

Special Advertising Feature

Beyond NYC



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOULIHAN LAWRENCE

This gorgeous pool was only one of the surprises awaiting Marisha Pessl when she finally walked into her family's new home, purchased at the height of the pandemic.

Quick Sales, Happy Families

by Julie Bennett

Bestselling novelist Marisha Pessl considered herself a lifelong New Yorker, but upon the arrival of her third child, she and her husband began to consider a move out of the city. They found Angela Kessel, a real estate agent with Houlihan Lawrence in Bedford, and started looking at houses.

The pandemic accelerated our move," Pessl says. "We were going to take our time looking, but in March 2020 I packed up my three girls, 6 months, 3 and 4 years old, and decamped to my mother's house in Western North Carolina."

"Meanwhile, my husband and Angela continued looking at houses. When they found this one, I only saw it through video chats and didn't set foot inside until after we had closed. Thankfully, the house and the community was all that I had hoped for and more."

ADULT CHILDREN RETURN TO WORK OR SWIM

"Bedford is only one hour from Manhattan, but our natural, lush countryside feels like it's a million miles away," Kessel says. "Before the pandemic, we consistently had buyers from the city purchasing both full-time and weekend properties, but during the last year, the pace has accelerated significantly." Buyers who want amenities like pools, tennis courts, outdoor activities, events, arts, culture and good restaurants appreciate the easy commute and great values. In addition to families with young children, the number of empty nesters looking for multigenerational homes has skyrocketed, she reveals. "They're buying these properties to lure their adult kids out from the city on weekends."

During the pandemic, some kids required no luring, recounts Lisa Murphy, a broker in Houlihan Lawrence's Rye office and the mother of three adult sons. "They were living the dream in their old bedrooms until their offices reopened," she laughs. "At least I hadn't downsized yet. When one client's 4,000-square-foot house felt overcrowded because of so many family members working from home, I sold him a house twice that size."

Many of Murphy's quick sales in the last year were "Rye to Rye." Couples working from home with children attend-

ing remote school down the hall sought something larger. "I also sold houses to a number of my old babysitters who discovered trying to juggle remote work in an apartment with a newborn and a puppy was not working," she says. "They'd planned to move back in a couple of years anyway, but the pandemic sped up that decision."

NEW TO SUBURBIA, BUT LOVING IT

But other buyers in the pandemic market, like Jeff and Caitlin Bladt, had never lived in the suburbs before. "She's a native New Yorker," Jeff says, "and I was born in Kalamazoo. The only other places we'd lived are Chicago and London. We loved living in Park Slope in Brooklyn with our two daughters until remote schooling got ugly for our eldest and I was trying to teach math over video calls to first graders. That really motivated us."

The couple found Anne Moretti, a real estate broker with Julia B. Fee Sotheby's International Real Estate in Scarsdale, but lost out on offers for three or four places they'd seen only on video. "We knew leaving nearby grocery stores and restaurants would be a big adjustment, so we used online maps to find houses located where we could walk to stores, trains and the kids' school," Jeff says. "When one came on the market, we acted quickly."

"We were lucky. Our girls could be in school every day last year, and they learned to ride bikes. That would have never happened in the city," he says. "I'm in my late 30s and just bought my first car. But the biggest surprise occurred when we drove through our old neighborhood and realized the place Caitlin and I missed so much no longer existed."

Moretti says current homeseekers should not be discouraged by reports of houses getting multiple offers over asking. "Our market is strong, but not all properties are selling

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quickly. Upper-end homes, priced at \$4 million and up, have been selling, but are not flying off the shelf," she says. "Some substantial residences have sold quickly, while others have had to reduce their asking prices to attract buyers." There are great opportunities to find a good house in all price ranges, she says. For example, an elegant 1900s manor house, set behind gates on 10 acres, with a separate guest house, just came on the market in Mount Kisco, according to a William Pitt spokesperson. The estate, at 69 Chestnut Ridge Road, is priced at \$5.9 million.

And owners of large homes are still selling into the strong market. One such owner says he and his wife had planned to wait until their children finished college, but they saw a window of opportunity and jumped through it. Moretti listed their home on a Friday and by Monday morning got several offers. The property sold well over the asking price. The sellers don't know where they'll end up living next, but they are renting a townhouse for a year to figure it out.

BEACH LIVING NEVER ENDS

Scores of New York City residents fled to the Hamptons when the pandemic hit, to rentals or their second homes. "It was like a tsunami of people," jokes Judi Desiderio, CEO of the eight-office Town & Country Real Estate firm there. "The majority of those people are still here for the foreseeable future, until they feel safe going back to the city."

Sales picked up last summer and never stopped. The median price of all homes sold in the Hamptons during the first six months of 2021 was \$1.586 million, and the number of houses sold "was up a whopping 68% over 2020," Desiderio reveals. "Longtime owners are looking at the best seller's market they've ever seen and pulling the trigger."

Or they are renting out their

summer homes year-round. "We've always had winter rentals, but because people are willing to pay more for them now, more owners are willing to rent," says William Stoecker, a Town & Country agent in East Hampton. "We just posted a three-bedroom cottage with a pool that's available to rent from September 1 to the end of May 2022 for \$83,000, and we've already had several calls."

FINDING A UTOPIA FOR CHILDREN

But some newcomers to the region are arriving from way beyond New York City. Karla Murtaugh of Karla Murtaugh Homes in Ridgefield, Connecticut, says, "We are known as one of the safest towns in the country and have one of the top school systems, plus a vibrant downtown. People come here for the lifestyle."

Tom Trujillo and his husband, Dima Trujillo, were a few months away from becoming parents when they realized their lifestyle had to change. "We were living in the Hollywood Hills, where no one around us even had kids," Tom says. "Because we both own businesses, we could live anywhere, so we rented a motorhome and drove through the Northwest."

"We liked the idea of a ranch in Montana," Dima adds, "but they looked so cold and remote."

"Then we switched gears and started looking online at communities on the East Coast," Tom says. "We found Ridgefield and Karla online and flew out to look at houses with her in person. She showed us an amazing house that had been built in 1992 that was in the sweet spot between downtown and out in the country."

"I love the location," Dima says. "Everything here is on a smaller scale, but Manhattan's only an hour away."

"And there are tons of children. We just hosted a first birthday party for our son and 75 people came," Tom says. "It's like raising children in a utopia."



TOP AND MIDDLE PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIA B. FEE SOTHEBY'S INTERNATIONAL REALTY

The couple who purchased this house in the summer of 2020 used online maps to find a home within walking distance of groceries, restaurants and their daughters' school.



Scarsdale's location, within easy commuting distance of New York, attracted many city dwellers seeking space, privacy and, if possible, swimming pools, during the pandemic.



MODERN ANGLES

This Mount Kisco estate at 69 Chestnut Ridge Road was just listed by William Pitt Sotheby's International Real Estate for \$5.9 million.