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Living Downtown

Convenience is attracting professionals

By Scott Stafford, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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Aaron Brown and Natalie Forte pose in the center of Pittsfield's North Street. They live in the Greystone Building at the corner of North St. and Maplewood Avenue. Photo by Caroline Bonnavier / Berkshire Eagle Staff

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Thursday, April 05

PITTSFIELD

Financial advisors, computer specialists, retail managers, social workers, real estate agents, technical writers: The faces of people living on North Street are slowly changing, and so are their professions and their income levels.

Among the newcomers is Ronald J. Kelly III. He doesn't spend a lot of money on gas since moving into his new condominium at 433 North St. Because he also works on North Street, eats out on North Street, and does much of his shopping there as well, he only gets into his Saab to visit friends or head to the grocery store, and the Big Y is just blocks away.

At 24, Kelly is in the early stages of his career in financial services. Since

college he has shared apartments with friends or lived with his parents. This is his first shot at the grown-up life on his own. And he chose the freedom and convenience of life on North Street.

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Ron Kelly at his desk in his newly purchased one-bedroom condominium at 433 North St. Photo by Darren Vanden Berge / Berkshire Eagle Staff

He paid \$180,000 for his 777-square-foot, one bedroom condo.

"I walk quite a bit now," he said. "I find I don't have to drive at all during the work week. I walk to work, and most everything I need is right on North Street. It's nice to be able to work as much as I want and walk home in five minutes."

"North Street is now becoming a pretty interesting destination for younger, cooler tenant," said George Whaling, the North Street property owner and

developer, who renovated Kelly's building. "The demographics walking the street are changing."

David Carver, a managing partner of Scarafoni & Associates, is overseeing the final stages of construction of 10 new rental apartment units on the other end of North Street, in the Dunham Building. There is already a waiting list.

"The nice thing about our waiting list is that it includes all age groups, from retirees to young professionals, and many professions — which is a positive thing for downtown growth," he said.

"Based on who is buying the market-rate housing downtown, we are seeing two trends," said Deanna Ruffer, director of community development for Pittsfield. "One is the young, vibrant professionals, and the other are what we're calling the empty nesters, who tend to have disposable income and enthusiasm for community. It's just what we were trying to achieve by encouraging in-fill, market-rate housing in the North Street area."

Aaron Brown, a 29-year-old assistant manager at Target, and his fiancée, Natalie Forte, a 28-year-old social worker with the Department of Social Services, are two others enjoying their new life together on North Street — in the Greystone Building.

Brown said they had been living on Second Street, but he saw the changes

happening on North Street and wanted to be a part of it. When a Greystone apartment opened up, they went after it.

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And, after a year, they are happy they did.

"I actually find myself staying right here in the area," Brown said. "If we want to go out, it's a nice walk to Spice. And we probably eat at The Lantern once a week. They know us by name there. Most of our needs are met right here."

Brown pays \$825 per month for a third floor, 1,150-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment.

"We have a nice view of North Street, and of (St. Joseph's) church," he said. "It's pleasant and quiet at night. We can sit by the front windows and watch the Fourth of July fireworks at Wahconah Park."

The couple belong to a nearby gym, which they walk to almost daily, he said. They also walk to the bank and restaurants.

"Living on Second Street didn't last very long," said Forte. "It's amazing that just a few blocks away, it's a totally different environment. Just the look of North Street makes it nice — it's upcoming, trendy..."

"And I have to say, my apartment looks like something you'd see in Manhattan — large and airy with a Victorian flavor and a nice view," she noted.

But there are challenges, among them a lack of parking.

Brown and Forte have had to pay about \$200 in parking tickets over the past year because they were late getting up to move out of a 90-minute parking spot by 9 a.m.

And while Spice is right down the street, there is really not much else of a night life .

"For my age range, there are not many places to go nearby," Forte said. There are no nightclubs, she said, and Spice has the only lounge nearby. "You have to drive to Great Barrington, or maybe Albany, but there's not much locally."

And as the retail activity increases on North Street, Forte said stores she would like to see there include a women's shoe store ("That would be awesome."), a store for hair care



Roberta Lord in her North St. apartment along with her actual-size plaster cast of the head of Michelangelo's David. Photo by Darren Vanden Berge / Berkshire Eagle Staff

products, a book store and a music store.

Brown said a specialty food store, or even a small grocery, would be helpful, as would a movie-rental outlet. And he agreed that a music store would be nice.

Dodzi Koffi, 26, a human-rights advocate for the Department of Mental Retardation, also lives in the Greystone Building with his wife, Meghan Maloy.

"We have very beautiful views of the mountains," Koffi said. "We can see Onota Lake, all the sunsets, and anything that's happening on the street. I'm a city kid, and the whole city is right here on North Street."

He and Maloy go for walks, eat at Spice, the Golden Phoenix, and get pizza.

He too complained that parking is an issue. He has also incurred about \$200 in parking fines.

And the lack of a night life is also part of living on North Street.

"A night club would be a good idea, but I don't think they would do it — we used to drive through North Adams to go to Mountain View, but they shut that down," Koffi said.

Koffi agreed that a music store and a small grocery store would be good additions to the neighborhood.

Higher age bracket professionals are also calling North Street home.

At 58, real estate broker Kurt Volkman has been living in his North Street condo since November.

"In my professional activities, I have been getting more and more excited about all the activity, and the increasing sense that North Street is changing dramatically," he said. "Of all the places I could be in Berkshire County, this is where I want to be the most."

He is happy with the local shops and services, including a yoga studio, health food store, the Bellissimo Dolce coffeehouse, and the restaurants, of course. But he would like to see a book store, and "a music store would be great here."

Roberta Lord, a 55-year-old freelance art writer and a technical writer at General Dynamics, is enthralled with her apartment in the Greystone and her life on North Street.

She rises every morning and walks to the Y for a swim in the Olympic size pool there.

"I see the sun rise every morning on North Street," she said. "And Wahconah Park is so close that when Bob Dylan was there, I opened my windows and it was like he was playing in my living room."

All the North Street residents interviewed for this article said a planned multiplex movie theater down the street would make life on North Street even more fun. And they intended to stay for some time.

"I'm gonna be the crazy 90-year-old woman in the Greystone Building," Lord said, laughing.

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