Two art fanatics home in on a Texaco artifact and help turn a corner around.

by Mike Hixenbaugh    photography by Keith Lanpher

It's a damp, dreary day in the middle of winter, and Brother Rutter is walking – no, bounding – toward me along a cracked sidewalk, past a partially torn-down building and orange construction cones and boarded-over windows that greet visitors to Norfolk's blossoming arts district. As he glides along Olney Road toward Granby Street, the 51-year-old lawyer is smiling the sort of smile that you can see from a distance. He's still grinning when he slaps my palm in a forceful handshake and simultaneously points up to the three-story, half-renovated brick building in front of us.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he says with almost startling enthusiasm. "I can't tell you how excited I am."

Oh, but he can.

And he does.

His wife, Meredith, meets us in the parking lot, and he greets her with a kiss. Together we step inside the building they bought about a year earlier. He's a former Wall Street trader; she has a background in business management. Originally the couple had hoped this old, red-brick building would serve as a place to display some of the larger pieces in their contemporary art collection and a spot to crash after their frequent late nights downtown.

The plan has become so much more than that.

The place is teeming with construction workers on this January afternoon. They're hustling to get the first floor ready for its April premiere. Power saws are screaming and drills are buzzing as workers install metal ventilation overhead. Brother doesn't wait for the noise to die down before he begins the tour.

"We're leaving the concrete floor!" he shouts over the power tools. "The walls are the original brick! In some spots concrete! We've got 18-foot ceilings in here! All the ventilation and piping will be left exposed! We're just cleaning it up and letting it rip! It's going to be freakin' awesome, dude!"
The power tools go quiet for a moment, but Brother barely lowers his voice as he tells me the plan: open to the public a few nights a week, with a new exhibition every other month or so.

“We really want this to be a space where people feel comfortable engaging with the art, but also just to hang out,” he says. “Oh, listen to this!”

The saw shrieks back to life.

“We’re gonna bring in graffiti artists this summer! And we’ll bring in some old shipping containers over there! We’ll bring in music and be serving drinks late into the night! And during the middle of the dance party, the lights will come up! And those guys will come out and tag the containers! It’s going to be incredible! Can you imagine it?!”

Before I can respond, Meredith suggests we head up to the second floor, where it’s quieter.

In truth, the raging party scene he’s describing – with people spilling out into the street – is somewhat difficult to imagine at the moment, with the place still filled with construction materials and a layer of sawdust. The gloomy weather doesn’t help. But Brother speaks with such enthusiasm, there’s little doubt that his vision will become reality.

A lot of folks rolled their eyes nearly two years ago when Norfolk set aside this dilapidated downtown stretch of
Granby Street as a future cultural hub. The standard argument: Neat idea, but who’s going to pay for it?

Brother is among those who’ve stepped forward.

“Every time in my life that I’ve made a decision that was more or less about the dollar, that was about greed, it’s burned me in the butt,” he says. “And any time I’ve made a move that was not about that, it’s paid off, it’s enriched my life in some way, even if it’s not in money.”

He might not realize it, but this middle-aged attorney – his resources, his enthusiasm and his seemingly endless energy – might be just the spark the arts district needed.

**When workers broke ground at the intersection of Granby and Olney** 98 years ago on what was to be the new Texaco regional headquarters, they uncovered the scattered remains of a large ship, including a 6-foot long rudder. The unusual discovery was noted in the pages of the Texaco Star, the oil company’s in-house newsletter from the time:

“It is within the memory of older residents that a large ship yard was once maintained at this site, where seagoing vessels, including full rigged ships, brigs, barques, and schooners were built and repaired. … Some of the old sea-dogs claim to remember stories of Paradise Creek having been one of Captain Kidd’s regular anchoring ports, and the theory is advanced that the wreck now rotting under The Texas Company’s handsome new building, may, in days gone by, have been the pride of that king of pirates.”

Brother loves to tell that story, and not just because it involves pirates. He and his wife – along with Brother’s law partner at Rutter Mills – are sinking a small fortune into a structure built on what was once a branch of the Elizabeth River.

“Gee, I hope flooding’s not a problem here,” he jokes.

