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Come in...and be captivated...



"Silver Edged Clouds" by Jesse Blanchard; <http://www.jesseblanchard.com/>

I love interviewing people who have followed their dreams at nearly any cost and made them come true.

No one personifies this 'make it or break it' spirit more than Bob and Melinda Blanchard.

Live What You Love takes us through the good and even bad times until they were living the dream. A Trip to the Beach is an exotic journey that tells the story of how Blanchard's Anguilla restaurant came to be the world renowned culinary and cultural jewel that it is.

This issue, their gift to us is the straight-forward answers of what was, what is and what's next for them. They are the most genuine, warmest individuals you will ever come across. For the person who has everything, consider giving them the gift of Live What You Love for the holidays or grab it for yourself if you're ready to live the uncommon life.

I invite you now to a behind-the-scenes visit to the Blanchard's and then ask you to join us for a virtual Christmas Eve dinner for our writers, artists and staff at one of the most popular restaurants in Anguilla.

*Merry Christmas,
Denise*

Blanchard Interview by Denise Bouchard

"Chance is always powerful. Let your hook be always cast; in the pool where you least expect it, there will be a fish" ~ Ovid

1) I've been following your adventures for years now but I've found out that I'm not alone in my awe. A few years ago when my family and I stayed at a gorgeous bed and breakfast on Cape Cod, the owners, a middle-aged couple, had Live What You Love prominently displayed on their bookshelf. These are people who are living the dream and living it well but so inspired were they by your stories that they said that they were giving the book to all of their closest friends for Christmas.

That is what your books are- they're gifts to the world on how to live a fulfilling life. To me, it all seems to begin with your easy way of loving one another even though you've been through great difficulties. What do you think each of you brings to the table in terms of personal strengths in your marriage and then, as an equation, that enables you to also work well with others as a couple?

We just celebrated our 37th anniversary so it's an interesting time for us to respond to a question about our marriage. Looking back, what we both bring to the table more than anything else is respect for each other's feelings. We try to be kind to each other and listen to one another thoughtfully. That may sound simple and a bit trite but it's that honesty that is the basis for our relationship. We don't argue about things that don't really matter and when we differ in our opinion about something, we find a solution that works for both of us. That calls for compassion, understanding and compromise.

Living a fulfilling life requires a few things, not particularly in this order: patience, confidence, and determination. You also can't be afraid of hard work and know from the start that there will be bumps in the road.

Working with others as a couple is much easier than working as an individual. We have two distinct personalities and can choose which one of us should handle a particular situation. We also tend to surround ourselves with people we really enjoy and in all of our businesses, we've tried to find the strengths in everyone we hire. We figure out what someone is good at and let them do it. It's important to create environments where people can succeed as opposed to asking people to do things they can't do.

2) The chapters "California Dreaming" and "Moving On" follow one another consecutively and the title of the latter could easily be transplanted to the chapter on California yet what strikes me is the difference between them. The first speaks to the allure of newness, adventure and the wisdom of knowing when to withdraw while the second, involving Mel's childhood, stresses the virtues of adaptability, stability and the wisdom of staying in the game even when things don't go smoothly (as with the change in the NY real estate market).

In the breadth of your amazing lives together, you demonstrate the wisdom and virtue of both philosophies- when to stay (Anguilla), when to go (California), despite facing seemingly similar circumstances that, when put side by side could have gone either way. As author Joyce Carol Oates once wrote, "It's where we go, and what we do when we get there, that tells us who we are."

For the benefit of our readers, how is it that you find the difference and make a choice that you trust; throwing the cards all in or folding for the night?

We're fussy about how we live our life: where we live, who we work with, how we spend our time. We set our standards quite high and don't settle for mediocrity. Our standards, however, have little to do with money and things. Our quality of life is based more on relationships and our physical environment.

