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The best of two lifestyles

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When the newer downtown condominium towers began to rise in Sarasota, many developers and Realtors thought they were ideal for European seasonal visitors, well-heeled young professionals (the loft market), active early retirees from other parts of the U.S., and, of course, for investors who hoped to sell to any and all of those categories of buyers before closing date.

But what many observers underestimated was how appealing these new high-rise apartments would be with local year-round residents -- folks who thought they were content in a home in a status neighborhood or country-club community ... until they got the downtown fever.

"That phenomenon actually started with Sarabande," said Lynn Robbins, a Coldwell Banker Realtor with more than 30 years of experience selling in Sarasota. "When that luxury building was completed, all the units except one went to local people from Lido Shores, Longboat, Siesta Key and upscale neighborhoods on the mainland. People who like to travel, and who were tired of their boats, yards, big houses and seasonal traffic on the bridges, bought them. They wanted convenience, as well as the neat and vibrant ambience of downtown. I still see that attitude. About 60 percent of downtown condominiums I sell are to local people who live here year-round."

Norma and Bill Herman fit that profile. They recently moved from a modern-style, 3,000-square-foot home in Bay Isles on Longboat Key that they built 10 years ago with the intention of never moving. Now they're in a 2,400-square-foot, 12th-floor condominium in The Plaza at Five Points, where they enjoy stunning water and city views and can walk to nearly any kind of entertainment they choose.

They love city life. But, they also appreciate the relaxed lifestyle of living on a tony barrier island. So they kept their country club membership on Longboat Key when they moved to the city. "Five days a week, we get up and go to our club on the island to play tennis," said Bill Herman. "Because while we were ready to give up the house and commuting from the island to the mainland for arts and cultural events, we were not ready to give up our tennis. We like having both worlds."

The sophisticated Hermans have a history of going from house to apartment and back again. They started their married life 47 years ago in a home set on two acres of lawn on Long Island, and, some years later, moved to Manhattan, where they enjoyed co-op apartment living for 15 years. Bill's job was in the city; he was a senior partner in an accounting and consulting firm, whose clients were art venues (including the Kennedy Center), performers (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater) and writers (Leon Uris). His firm, Lutz & Carr, also holds the secret ballots for the annual Tony Awards.

"You might have seen my hand on TV holding envelopes," joked Bill.

During their working and parenting years (they have a son and daughter), the Hermans vacationed in Florida, but never in Sarasota. "We were always East Coast people," said Norma, who owned a successful real estate business in New York and insists she was never even tempted to try it in Florida.

"Then in 1996, when Bill retired, we moved to Longboat Key and built a house," continued Norma. "We

didn't know a soul in town except for our friends, who encouraged us to check out Sarasota and showed us around Longboat Key. Bill was involved with the Big Apple Circus in New York, and he's a circus buff. When we first came to Sarasota just to drive around, he was delighted to find so much circus history here. And when we saw how much of an art town this is, we knew it was for us."

The Hermans said they made friends through the arts and through tennis. Bill just finished six years of volunteer service at the Sarasota County Arts Council, where he was a board member and chairman of the grants panel.

"That's one of the reasons the Plaza condominium became so attractive," said Bill. "Some days I was crossing that bridge to Longboat three times for various meetings and events, and then Norma and I would come back to town again in the evening for the opera or a play, or to meet friends for dinner. Finally, we admitted if most of our life was being lived downtown, we should just move downtown."

Now, Bill Herman is on the Advisory Board of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, and he serves on the condominium owners' association board at The Plaza.

Are there any downsides to moving from house to apartment?

"Well, there's never enough closet space," said Norma. "But our interior designer, Sally Trout, helped us edit about 40 percent of our belongings at the Longboat Key house before we made the move. We had Innovation Designs make us a cherry wood built-in for the office, where we can store a great deal and still have two working office areas for ourselves."

The couple enjoys cooking, and say they are getting used to the GE Profile electric range after years of cooking with gas. But they have no complaints about the size and configuration of the Plaza rooms or about living in proximity to so many neighbors.

"We never hear anything above us," said Bill, "and all the neighbors are considerate. And we appreciate the amenities in the building, such as the pool, barbecue area, fitness center and two parking spaces in the building. There's also a book club and dinner club. But best of all, we can walk to the library, to theaters, movies, restaurants and the opera. The convenience is fabulous. Six of our neighbors from Bay Isles have moved downtown recently, too."

The Hermans met interior designer Trout through their Realtor, Judy Kepecz-Hays, and hired Trout as a consultant and space planner because they were keeping nearly all of their Longboat Key furniture.

"I went to the Longboat Key house and did an inventory and helped the Hermans select what would and wouldn't work in the new space," said Trout. "They ultimately bought a new sofa and a large glass cabinet in the entrance foyer to display Asian artifacts. I chose the paint colors for them, using their area rugs as the starting point, and I did their window treatments, which are uncomplicated and contemporary, since we didn't want anything that would detract from the view."

The Hermans kept all their art and sculpture, and Trout said one of the fun challenges she undertook was creating a bedroom photo wall of large framed pictures that Norma had taken on the couple's trips throughout Europe, South America and Asia.

Trout noted that about 75 percent of her condominium projects are for local people moving from house to apartment or from a condominium in one neighborhood to either a smaller or larger one in another part of town.

"Sometimes it's about upgrading or downsizing," said Trout. "Sometimes it's just about changing location and having a different view. But whether they go from island to mainland or to another building, or to just another apartment in the same building, local people do move around a lot, and I notice that many have been moving downtown."