The building, considered by some the crown jewel of the arts district, was completed in 1918. The top two floors were office space; the bottom floor was set up as an indoor fueling station. In those early days of automobiles, it took a few years for company executives to realize that an indoor gas pump was a bad idea. Soon, more development cropped up on all sides.
In a photo of the building taken in 1959, pedestrians stroll along the sidewalk. The street is lined with glass storefronts and car dealerships. Automobiles cruise down the street. For decades, this section of town just north of Brambleton Avenue was a thriving commercial area known as “auto row.” But the dealerships eventually moved to bigger spaces away from downtown, and the other businesses that once prospered here soon followed. It was a decline mirrored in downtowns around America: Over decades, empty buildings fell into disrepair.

During the housing boom 10 years ago, a developer came up with a plan to covert the old Texaco office space into condos. But the project fell through, and to help recover losses, the developer stripped the building of every piece of pipe and wiring. For a decade, it sat vacant. The Texaco stars on the facade remained.

Meredith Rutter noticed the “For Sale” sign while waiting at the stoplight. It was spring of 2014. She and Brother had been searching for a place near downtown, and this one looked plenty big enough. She snapped a photo on her phone and sent her husband a text.

“What about this one?” she wrote.

An empty shell of a building. Built on a backfilled river. Boarded-up windows on all sides.

“Boy, wouldn’t that be cool?” he responded.

**Buying a dilapidated building wasn’t part of the life plan.**

Brother and Meredith met at a wedding in the late 1980s. The way she tells it, mutual friends sat the two of them together, hoping she would be able to “control Brother throughout the course of the evening. That was my mission.”

Brother, a Virginia Beach native and Norfolk Academy graduate, was working as a bonds trader in New York. Meredith, working on a degree in economics, was soon heading to the city to begin an internship at Sotheby’s.

Not long after she made the move from her hometown of Asheville, they got together for cheeseburgers and hit it off.
A shared love for art became central to their relationship. They took in as much of the vibrant scene of New York in the mid-'80s as they could. “We’ve always loved being around art, loved the intellectual stimulation of art, and we thought, maybe one day we’ll get the chance to live with some of it,” he says.

When Brother graduated from law school in 1993, they celebrated by buying their first serious piece, a painting by the Greek-American abstract expressionist, Theodoros Stamos. They soon moved to Tidewater, where they started a family and a law practice. Over time, their art-buying hobby turned into one of the more significant contemporary art collections in the region, with pieces hanging in their Virginia Beach home and at Brother’s law office and a few other spots around town.

“We’ve never wanted to collect art that needs to be hidden away, put in storage somewhere,” Brother says. But a few years ago, the couple realized they had pretty much run out of wall space.

“We had been looking for a place downtown,” he says. “It’s the cultural center of Hampton Roads, and we kept finding ourselves down here late after an evening at the Chrysler, or for drinks with friends. So we said, let’s get a little place in the city so we have a spot to hang out and also display some of our collection.”

The 15,000-square-foot Texaco building seemed a bit excessive. But they liked what the city was trying to accomplish with the arts district. Maybe they could do something a little more ambitious and community-minded, they thought.

“We said, look, let’s do an arts project,” Brother says. “Let’s put profit aside. Let’s make this a project of passion, not of profit. And so we bought, really not knowing what we were getting ourselves into.”

Plans for an occasional gallery on the first floor turned into a full-service restaurant and bar, and a gallery where emerging artists can display their work – sometimes blended with live performances similar to those drawing big crowds to the Chrysler Museum of Art’s Glass Studio every third Thursday night. What started off as a plan for a little space for themselves on the third floor has turned into a sprawling flat where they will display some of their larger contemporary pieces and invite area arts nonprofits to hold special meetings. And all that extra space on the second floor? That will be one-bedroom apartments, priced below market and reserved for artists working in the district.

“We were really worried that the arts district here would gentrify quickly, and the last thing we wanted was to have artists priced out of the market,” Brother says. “The common thread in all that we’re trying to do: How do we engage the creative community and keep intellectual capital in the arts district?”

