

People



THE **Visionary** of Gallery 8

By PAT GOULD
Photos by John Cameron

MEET WORLD-TRAVELLING ENGINEER
RAZALI WAHAB: ART GALLERY OWNER

“The secret of success is to know who you are and believe in yourself.”

Such was the advice once given to Salt Spring newcomer Razali Wahab, new owner of Gallery 8, formerly J. Mitchell Gallery, in Grace Point Square. It would be his mantra.

Visitors to the expanded showrooms now occupying two floors might wonder if the clearly confident young entrepreneur is a visionary or simply foolhardy. After all, aren't we in a recession? Isn't tourism way down? Isn't the sky falling?

Razali just smiles, somehow leaving the impression that he knows something the rest of us don't.

Our interview took place in his Isabella Point home, which he shares with yellow Lab Singa. As expected, art abounds — paintings, ceramics, carvings, things, an eclectic mix acquired throughout his extensive travels, plus some purchased locally since his fateful first visit in July 2002. In the driveway, a sporty red convertible Cadillac sits alongside a blue Saab convertible and a GMC truck — which belongs to the dog.

“Serendipity” might describe his turning up on Salt Spring. Then living in San Diego, he was cruising B.C. waters on a friend's sailboat, the two having sailed up the coast from that city. It was just one of many stops, but on that brief visit Razali knew he would one day return. It would be sooner than expected.

Born in 1974 in Malaysia, he was the youngest of three children being raised by a single mom after his parents divorced. A good student and talented athlete, Razali was sent to live with an uncle in a small town near Penang, where he applied for, and won, a sports scholarship to a local private school. After completing secondary school, he got another scholarship to a technical college in Kuala Lumpur. Again, he excelled.

After graduating, he was recruited as an electronic technician for a U.S. company based in Malaysia, which entailed frequent travels throughout the country. Razali's horizon was expanding as fast as his ambition.

Another application: this one for a scholarship program to the U.K. During an interview he learned that he could switch to a similar program in Canada, an opportunity he was quick to seize.

Ontario's Durham College was his first foray into the North American lifestyle — an experience both fascinating and frightening to the newcomer with limited English. He studiously taped his every lecture, which was then replayed that same evening. This allowed him to slowly — if painstakingly — decipher the contents. He admits to often tearful evenings due to part loneliness, part frustration. He hung in.

Soon after, and at the urging of his San Diego boating friend, Razali switched to a technical college in that city. Derek, older and wiser, would be a steadfast supporter and mentor to the young student.

After graduating with a degree in Electronic Engineering he worked for a few months for a local firm. Then, in order to retain his student status, which allowed him to remain in the U.S., he enrolled in another college, this one in Hartford, Connecticut, where an MBA would be added to his resume.

After Hartford, Razali and Derek set out for a drive across Canada — an eye opener for both. After visiting Vancouver and Victoria, Razali began to rethink his options. The friends returned to San Diego and promptly embarked on Derek's sailboat for a cruise up the coast to visit the legendary B.C. inlets and coves — including the fateful stopover on Salt Spring Island.

After returning to San Diego, Razali accepted a job with an engineering company, which entailed frequent visits throughout the U.S. That led to another international company and extensive travels in Alaska, Turkey, South America and Indonesia. He reveled in the diversity of art forms exhibited in the countless





Above and Page 17: Two views of the expanded Gallery 8 in Grace Point Square. Inset Page 17: Gallery owner Razali Wahab. Previous page: Razali in the field of his south Salt Spring Island property.

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galleries he visited, which honed his appreciation of — and desire for — an eclectic collection. The old adage “Be careful what you wish for” clearly was not in his lexicon.

Razali began to look seriously at Canada as a destination. “Why?” became “Why not?” In 2006 he became a Canadian resident, albeit with one foot in the United States.

A few months later he accompanied Derek on the latter’s newest acquisition, a 53-foot ocean trawler, from its base in San Diego to Victoria. It would be a last adventure for the pair. Derek died suddenly of a stroke.

Eventually, with the boat sold (a magnificent reproduction of which sits on a mantle in his living room), Razali moved on with his life. He revisited Salt Spring Island. Not only was he impressed with the local art scene, he felt curiously at home — so much so that he purchased a small cottage on Isabella Point and visited as often as his “real world” schedule allowed.

On one such visit he heard that the J. Mitchell Gallery might be closing down. He happened

upon owner Judy, who spoke of her concern for “her artists.” Those concerns would soon be put to rest.

If second mantras were allowed, his would surely be “carpe diem.” A sale was finalized, bridges were burned and the new owner, Razali Wahab, Electronic Engineer, MBA, BSc became a purveyor of fine art.

What’s in a name? To most of us, “8” is just another number, whereas in many parts of Asia it is thought to be lucky. And so it is with Razali. He explained its significance this way, which, if nothing else, might make one pause: Eight boys were in his first science class; eight boys were fellow scholarship students in another school; his first Salt Spring house address was 332; and most significantly, the new gallery’s address in Grace Point Square is 3104.

Like the man himself, plans for the future of the gallery and “his artists” are bold, imaginative and daring. Clearly the stars are aligned, the gods are in accord and all is right in Razali Wahab’s world. ★