

Neighborhood marked by riverfront tranquility

OUR NEIGHBORHOODS: STORIES ABOUT MICHIANA NEIGHBORHOODS

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For decades, Gene Harsanyi would unwind after stressful workdays by taking his coffee or maybe his fishing pole down to the woods by a gravel-pit pond between his Jefferson Street home and the St. Joseph River.

"I've been coming back here 40 years," Harsanyi says. "There were deer, foxes, owls. It was wonderful to come back here in the evening. Kids used it for bike trails and things like that.

"Thirty-five years ago, I told my wife, 'If we ever build a house, we'll build it right here.'"

Then one day he noticed bulldozer tracks in the soft earth.

"I said, 'Whoa, somebody's developing this,'" Harsanyi recalls.

Just as he suspected, the bulldozer tracks meant development was coming to the land. He bought the third lot from developer Bob Stephens -- the one with the sycamore tree by the water, he specified.

Now he gets to enjoy the serene scene from his backyard terrace.

"Every morning this is what I see," says Harsanyi, 66, who installed the 112-pound stones in the terrace walls and planted grapevines, tomatoes and peppers in the gardens that step down to the water. "I figure it'll add five years to my life."

Stephens, who graduated from Penn High School in 1970 and remembered the quarries from his youth, came back from working on brownfield sites in Chicago to develop the area in the late 1990s.



This home on Estates Drive is in the Barrington Estates subdivision off Jefferson near the St. Joseph River in Mishawaka.

His Prime Development Corp. transformed the abandoned quarries into Barrington Estates, Villas at Barrington and, recently, Estates East at Barrington.

"There's some estates," says Eileen Herms, treasurer of the tentative homeowners association board that took over responsibilities from the developer in July. "There's the villas. Most of the people in the villas are retired, but there are some people here with children, too. It works for everyone."

Villa lots cost \$33,000 to \$50,000, villas \$250,000 to \$350,000, single-family lots \$30,000 to more than \$100,000, homes \$275,000 to more than \$1 million. The development is on Mishawaka water and sewer services and in the Penn Harris Madison school district.

Barrington has 41 villas, about 60 homes in Phase I and eight or nine homes in Phase II, the East, with some 26 large lots planned.

Herms, who came from Michigan, enjoys both the secluded setting and the convenience of the community, which touches Willow Lake and Eberhart-Petro Golf Course. A gate at the Barrington entrance is open in the daytime but closes at night.

"It's very nice just to walk around," she says. "It's peaceful. The golf course is right here. We liked the community when we came through it. There's so much here as far as stores and restaurants. We love it. It's a great area."

Bob DeBroka, who moved into the Villas seven years ago and is part of a group of nine people organizing the new association, says the beauty and peace of the area attracted him.

"The main thing was the beauty of the place when we first came into it," he recalls. "It's very quiet, too."

People in the Villas do more socializing together, partly because the section is older and partly because the homes are closer together. Every winter, eight or 10 owners participate in a Villa Crawl, a house-to-house food-and-drink celebration.

"We do a lot more things together," says DeBroka, who estimates 70 percent of the Villa residents are retired. "Many of the people have extensive flower gardens," partly because most lawn maintenance is provided.

Residents hope to develop more relationships now that they have responsibility for the association.

"We haven't started the committees yet," Herms says. "We want a Neighborhood Watch. We have a barbecue for all. We have a Christmas party. Somebody will volunteer their house."

Residents credit Stephens with fashioning desirable development around the long-abandoned quarries. The developer has continued his riverfront work with Highland Village, on an old industrial site where Volney Felt Mill and Owens-Corning once stood, and IronWorks, the former Uniroyal site in downtown Mishawaka.

"Bob Stephens just has a knack," says Harsanyi, who retired six years ago as an administrator at the Elkhart Career Center and started his own business. "He has my confidence. He gave me a little grief because I cut too many trees down," but the walnuts and oaks were on the spot where the house needed to go.

Over in the Villas section, Walt Claeys' family is working on a major landscaping project at the end of the Larkspur Lane cul-de-sac.

"This was a jungle," Claeys says. "We spent last year cleaning it out. This summer we decided we wanted to do something with it. We decided we'd put a waterfall in."

He got a bargain rate for the project because its high visibility leads to plenty of referrals for the company. Now, large stones grace the once-weedy steep slope under a fence and four waterfalls cascade into ponds.

"The neighbors are crazy about it," he says.

Know of a neighborhood worth writing about? Let Gene Stowe know at stowegene@yahoo.com.