Again, at the risk of sounding simplistic the answer to your question is that we trust our instincts and follow our hearts. Instincts are about feelings and emotions and our feelings for Anguilla are not straightforward. It was never about the beach and the sunshine. It was always about the Anguillian people. It's about the honesty and integrity of the island culture. We knew from the start that working and living in that environment would be a fulfilling experience we would treasure forever.

When we decided to leave California, our hearts told us something quite different. We thought it was what we were looking for but something just didn't feel right. It's hard to pinpoint but we weren't willing to take the risk.

It's important to know that we haven't always made the right choices. Our 9 months in Aspen were a disaster! Without going into the details of why it didn't work, suffice it to say that we trusted our instincts again and lost our investment in order to try something else.

3) I'm certain that this question has come up for you not only from your devoted readers but even perhaps in the corners of your minds in the quiet moments of uncertainty- what (if any) limited beliefs arose that you had to first identify and overcome before you could pursue your entrepreneurial dreams with abandon?

How did you vanquish these beliefs?

Our dream of working together and for ourselves has always been far more powerful than our fears. Flexibility and determination are key. If we don't have enough money to do exactly what we want to do, we either figure out a way to find the money or we change our plan to fit what we can handle financially.

A good way to overcome fear is to think about the worst case scenario before you make any kind of change or start a new project. If it doesn't work out, what are the various problems that could arise and how could you approach each one? Finding potential solutions ahead of time prevents too many surprises down the road.

4) To have your cake and create it too:

When you were called upon by the Today Show to create a dream wedding cake that would be compared against those made by expert cake decorators in front of ten million viewers, you said 'yes' without blinking an eye or dwelling on the fact that you had never done something like this before.

It isn't only the astounding courage and innovation of the story that jumps off the page, but also the way in which it was done- with personal, heartfelt touches that celebrated Anguilla's cultural heritage in a manner that only someone seeing it through your eyes could.

"As our decorating skills improved and our cake began to take shape, the story we were trying to tell with each layer became clearer. The bottom tier represented the pale turquoise water of the Caribbean which we would cover with edible coral and seashells. The second tier depicted an Anguilla boat race... [Even though sailboats cruise the entire Caribbean, boat racing is the national sport of Anguilla and is very serious business.] The next tier was designed to showcase Anguilla's powdery white sand beaches and was adorned with chairs, umbrellas and tropical foliage. On top of everything we placed a traditional Caribbean cottage, complete with white picket fence, red tin roof, and wooden shutters- all edible of course- to represent [the couple's, new life together.]"

You mold experiences in your life to fit you as opposed to molding yourselves to

fit the experience. What would you say are the most important elements gained by an entrepreneur or small business by adding personal touches, having creative control and fostering authenticity in a world too often preoccupied by mass-marketing/production?

One benefit to the current state of our economy is that it is accelerating a significant trend: People need to surround themselves with authenticity. They crave an environment that's optimistic, honest and real and long to be reassured that integrity, sincerity and hope still exist. Our enthusiasm for jumping into new projects has always been tied to our desire "to do the right thing" for lack of a better phrase. For us, that definitely means having creative control and fostering authenticity. That's just an integral part of our DNA. Sometimes, being idealistic gets us into a bit of hot water in the business world but that's okay. The alternative is nothing that interests us.

5) Bob, you talk about how in America today, family-centered dinners are no longer the norm. I'm with you when you say that at least once a week, families should get together to discuss what they're going through and laugh together. I grew up in a home where we always sat around the dinner table and laughed. My parents always had the big Sunday dinners. I think that is so important. I continued that with my husband and daughter and we then became the go-to house for all of my daughter's friends when she was in school.

You see this more in European families but I like to create an atmosphere of beauty and warmth every night. Though this is not always possible today, it's important to try and do this often because it promotes close familial bonds. Do you think that the trend is changing and that the family will come back to the table?

Yes, I do think it's changing. The downturn in the economy has forced people to slow down and take stock of what's most important.

