Disneyland and television, which dishes up the artificial in ever shorter snippets," said the foreword. "It is a good atmosphere in which to reconsider the modern obsession with short-term goals, which are so often at odds with long-range achievements."

Rex Frederick had asked himself a question. He had answered it. And it seemed to me that he was asking his visitors to ask it of themselves.

But that summer I was here turned out to be the last summer he was here, too. He was pushing 80. He wasn't making a fuss about it. It was just time. "About time," he told me, "to retire."

SEAN BUSER — AT LEAST AT FIRST — COULD BE SEEN as an unlikely successor.

He was in middle school when he found his father's old Canon camera in a closet and started teaching himself how to take pictures. He graduated from South Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte in 1997 and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2001. Along the way, he took photos for *The Daily Tar Heel* and was the runner-up for the North Carolina Press Association's



In a bungalow next to the main lodge, The Healing House provides guests with services ranging from massage therapy and yoga to meditation and sound baths.

“Find Your Center” project he did for Charlotte Center City Partners that made six billboards out of 163 separate layers of pictures. There’s the single continuous panorama he made by recruiting some 136 fellow photographers to stand spread out over a stretch of 15 city blocks, and at the very same instant hit click. There’s the opus he called *The Descent of Man*, which took him five years and more than a thousand hours and which posited the return of Jesus Christ to Earth to teach evolution.

He wanted, he stated on his website, to “explore the world from a metaphysical perspective.”

“Blurring the line,” said the back of his business card, “between dreams and reality.”

IT’S HARD, SITTING HERE ON THE PORCH OF THE lodge, to see seasons.

Across from the rocking chairs, depending on the time of the year, the green of the leaves on the trees slowly but surely moves up and down the slopes of Deer Mountain, of Winter Star, of Cattail Peak. “We’ve been watching,” Busher says.

Mount Mitchell is the highest point in the Appalachian Mountains, the highest point in all of Eastern North America, and a hike from here to the top can take a person, in the span of a single breathtaking day, from the sweet sweat of late summer to the vibrant glory of the fall to the clarifying chill of early winter and then back again.

And being in a place like this has a way of making people attuned to the seasons of not just years but also their lives.

Rex Frederick was a mortgage broker for 20 years. He did what he did here for another roughly 20 years. Sean Busher has been Sean Busher of Sean Busher Imagery for just over 20 years.

Early on in his time here, a huge whoosh of wind came rushing down from the mountains and toward the cabins in the clearing. He heard it before he felt it. It nearly knocked him over.

“I had a really great, ideal almost, career — but I was kind of bored,” he says now. “I had a great time, and I felt like I was definitely leading-edge and exploring and doing the things that I was called to do. But that doesn’t mean that I’m going to be called to do the same thing my whole life. It’s living in the moment.” It was just time.

Student Photographer of the Year award and did a summer internship at a newspaper in Delaware.

But he chafed even then at the track that was open and available to somebody with his talent. “I’d run into these other photographers who just seemed beat-down,” he once told the alt-weekly in his home city. “That wasn’t the career path I wanted.”

So he started his own eponymous business. He took pictures at weddings. He went everywhere. He met everyone. In 2006, he married the former Heather Dawn Lambert, who became for Sean Busher Photography its “business manager and muse.” The list of clients grew and grew, a who’s who of corporate America in the area and beyond — the City of Charlotte and the

Charlotte airport, Wachovia and Wells Fargo and the Bank of America, Duke Energy and NASCAR.

Scroll through Busher’s body of work, and there’s no shortage of shots of skyscrapers and stores and gleaming condominiums and people in suits in offices or in their homes, hawking products. Also, though, there is an arresting blend of pictures and genres, practiced captures with CGI shots in the arm to give them an almost surrealist chi that’s hard to describe. There’s the

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The four bedrooms in the Mitchell Lodge — one of five lodges, comprising 16 rooms/suites total — boast king-size beds and mattresses made of organic materials.

THE FIRST PHASE IS FINISHED. THE INSIDES OF THE retrofitted cabins at the Eco Retreat have a sharp, sleek, fresh feel — bright spaces with organic mattresses and stylish fixtures and handsome red refrigerators, self-check-in locks with codes instead of clunky keys, even fast fiber Internet. Inside the main lodge, there’s a community kitchen. “Leave it **BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT**,” says a sign pinned to the wall.

Sean and Heather and a collection of helpers are already busy with a next set of projects. The pool that the county condemned is going to be a koi pond with a meditation garden. What was a horse pasture is on the way to becoming a spacious, deer-proof, bear-proof coop for 19 new free-range chickens. “Plenty of land,” Sean says, “with the bugs and the grasses and all the things they want to eat, which will make better eggs.” They’re building 20 Adirondack chairs to go around more firepits and places to play Ping-Pong and horseshoes. They plan to build a year-round greenhouse. Maybe they’ll have a local arts gift shop.

Sean stands up and walks into what, at the dude ranch, was the tiny bar with the cheap drinks.

“So, this is the Healing House,” he says, and explains that it’s a venue for retreats and yoga classes and maybe even small weddings.

“What,” I ask, “will people be healing from here in the Healing House?”

“Well, from their illusions,” Sean says with

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a smile. “We’re all perfectly aligned and perfectly capable of being fully healthy, but sometimes we’ve got to peel back the layers,” he says. “Sometimes healing practitioners can intuit some hang-ups that you have and work to release those in various ways to get closer to that peace and happiness that everyone seeks.”

Outside, it’s quiet and still but for the creek and the wind.

Inside, it is, too.

“I think,” Sean says, “good things are going to happen here.” **Os**

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PHOTOGRAPH BY SEAN BUSHER IMAGERY