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'Empty nesters' find downtown roost

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Peggy and Roy Harrell were living a good life in Hoover where their two sons stayed active in school band, sports and neighborhood activities.

Over the years, their boys grew up and moved out, leaving the Harrells with a 4,300 square-foot "empty nest" in Trace Crossings. Yet they were still content with suburbia.

But when they stumbled upon an old spice building under renovation for lofts in downtown Birmingham, Roy suspected their life was about to get even better.

He fell in love with the space's wooden floors, exposed beams, and 9-foot-tall windows that let in the sunshine and a good view of Vulcan. He convinced his wife that the old A.C. Legg Packing Co. building (now Legg Lofts) on First Avenue North was the place for them.

The Harrells moved in four years ago and haven't regretted a thing. The 58-year-olds are part of a growing group of people trading in their suburban lives for urban ones.

"We really loved our lives in suburbia, but this downtown living has opened a whole new chapter of our lives," Peggy said. "We have a new set of friends, adventures and different style of living that moving downtown has given us."

They and their neighbors enjoy rooftop dinners. They meet other loft dwellers Saturday morning for coffee at Urban Standard on Second Avenue. They don't have to worry about yard work anymore. They can walk to their downtown church, the art museum, the Alabama Theatre and restaurants within minutes.

About a year ago, Peggy started the Downtowners Social Club with neighbor Sandy Tilt in an effort to meet more of those who make up the eclectic mix of college students, professionals, various age groups and different ethnicities living downtown.

Every other month, group members meet at someone's loft for gatherings - which have gotten so big that it takes two lofts to host parties. Members even meet to attend plays and concerts together, and meet for kickball games in the spring. Last month, the club helped to raise over \$3,000 during an art show at one of the members' lofts for the art department at Phillips Academy, a Birmingham public magnet school in downtown.

The Harrells' social calendar is packed thanks to their downtown living, and they've been told it could easily rival that of someone 30 years younger.

"At least one night a week, there is something going on downtown with the loft dwellers," said 27-year-old John Nicolini, who has been living downtown for three years and is vice president of Central City Neighborhood Association.

Virginia Rekoff, who still lives in the 1896, two-story downtown building that she transformed into her home

in the 1980s, said the Harrells have a special knack for enjoying life and it's contagious for everyone around.

"You know when you have an invitation to their loft, it's going to be a very special celebration," said ReKoff, 77.

Lure of convenience:

Roy, who is vice president of the Southern Electric Railroad with Southern Co., can walk to his downtown office. And Peggy, the secondary mathematics supervisor for Jefferson County Schools, said it takes her just 10 minutes to get to work now. Shorter commutes mean less money spent on gas.

"One of the greatest things is that when we go on out-of-town trips, it's great to take a taxi to the airport. It's great to be dropped at the door and dropped at the terminal," Peggy said.

That and other conveniences are luring more to downtown.

Currently, there are more than 700 people living in downtown Birmingham lofts and condos, and about 585 people living in the mixed-income development Park Place, according to Operation New Birmingham. That's a considerable jump from when only a handful of people lived downtown in eight loft and condo buildings in the 1980s. (While there are condos and apartments on the Southside, the ONB numbers in this story only include those residences north of the downtown railroad tracks.)

More downtown living space is on the horizon. Officials with ONB predict that by 2010, an additional 250 to 400 lofts and condos will have been built.

"I think that if you speak to anyone who lives downtown, we are all wildly crazy about it," said ReKoff. "I've been downtown 20 years now and I always said, 'What took them so long?' I've been waiting for them to come for a long time."

A fortuitous accident:

While some loft residents find their abodes with the help of a real estate agent or friend, the Harrells found their loft quite by accident.

Before heading out for a Saturday afternoon ride on Roy's Harley-Davidson motorcycle, Roy asked Peggy where she wanted go. Peggy remembered hearing about the loft district in downtown Birmingham and suggested they head that way.