They created a nonprofit, the Rutter Family Art Foundation, to bring all of those things under one umbrella. His law partner, Robert Mills, is helping finance the venture. Some historic tax credits have eased the financial burden. Still, Brother says they hadn’t imagined anything of this scale. They bought the building for $850,000. They’ve spent nearly twice as much restoring it.

“As this project has kind of zigged and zagged and become different things along the way, we’ve just kind of gone with it,” he says. “And it just seems like it’s just flowing. It’s like a river finding where its banks are supposed to be, and we’re just riding it, man. And it’s really cool. It’s really fun.”

During our tour, I ask jokingly whether he’s doing this full time.

“That’s what Meredith says,” he laughs.

“Seriously,” I say. “This sounds like a lot of work.”

“Dude, it’s crazy!” he says. “It is. It is. But I’m loving it. Sometimes you feel like you’re just out on a limb. And that noise in the background, you’re not sure if that’s just the wind, or if that sucker’s cracking. And we’re not sure, but we know that we are enjoying ourselves. We know that people are really responding to it. And it feels right.”
Meredith, with the economics degree, is excited too, but a bit more measured in her thinking: “I’m trying to do the math and figure out how he’s going to be an attorney and a gallery owner and a restaurant owner and a foundation runner.”

Brother laughs.

“What do they say?” he interjects, smiling. “You sleep when you’re dead.”

Nobody hung out in downtown Norfolk when Brother was growing up. Even when he and Meredith returned in the mid-1990s, Granby Street was a pedestrian mall with far too few pedestrians. But smart people with smart money had a vision, Brother says, and now Granby is booming.

The same is happening in the arts district, he says, but faster.

There’s a bit of unintended symbolism in the name Meredith and Brother chose for the first-floor art gallery and restaurant: Work | Release. It was meant to be a play on words, alluding to the fact that this would be a place where artists release their work into the community. But for this to really work, Brother says, he also needs to let it go.

“I don’t know if you can tell, but I have a lot of ideas and a lot of energy,” he says. “The hard part for me is getting something started and then backing away, and just letting other people’s ideas come to the top. As a business leader and entrepreneur, I’ve always felt like I had to take the machete and whack the path. Now I realize there are people in the arts community who, once I’ve started the path, they’ll take it over and let it grow and do things with it I never imagined.”

Finally, after months of work, the building is opened to the public on a Friday night in April.

Hundreds have come to see what’s been going on inside the old Texaco building. So many people have crammed inside – dancing to hip-hop, drinking craft beer and top-shelf liquor, discussing the glowing artwork that hangs on the walls – that the fire marshal has capped off entry.

The line of people waiting to get inside stretches half a block down Olney. Those on the sidewalk press their faces up against the glass to get a peek at the party raging inside.

Brother must notice the surprised look on my face when I walk inside: “Welcome!” he says, shouting once again, this time over throbbing music. He gestures to the crowd surrounding us, the art displays – his vision come to life.

“Good party, right?! Right?! This is what we call a Brother-Meredith joint!”

Artists from all over the world have contributed to the exhibition, which was curated by Suzanne Peck, a contemporary artist and writer who spends part of her time in Norfolk. Brother never would have thought to invite light artists to produce neon-based works that explore themes of light. He pulled the people and permits together, then “let it fly,” as he says.

Outside at The Plot II, the small park across the street, dozens more people are dining on food served out of trucks and listening to live music. On this day – to coincide with the Work | Release exhibition – the city has rebranded the arts district as the NEON: The New Energy of Norfolk.

Brother knows a thing or two about energy.

“It’s amazing how the community has responded to this thing,” he says. “We’ve always had an arts community here, but what has been missing is a sense of place. You know, we’ve had the Studios at Fawn Street, we’ve had the D’Art Center, we’ve had other kind of satellite art centers. But I don’t think you’ve seen that energy balled up together in a way where it can become a self-sustaining reaction. To have a nuclear reactor, you’ve got to have a heated core. And if the arts community is able to find that sense of place – if we can find it here – when you take all that energy
and crush it together in one place, it becomes explosive.”

At the core of that scene, Brother Rutter seems at home.

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