

Serenity is found in Serenbe, a close-by country getaway

For Mary Warren, moving to Serenbe in south Fulton County is a culmination of a new phase in her life.

"My whole life is in transition," says Warren, 47. "I've gone from being married with two kids living in St. Ives to living in south Fulton. If you had asked me four months ago, I never would have thought I would own two properties in Serenbe, but here I am."

Warren found Serenbe last October when she came to look at a barn where she could keep her horse. She quickly ended up buying a condo, and then decided it was too small. So she bought a cottage and decided to keep the condo, too. As an artist, she knew the condo space could become a versatile space for an art gallery, yoga classes or a studio.

Warren traded life in the suburbs for a densely populated "hamlet" surrounded by acres of meadows, woods and green space.

"You get the best of both worlds," Warren says. "It's urban, but my backyard is the wildflower meadow. The barn is a five-minute walk from my house. I used to drive 45 minutes in traffic to get to a barn. And I love the fact that it's an artist community."

A fascinating assortment of people are being drawn to the Serenbe community, which is part of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance.

"It's our little brownstone in the countryside," says Raina Newell, who moved to Serenbe in December with her husband, Chip Newell, an Atlanta firefighter. "It's a good combination."

For Donna Nichols, formerly of Buckhead, buying a cottage in Serenbe was appealing because of its commitment to the environment — from the way the homes are built to its commitment to green space.

"I'm looking for fresh air and clean water and trails," Nichols says. "I love the healthy living,

I've been a semi-vegetarian for years, and having fresh, organic farm produce was appealing."

Serenbe's new residents gather at the town's meeting place — the Blue-Eyed Daisy — a cafe open Wednesday through Sunday where people swap stories, visit with neighbors and catch live music.

More often than not, Serenbe developer Steve Nygren comes in for lunch and visits with folks moving to his growing community. Many of the new residents have known Nygren for years, when he was running the Peasant restaurant chain or serving on the boards of the Midtown Alliance and the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Nygren and his family moved to Serenbe from Ansley Park in the mid-1990s to run a bed-and-breakfast. Seven years later, Nygren became concerned the area around them would be developed into sprawling, gated subdivisions with cul-de-sacs and disappearing, unprotected green space.

So he helped convene major landowners in south Fulton to create a development formula that would cluster homes and businesses and preserve the majority of land (between 60 and 70 percent) as green space.

The concept has attracted many of Nygren's former neighbors and associates to move to Serenbe, or at least invest in it.

Woodruff Arts Center President Shelton Stanfill and his wife, Brigitte, are selling their Ansley Park home and moving to an "Earthcraft" house in Serenbe at the end of May. He will retire from the center at the end of June, but he intends to continue working. Being located 20 miles south of the airport was only one draw.

"This fits so many of the values that I hold dear — conservation, the village/hamlet concept and the fact that there's going to be an ongoing stream



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MY OPINION



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Serenbe resident **Mary Warren** greets neighbor **Donna Nichols** at the Blue-Eyed Daisy, the meeting place for a community where urbanites are falling in love with cottages and meadows.

of money to support the arts," Stanfill says.

Atlanta Parks Commissioner Dianne Harnell Cohen and her husband, Richard, are buying a lot where they plan to build a house. Eventually, they'll sell their Atlanta house and move to Serenbe when they retire. But Harnell Cohen adds that they also plan to have a condominium downtown to keep a foothold in the city.

Atlanta City Councilwoman Anne Fauver is buying a second home in Serenbe. "I am a confirmed city dweller," Fauver says. "For me to buy in Palmetto, Ga., it has got to be special."

Developer Ray Weeks, who is chairing Mayor Shirley Franklin's Beltline Partnership, is buying four townhouse lots, which he and his wife plan to develop. The Weekses will keep one of the townhouses for their own use.

"I'm a big fan of Steve," Weeks says. "It's a great strategy for better land use, and I think there will be a higher quality of life in that part of the region because of the Chattahoochee Hill Country."

Thomas Swanston and his wife, Gail Foster, who are both painters, had been living on a 600-acre farm not far from Serenbe. He started seeing developments sprouting up nearby, and knew it was only a matter of time before the farm would be sold.

Later this week, the Swanstons will move into one of the townhomes near the Blue-Eyed Daisy. They've also bought the three-story townhome next door, where they will have their studios and a gallery affiliated with the Lowe Gallery in Buckhead.

"We like the commute," Swanston said of his new live/work arrangement. As he sees it, there's a "pent-up" demand for quality developments that preserve open space.

But moving to Serenbe does have its shortcomings. Major stores are at least 20 minutes away. Schools, health care and other community needs have not yet caught up with development in the area.

Still, the amenities seem to outweigh the drawbacks. Fran Allen, a real estate agent who had been living in Athens, visited a cottage with her son on a Saturday, and she was writing up the contract the next Monday. She went from thinking it would be an investment to making it her full-time residence.

"They called it Lacebark Cottage. We went in and that little cottage put its arms around me. It bought me," says Allen, 69. "My kids are so excited that I'm here. There's something magic about this place."

Even though it's still in its infancy, Serenbe demonstrates that people will gravitate to developments that offer a greener way to grow. Now it's up to developers to lead the way.