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A Community of Contemporaries Stands Tall in Fairfax

By Cheryl Kenny - Special to The Washington Post
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Dan Entingh's decision to buy his first home in Fairfax County's Pine Spring neighborhood hinged upon a slice of apple pie.

"I'd spent the day looking at houses," Entingh, an energy consultant, said of his 1978 search. "By the end of the day I was sick of looking, and I told my then-girlfriend that if anybody offered me a slice of apple pie, I'd buy their house."

The next house Entingh looked at was a 1950s California contemporary in Pine Spring. There, he received the hoped-for unsolicited dessert offer.

"And I said, 'Done.' "

Entingh already knew the neighborhood's location inside the Capital Beltway, near routes 50, 29, and I-66, would be "hard to beat for convenience." And he liked the house's beamed cathedral ceiling and wall of floor-to-ceiling windows -- trademarks of Pine Spring's 131 houses.

Entingh lived in that house nearly 20 years. When Entingh and his wife, Meridith, looked for a larger place in 1997, they bought another Pine Spring house.

Jenna and Vincent Reedy began looking for their first house two years ago, expecting to buy a traditional Colonial. Then they checked out communities with contemporary homes -- there are some, but not many, in the Washington area.

"We walked into the living room [of their Pine Spring home], saw the wall of windows looking onto the garden, and said, 'Okay, we're done,' " Jenna Reedy said.

"I love the 11-foot ceilings, the natural light," said Vincent Reedy, an art director for a marketing company. "I lay on my living room floor at night and look at the moon and stars through my window."

Carol Ross, a real estate agent and 30-year neighborhood resident, said the typical Pine Spring buyer "is not the traditional, classical buyer. There've been a lot of architects, artists, people interested in music. . . . 'Avant-garde' is a word that pops into my head."

Jenna Reedy, a marketing professional, said residents include non-artists, too. "We have more than just artistic types . . . we have teachers, business people, government workers."

Pine Spring houses, built in the 1950s by Gerald and Eli Luria, were individually sited on mostly 1/4- to 1/3-acre lots so as to enhance inside views of the outdoors. There are some bi-levels, but the majority are one story, and all are permutations of two basic floor plans. While many have been remodeled, original houses are small, generally about 1,000 square feet.

Still, Ross said, people are taken with Pine Spring because of the architecture and the location. "They are willing to overlook the 'missing features' that you'd see in a new four-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath Loudon County-type house," she said.

The post-and-beam construction of Pine Spring houses, which means there are no interior load-bearing walls to restrict remodeling, is significant to the community's identity. "I think the homes make people bond," Vincent Reedy said. "Everyone loves to talk about their homes, to share ideas and vendors on remodeling."

But there is more to Pine Spring than the style of its residences.

The Pine Spring Civic Association has been active for more than 50 years. Three years ago, when Meridith Entingh, a business manager, assumed the association's presidency, some long-time and newer residents were finding it hard to agree on the scope of the group's functions. "New ideas were not very well-received, and some things just were not happening," Entingh said. "I tried to help the [two factions] talk to each other again, and the result has been fabulous."

The association sponsors several annual parties and occasional house and garden tours. Last year it had a special celebration to mark the neighborhood's 50th anniversary. A mothers group and a traffic safety committee were organized recently, and the association may soon offer semiannual coffee and dessert parties to welcome newcomers.

"It's all to build community," said Entingh, who recently retired as association president.

Original owner John Mastenbrook, a retiree of the Naval Research Laboratory, described a neighborhood unity, fueled by the civic association. "You don't feel isolated in this community," he said.

Mastenbrook led the neighborhood's efforts to revitalize five-acre Pine Spring Park, which sits at the community's northwest border, beside Pine Spring Elementary School. When the Fairfax County park had become overgrown, Mastenbrook lobbied for a county grant program that has allowed Pine Spring (and other communities) to provide donations or sweat equity in return for matching funds. Through that program, a group of about 15 Pine Spring residents have transformed the tiny park into a growing shade garden.

For Ross, the Pine Spring spirit is reflected in an impromptu snowstorm barbecue held on her street a few years ago. "It was a big storm, we were snowed in, and a neighbor said, 'Let's have a party.' I said, 'Sure,' thinking it would be at her house. But no, she wanted an outdoor party." Ross trudged door-to-door to invite others to the potluck.

"We dragged the grills onto the cul-de-sac. Someone cleared their deck, we set out chairs, and some people used one neighbor's hot tub," Ross said. "The woman next door -- she was in her eighties -- couldn't get her hat and mittens on fast enough; she was ready to go!" The snowstorm barbecues have recurred several times since, Ross said.

Two years ago, Michael Fischetti and Michael McManus bought a small Pine Spring house, took it down to the slab, then built a new house more than double the original's size. McManus, a project manager for a travel company, designed the house with their builder, creating rooms with unusual angles, soaring ceilings and banks of windows. Fischetti, a buyer for Marriott, helped with finishing touches. The house was a highlight of last year's Pine Spring house and garden tour.

But what Fischetti raves about most is not his house, but his neighbors.

"The first time we mowed the grass, a neighbor came over with a tray of wings and a couple of Dos Equis [beers]," he said. "People wave, they stop by with gardening advice. . . . After 22 years in the D.C. area, I feel grounded, finally."

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