





Oakside

Inside the Walls

by Wesley Gallagher photos by Kevin Harkins

In the heart of Methuen, nestled between two streets, hidden behind towering walls, sits an unassuming ranch house on a sliver of land. On the driveway gate an address sign reads “Charles.” To the unsuspecting passerby, it looks like the entrance to any other home. What lies behind the house, inside those walls, however, is a magnificent secret.

The property’s original owner was Edward Searles, an interior and architectural designer who was born and raised in Methuen. In 1887, Searles married Mary Hopkins, the widow of an original investor in the Central Pacific Railroad. When she died four years into their marriage, he was left with a great fortune. Searles gradually acquired a vast amount of land in and around Methuen, including the 1-acre parcel that is known as Oakside.

Searles named the property Oakside due to the large oak tree that stands at what was

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Top: Oaksid e's back porch is the perfect spot to take in the view: flowers, evergreens, a monstrous ancient oak and the tower in the distance. The columns, one of the property's many vignettes, create a "temple" of sorts overlooking the pool. Opposite page, top left: The walkway from the house leads past the tower and down to the rest of the yard where the "beach" and contemplation area lie hidden from view. Top right: Charles Mello, Oaksid e's current owner, is an artist in every sense of the word. From hairdressing to sculpting, gardening to interior design, his life is defined by beauty. Bottom left: A sculpture of scissors cutting through the male and female symbols was the sign for the salon Charles opened in Tewksbury in 1977, one of the first unisex salons in New England. Bottom right: Charles wakes up at 4 a.m. every morning to water the stunning flowers covering his property.







The "beach" is a tribute to Charles' childhood on Plum Island, and an area of the property that doesn't require much upkeep, which makes maintaining the rest of the property more manageable. The shed is reminiscent of the houses on Plum Island and is surrounded by flowers, knick-knacks and items from Charles' life, like an old bowling ball.

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the original entrance. More than 225 years old, the tree is one of the oldest oaks in the Merrimack Valley, with the size and grandeur to prove it. Matching the impressiveness of the oak are the enormous granite walls and towers that surround the property, which are part of an elaborate series of walls Searles erected throughout Methuen.

“There is no other city or town that has the walls that Mr. Searles built,” says Joe Bella, vice president and historian at the Methuen Historical Society. Searles built several structures that continue to serve the city today — churches, schools, even the railroad station — but the walls are a defining characteristic. He built the walls and towers out of a love of 16th century English architecture.

Charles (he doesn’t use his last name, Mello) fell in love with Oakside the instant he walked through the front door of the house, which was built in the 1950s by Florence Robertson, a local philanthropist and owner of Methuen’s now defunct Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company.

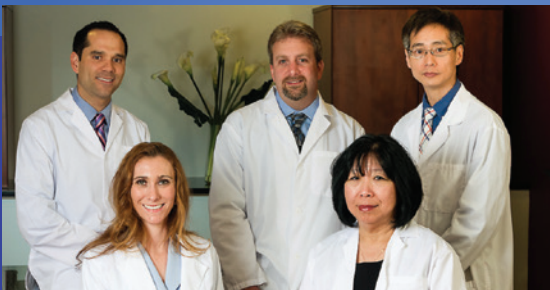
When Charles purchased the property in 1986, the house measured a mere 2,100 square feet, and the land that it sat on was little more than a grassy knoll. Under his care, the house has grown to 6,000 square feet with the addition of a wing for entertaining, and the property has evolved into a full-fledged botanical paradise.

Charles loves the property for many reasons. One of the original draws was his desire for privacy and protection from the outside world. He struggled with crippling agoraphobia for a decade, and Searles’ walls and towers became a fortress. As an artist — he was once a sculptor and has been a hairdresser for more than 40 years — he also saw the beauty of the property and wanted to develop it. He is a project man, and for the past 28 years, Oakside has been his project.

Charles has turned the backyard into a series of visual vignettes, making a walk through the property feel like a venture into a private Eden. From the back

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patio's sprawling view of the landscape and the main tower in the distance, to an enchanting saltwater pool flanked by rocks and flowers, and a path that wanders under trees and down a hill to the "beach" and contemplation area, each new piece of the puzzle is unique and eye-catching. "I wanted to use the acre to its fullest," Charles explains. "I wanted every section to have a purpose." Charles encourages his salon clients to take advantage of the property when they visit, as a retreat of sorts. He also hosts fundraisers and events for organizations with passions that coincide with his.



Charles is always looking for new art to extend the visual interest of the gardens for his visitors. Interesting pieces like this angel, which he found at an estate sale in the Berkshires, are peppered throughout the grounds.

Over the years of transforming Oakside, Charles has changed as well. The agoraphobia that once drove his desire to create the oasis is now gone, and he plans to move to Lowell in order to be surrounded by artists as he returns to sculpting. This project is finished, and it's time to move on.

And what of Oakside? When asked where he will find the next owner, he answers with unwavering confidence that the new owner will find him. mvm

***Editor's Note:** For more on Oakside, see our custom home audio system article on page 38.*

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