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Kristen Kroepfl trails behind her son Jack, 3, riding his tricycle along North Clark Street. (Photo for the Tribune by Nolan Wells)

By Mary Lu Laffey | Special to the Tribune June 13, 2008

Christopher Watson started his search for a condo by reading a tourism guidebook about Chicago, one that included descriptions of its neighborhoods. He liked what was written about Andersonville. After a job interview at Northwestern University in Evanston, he hopped off the elevated train at Berwyn Avenue and took a walk.

"What I read about Andersonville reminded me of my neighborhood in Boston. I thought it would be a fun place to live. It's walkable, friendly and has everything at your doorstep," he said. "That I discovered the area is beautiful was fortuitous."

Watson, now Northwestern's dean of undergraduate admissions, found the two-bedroom, 1½ bath condo that he had dreamed about on a tree-lined street in Andersonville. "There were four that I looked at," he recalled, "but this building was owner-occupied and that meant a lot to me."

For many people, Andersonville is a nebulous area, according to Maggie Finegan of Keller Williams Realty, who has lived and owned property in the neighborhood for over 15 years.

There's East Andersonville, West Andersonville, South Andersonville and just plain Andersonville, she explained. Of the city's 77 official neighborhoods, none of the A'villes are listed. The city wraps it in with Edgewater and a little of Uptown community areas.

The Andersonville Chamber of Commerce doesn't have that problem. It says the neighborhood is bounded by Victoria Street on the north, Ainslie Street on the south, Ravenswood Avenue on the west and Magnolia Avenue on the east. Some, however, say the southern boundary should be Lawrence Avenue.

Within those shaded and historic blocks, condos are selling ahead of the curve, Finegan says, and backs up her statement with figures from the last six months.

Condo sales

"This is a strong condo market," she says, adding prices might be down less than 5 percent. That changes block-by-block and unit-to-unit. Of the 80 condos listed in the last six months, 52 are sold, 19 are spoken for or under contract.

"That's an absorption rate of 12 [sold] per month for six months' worth of inventory," Finegan said. The most popular condos are one- or two-bedroom with an average asking price of \$312,000 and an average selling price is \$310,000. Most condos are carved from houses, rehabbed with a devotion to upgrades, most notably in the kitchens and bathrooms. Just like single-family houses, these two rooms are of paramount importance to buyers. Finegan says she can count on one hand the number of newly constructed condo buildings in this area. "People want vintage on the outside and modern amenities on the inside."

Quality of life

Buyers in Andersonville seek the quality of life here, Finegan said, referring to the live-and-letlive attitude of the diverse neighborhood. Andersonville was rejuvenated in the 1960s when the state and city officially recognized the contributions of the Swedish immigrants that settled in the area in the mid-1880s.

Andersonville's Midsommarfest started about the same time, said Ellen Shepard, executive director of the Andersonville Chamber of Commerce. Sommarfest 2008 is set for Saturday and Sunday. Booths and stages line the middle of Clark Street, while keeping the sidewalks open.

Shepard is also proud of the low crime rate in Andersonville, which is part of the 20th Police District. "The 20th district has the lowest crime rate in the city," she said.

Clark Street is on a short list to be named a National Historic District, Shepard added. The application was signed by local and state officials and now awaits signature in Washington, D.C.

The 1980s brought another wave of settlers as lesbians and gay residents moved north from Uptown. Today, Andersonville is home to one of the city's largest gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities, which thrives in a harmonious mix of residents evidenced in the baby-buggy brigade, singles, partners and longtime residents mingling over coffee or sharing a bench on one of the landscaped corners.

Diversity of businesses

Clark Street boasts Swedish originals like Svea Restaurant, Simon's Tavern and the Swedish Bakery. The roots of it all are displayed at the Swedish American Museum Center (5211 N Clark. St.) and the Edgewater Historical Society (5258 N. Ashland Ave).

Joel Berman remembers biking from Wilmette to this section of Clark Street as a teenager, returning again as a young adult on dates to then small holein-the-wall restaurants. Berman, a commercial architect with offices on Clark Street, now plays a hand in breathing new life into those holes-in-the-wall, helping to transform them into full-service restaurants and specialty stores. For the street's first wine bar, In Fine Spirits, the motto to "save as much as we can" came as much from the owner as Berman.