6) One would think that the best way to find great wait staff would be to hire experienced help. I LOVE that you instead hired enthusiastic, non-experienced people instead. I can see how your staff has turned out to be one of your biggest assets. It's those kinds of instincts that set you apart from the rest. This leads

me to two questions:

How did you just “know” who to hire or were you pleasantly surprised, after the fact, that your initial gut instincts were right on?

We hire people we think we'd like to spend time with. As long as they want to learn the skills, we're confident we can teach them. It works out very well 95% of the time.

How do you turn island time into ‘New York’ time without seeming bossy and instead turn it both into a four star restaurant and a comfortable, family atmosphere amongst staff that is so finely tuned, it’s almost like a symphony..? There is such a fine balancing act here, it almost seems movie-esque!

We would never want to work for a bossy manager so why would we want to boss our staff around and make them miserable? We try our best to lead by example and would never ask someone to do something we wouldn't do ourselves. When we welcome customers to Blanchards as if they were guests in our own home, our staff follows accordingly. When our dishwasher is sick and one of us jumps in to help out, we're not only getting the job done but we're teaching our staff what teamwork really means. It seems to work well for everyone.

As far as turning island time into New York time goes, it's a constant challenge. When a demanding customer insists on being seated promptly at 8:00 and gets annoyed when the table isn't quite ready, the best remedy is a big smile and a sincere apology. All we can do is try our best and luckily, that usually works.

7) In your book, *Live What You Love*, you talk about another new project and this one would be a huge undertaking- a Blanchard hotel. Is this still on the table as a possibility and is there another book on the horizon?

Unfortunately, the hotel project did not come to pass. As far as another book goes, we're working on one now.

8) It's Christmas Eve 2010 and our staff as well as all of our contributing writers/artists from *The Write Place At the Write Time* have just arrived at

Blanchard's Anguilla. What does it look like on this night? Who might greet and seat us? What's on the menu? What chocolate dream is for dessert?

Since you're traveling in such a large group, you'll probably arrive in a van driven by one of our friendly local taxi drivers. That alone will be a great start to the evening. As you walk through the tropical gardens and into the bar, you'll see beautiful Meads Bay Beach stretching out beyond the dining room. Since it's Christmas Eve, the chances are good that you'll also see one or more huge yachts anchored in the bay. Jesse's colorful artwork decorates the bar and dining room walls and adds to the tropical setting.

Bob or Garrilin will lead you to your table which will be set with flickering hurricane lights and pink bougainvillea. Ceiling fans will swirl gently overhead and tall teal shutters will be open to the gardens and beach. Alwyn will pour your water with a quiet smile and tall, handsome Miguel will come over to talk about wine.

Our most popular menu items are our Lobster and Shrimp Cakes served with Tomato-Tartar Sauce and our Sesame-Crusted Mahi Mahi with Caramelized Onions, Roasted Cherry Tomatoes, Curried Rice and a sauce made with Dijon Mustard and Capers. Lowell, our manager, will meander over to your table at some point during the evening just to make sure you're happy. For dessert, Clinton will have prepared close to a hundred of our signature Cracked Coconuts – Belgian chocolate melted and molded around inflated water balloons. Once the balloons are coated with chocolate, he sprinkles them with toasted coconut and chills them until they're easily removed and filled with coconut ice cream and a spoonful or two of Bailey's.

Mel will be in the kitchen most of the night but will try to come out to say hello if she gets a chance. And since we have so many families over the holidays, you're likely to see Bob escorting some of our younger guests into the kitchen to taste a few flavors of our homemade ice cream.

This may be virtual but hopefully, it's the thought that counts! Maybe someday...

Merry Christmas and thank you to Bob and Melinda, Jesse for his artwork above the interview, our staff, writers, artists and readers and a special Merry Christmas wish to Lowell, Clinton, Miguel, Garrilin, Tarah, Alwyn, Huegel, Samaro, Timi, Shaq, Rinso, Delvan, Collette and all of the rest who have brightened our lives with stories of their lively spirits as they work at one of the most remarkable restaurants in the whole of the Caribbean.

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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