They pulled up on First Avenue North, parked and peered into a building's front window. Then, Peggy sneezed.

The sound caught the attention of building developer Jerry Melton, who was three stories above street level in his loft in the Wooster Building.

Melton said, "Gesundheit!", leaned out the window and asked if he could help the couple. The three briefly chatted and Melton offered to show them the building next door - Legg Lofts.

Once Roy stepped foot into the lobby, he was hooked. By Wednesday, they made an offer.

Peggy was hesitant at first, asking Roy why they would want to sell their big, beautiful home in Trace Crossings.

Roy countered by saying, "If you don't like it, I'll buy you (another) big beautiful house."

Peggy was sold. "I said, what have I got to lose? This might be fun."

When they bought their 2,100-square-foot, third-floor loft overlooking Morris Avenue, it was still under

construction.

They worked with the developer on modifications. They also sought the advice of decorator Barri Burbridge of Atmosphere Home Essentials to help bring a homey feel to their new, wide open space.

They kept the building's original floors that still had the rough grooves of when workers moved heavy equipment across it. The exposed brick walls maintain the space's character.

Lifestyle changes:

To help them adapt to living in a loft, Burbridge examined all their furnishings at their house. What she found was a home full of antiques and very traditional furniture.

When they showed Burbridge the loft plans, she asked Peggy what she wanted to keep. Peggy insisted on keeping their dining room ball-and-clawfoot table and chairs.

Once movers placed the table in the loft, Peggy realized it just didn't work.

After a little convincing from Burbridge, the Harrells became enthusiastic about starting over with a new look. Burbridge later helped them find a unique wrought-iron, wood and glass table to replace the dining room table. They accented the table with red and brown leather chairs.

"If you will live in a space with exposed brick, and exposed duct work and old, beat up wood floors, you can't put a Queen Anne table or ball-and-claw chairs in it," Burbridge said.

"It (will) look too much like country came to the city," she said. "And I didn't want them to have that."

There were a few things Peggy just couldn't part with including her antique dresser, the kitchen table her children sat at when they were young, and her china, silver and Waterford crystal. Today, the kitchen table stands in a corner near a window displaying several treasured family photos. The antique dresser is in a unique dressing and reading area right outside the guest bathroom, and she displays her china on open shelves.

When it came to picking new furniture and accessories, Burbridge wanted something fresh and new.

"For people their age, if you are going to drive a Harley, you've got have some hip furniture," she said.

Next to their front door is a gallery wall holding their favorite art, including a signed Dali lithograph, a painting by one of Peggy's students, and a signed Picasso lithograph.

When guys enter, there's a framed piece on their gallery wall that stops them cold. It's a charcoal etching of Jimi Hendrix's 1970 headstone.

Overhead, is a wooden carved angel purchased in New Orleans. "That's the first thing Roy and I bought for the loft. That piece just caught our eye," Peggy said. "We were hesitant to show it to the decorator. But when we did, she made it work."

When the loft neared completion, Peggy realized the place was short on closet space. Roy designed a raised bedroom space with storage underneath and a large walk-in closet attached.

They camouflage the area nicely with a door they found at a salvage yard in Cullman.

Red is one of Roy's favorite colors and it's a dominant theme throughout the loft. It's seen in their custom bedding, their dishes and even their two Picasso-styled chairs near the dining area.

The Harrells and several others have become sort of ambassadors for downtown living. Their loft has been featured on a past loft tour, and they've been told that their loft, along with a variety of others, may be shown to those interested in downtown living.

One thing visitors find interesting is that they only have one bedroom. Peggy said they only wanted one bedroom so they could maintain the open feeling of their home.

So, where do guests and their sons, now 28 and 30, sleep when they visit?

"We felt that for infrequent company, we can either rent a room at the Tutwiler or invite guests to sleep on our sofa," said Peggy. "Our son is happy about that."

The whole family has happily made adjustments to the Harrells' city lifestyle. As Roy puts it: "Life changes and you move on."

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Downtown living gains popularity

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