A collaboration of business owners have joined the Andersonville Chamber and the Andersonville Development Corp. to form a green initiative for the area called Eco-Andersonville. Berman is chairman of the committee.

Today's Andersonville boasts Middle Eastern, New Orleans and Columbian restaurants, Mexican and Italian bakeries, shops for designer clothing, books, art, furniture and a good cup of coffee.

In the 16 blocks on Clark Street between Ainslie and Victoria Street, there are 68 restaurant/ bars, 21 beauty/nail salons, 11 retail apparel stores, nine home furnishings stores, seven banks, 13 health care/fitness facilities, and eight office buildings. The predominant use of upper floors along Clark Street is residential.

In the suburbs, retail may follow rooftops, but in the city and especially Andersonville, it is the reverse, says Jill Siegel, managing director of Andersonville Development Corp. Recent surveys reveal the top five reasons consumers shop Andersonville are its unique local businesses, neighborhood charm, the location, convenience and the diversity of the businesses.

Thom Greene adds to that by lifting his hands with his thumbs together and raising his index fingers, saying, "It's all about scale." Greene, an architect with an office, home, and luxury apartment rentals in Andersonville, explains that the scale of the neighborhood makes people feel comfortable.



Maggie Finegan Team Keller Williams Realty "The scale gives Andersonville a village aspect—the street isn't that wide, the buildings are rarely over three stories. You almost could describe it as cozy," he said, sitting in his glassfronted office on Berwyn. "It's really a Jimmy Stewart kind of place . . . a village in a great big, world-class city. Living in Andersonville, you get the best of both worlds," he said.

An insider's view

Marge Smith, 82, who has lived in a two-flat she owns since the 1940s, agrees. She recalls earlier locally owned shops that graced Clark Street, like Mrs. Hester's Hat Shop. "She designed and made her own hats, you know," she said. And other Swedish shops that thrived before the end of World War II, and the T-shirt shops that came and went.

"I've been here through good and bad," she says. "It was always unique," she added. "And today it is so busy. Over on Clark Street, it is party, party, party."

Maybe that's why it has become challenging to find a single-family home in the neighborhood. In the past six months, Finegan said three single-family homes were listed for sale. These include a Queen Anne with a double front porch at \$849,000; an American four-square at \$759,000; and another home listed at a little over \$500,000.

Still single-family homes regularly pop up for sale. Kathy Hoff and her husband, Andrew Degenholtz, bought their single-family home nearly a year ago. Other than rehabbing the bathroom on the first floor, it was a turnkey sale. They didn't have to be sold on the neighborhood; for four years they lived in a condo a block away.

Degenholtz, a magazine marketing executive, and Hoff, an artist, looked at houses in other areas of the city and in Evanston. Nothing

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measured up until they walked into the foyer of their new home and saw their reflections in a 4-foot wide mirror framed in hand-carved wood that stretches from floor to ceiling. "The vintage details meant a lot," Hoff said. "So did seeing trees through the windows."

For the couple's toddler, the accessibility of parks is a plus, said Degenholtz, as he ticked off playgrounds at Balmoral and Broadway, Magnolia and Bryn Mawr, and Ashland and Farragut.

Andersonville has two elementary schools, Helen C. Peirce School of International Studies and Lyman Trumbull Elementary School. Finegan sees a growth area in West Andersonville for young families where the Rogers Park Montessori School relocated into a newly constructed facility on West Balmoral Avenue. "Child care is very important to young couples. The school is a big plus in an area that already has a big draw," she said.

Many couples relocating to the A'villes are from Wrigleyville. "There's more available for your money in Andersonville," Finegan said.

Single adults or couples without children are moving to the fringes of South Andersonville, drawn by access to Metra's Ravenswood stop. The Union Pacific north line gets commuters to the Ogilvie Transportation Center in the West Loop in 14 minutes.

A few years ago, Realtors didn't receive that many calls requesting Andersonville. Today that is a different story. "Now Andersonville is a destination," Finegan said.