

Neighborhood Profile: Historic Kenwood, St. Petersburg

- By Patti Ewald, Times Correspondent
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Urban. Trendy. Affordable. Close to downtown. Diverse. Historic. Quaint. Friendly. Tolerant. Full of artists.

Those are some of the ways residents describe Historic Kenwood, the bungalow-loaded, hidden jewel of a neighborhood that isn't so hidden anymore. In fact, it's one of the hottest places to live in St. Petersburg.

"If I have a hip, in-town buyer who wants proximity to downtown, Kenwood is an easy sell," said Delia Davidson, president and principal broker of Forever Florida Real Estate. "The neighborhood is full of a wonderful mix of people of all ages and all walks of life who embrace and learn from each other's differences. The fabulous bungalow architecture is a plus."

Elina Vassilakou, Todd Novosad and their 3-year-old daughter, Olive, live in one of the more than 500 bungalows interspersed with about the same number of nonbungalows on the brick streets of the neighborhood.

A few blocks away, Trip Birmingham and Bryan Redman live in another of the bungalows, which, by definition, are small one- or 1 1/2-story houses or cottages with overhanging eaves and large front porches. Many also have low-pitched gable or hip roofs and dormer windows.

The Vassilakou-Novosad house and the Birmingham-Redman house have many similarities, the most striking of which are backyard paradises that belie the simplicity of the houses from the street.

Vassilakou, an Eckerd College graduate, said she had her eye on Kenwood when she and her husband bought a home just west of the neighborhood after moving here from Denver in 2012. It wasn't to be then, but she kept looking.

"We came from an urban area," she said. "We like places with a little bit of grit, places that aren't completely gentrified."

In 2014, they found their Kenwood house, ideally located near her job as an acupuncturist at Community Acupuncture on Central Avenue.

"We finally found something pretty perfect," she said. Their house looks as if it's in a jungle. Palm trees, bamboo and all sorts of tropical plants completely surround it — except for the space carved out for a pool in the back yard. The home's last owner, she said, bought out the inventory of a landscape company that was going out of business.

Birmingham and Redman also have a pool. It is surrounded by pavers that tie together the back porch, the pool, a large fountain and the pool house, which had been a rundown garage when they bought the house. Its renovation was part of the \$100,000 worth of improvements the pair have made since moving in 10 years ago.

Redman and Birmingham, who are from the Carolinas, brought their love of older houses with them when they moved to St. Petersburg in the 1990s.

Although they've lived in several different places, most recently in Gulfport, they say they have finally found their ideal home, close to their business, Redman Steele Floral Design on Central Avenue, and Affiniti Salon & Spa, where Birmingham is a hairdresser.

But that doesn't mean they have stopped dreaming of other things they can do to their ideal house.

"Think a stairway would fit here?" Redman asked from the center hall. "We were thinking of putting our master bedroom upstairs and turning this bedroom into a master bath."

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The Redman-Birmingham home

Their home: 2 bedrooms, 1 1/2 baths, 1,660 square feet, built in 1940

When bought: 2007

Current value (according to Zillow): \$191,747

Why they love it: They've always loved the neighborhood, which was an avocado grove at the turn of the 20th century when Charles Hall, a milliner and window shade salesman, developed it. In 2003, Historic Kenwood was put on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Vassilakou-Novosad home

Their home: 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, 1,800 square feet, built in 1940

When bought: 2014

Current value (according to Zillow): \$315,511

Why they love it: There is a gliding picnic table from the 1950s on a raised deck in the back of the back yard. They love the flow of the house, its crown moldings and large front and back porches. "It looks like a Key West house," Elina Vassilakou said. They also like that every bit of space is usable.

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