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## The hidden family nest

By Holly Yeager

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It is easy to miss Del Ray, Virginia. And that's very strange, given its location. Just two miles to the south is Old Town Alexandria, a busy enclave that combines cobblestones and colonial-era tourist attractions with trendy restaurants and shops. Two miles in the other direction you hit Reagan National Airport and Crystal City, a towering complex of offices, apartments and hotels.

But somehow, in spite of the neighbouring activity, Del Ray remains off the beaten path, set back just a block or two from the highways that carry most of the traffic in the area. "Unless you're going to Del Ray, you're never going to drive through it," says one resident.

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That doesn't bother the people who live here. Instead, they celebrate its leafy streets, quirky houses, and quick commuting distance to Washington, DC. Locally owned businesses add to a sense of old-fashioned small-town life that is all too often lacking in the city and suburbs. "I walk down the street and I recognise people," says Melissa Beun, eating her lunch at a picnic bench along Mt Vernon Avenue, the area's main commercial street. Beun grew up in Washington but has seen Del Ray become more family-friendly since she moved here in 1991.

Del Ray – technically a neighbourhood in the city of Alexandria – was farmland until 1894, when savvy real estate investors saw plans for a proposed railway line and bought up the land. Two years later an electric streetcar started running from Alexandria, and through Del Ray to Washington. The "trolley suburb" was soon home to both office workers who commuted to the capital and manual workers who walked to what was then one of the biggest railroad yards on the east coast.

The area grew quickly in the early 20th century and most of Del Ray's homes date from this period. There are wood-framed Victorian-style buildings, brick duplexes, bungalows, cottages and original Sears homes, which the retailing giant sold through catalogues and shipped as kits, to be built on site. There are bright colours, well-kept gardens, and the porches have a lived-in look, with flags, paper lanterns and comfortable furniture.

And while Del Ray still celebrates its railroad past (a red caboose sits in front of the elementary school and the old Potomac Yard is now a sprawling shopping centre, with new apartment buildings planned) one feature that sets it apart from its car-friendly contemporaries is the way the neighbourhood welcomes people who travel on foot.

That's what attracted Mary Jane Swanson, who moved 21 years ago from Oakton, a more rural suburb half an hour's drive to the west. "I wanted sidewalks. I really wanted to be close to activity," she says. Swanson and her husband live in a nearly 100-year-old white farmhouse, just a short walk to the restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques of Mt Vernon Avenue.

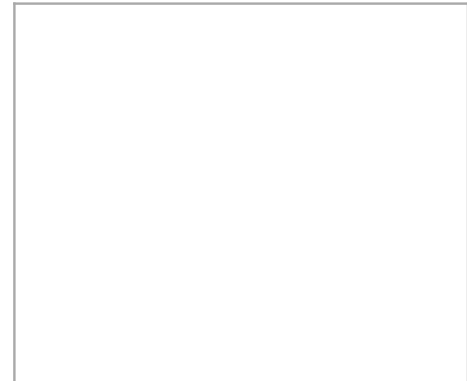
Nora Partlow, owner of St Elmo's Coffee Pub, a hub of downtown Del Ray, says: "We have everything you need. You can live, shop and dine here." Partlow and her business partner started St Elmo's in 1996, an early sign of confidence in the community's revival. Another good sign came in 2005, when New York real estate guru Barbara Corcoran included Del Ray in her list of the five best "up and coming" neighbourhoods in the US.

Partlow recently became a real estate agent and she has seen coffee shop customers become property clients. There are still more buyers than sellers, she says, and most househunters in the area are young couples. They are willing to accept Del Ray's smaller houses in exchange for the convenient location and busy community life (including the popular annual Halloween parade and a big arts festival).

"We're in a bubble," Partlow says. "All around us they're having trouble selling houses but not here." Several larger homes in Del Ray have sold for more than \$1m, though the average price of a detached house is about \$600,000. "People are looking for the lifestyle. And the lifestyle is extra time to walk your dog, go for a stroll with your kids. If you don't like dogs and you don't like kids and you don't like community, you're not going to like Del Ray."

Residents commute to government jobs but there are also writers and graphic designers who work from home and a few new internet-based businesses. Partlow calls the area "freer" than Old Town. "If somebody wants to paint a house pink we let them paint a house pink."

Swanson says that in recent years she has noticed more people remaining in Del Ray as their families grow. "I hear the sound of basketballs bouncing a lot, which means people are staying with older kids" she says. There are plenty of new additions to bear that out, with homeowners



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frequently opting for rear extensions and often relying on the same local architect and contractor to do the work.

Beun and her husband did just that, adding one bedroom and one bathroom to their 1930s red brick colonial house before their now 16-month-old twins were born. Beun has lived in the town for more than 15 years, and remembers when Taqueria Poblano, a popular Mexican restaurant, used to be a biker bar.

She walks a lot too – to the grocery store, the drug store, the bank, and to take her six-year-old daughter to school, to ballet lessons, to yoga class, and to visit friends who live up the street. (Her husband rides his bike to Crystal City during the week, then takes a shuttle bus to his workplace in Washington.)

Brooks Brown and his wife were living in a rented townhouse in Old Town when they got to know Del Ray, making frequent visits to the Evening Star Café, a popular upscale restaurant on Mt Vernon Avenue. They bought a two-bedroom bungalow during the market frenzy of 2004 and have since added a bedroom and bathroom in the basement, and a screened porch.

"You have a house, you have a yard but yet you don't lose that city feel," says Brown, a commercial real estate broker who drives to work in another northern Virginia suburb. These days, even though they live in town, the addition of a young son means Brown and his wife go out more often for lunch or coffee than to dinner at the Evening Star.

Brown is happy to be in a stand-alone house. "We have windows around all four sides and there is not another person on the other side of the wall," as there was in his old townhouse. He also likes the mix of styles. "It's not a cookie-cutter type neighbourhood." But he acknowledges that his small home is "a first house" and that someday he might want to make a move. "It would be great to pick up more space but it's kind of hard to imagine moving someplace else."

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