

NEIGHBORS

Old Palm Valley

By Kim Gilmore-Dunn

Old Palm Valley is home to a diverse group of residents – from newborns to the elderly – from all walks of life. While there are a large number of children in the area, the median age is 40 to 45. The 80 homes range in size from about 1,900 square feet to more than 4,000. Most of the smaller homes were built in the front (or first phase) of the development. All of the homes were built between 1993 and 2000.

Folks have clamored for years to buy the single remaining vacant lot at the end of the back lake. However, it is not for sale.

Amenities like a community park, basketball court, lighted streets and sidewalks continue to draw potential homebuyers to the area. Turnover is low and houses seldom stay on the market for long.

Tom West



Photos by Maggie FitzRoy

As a youngster, Tom West hunted, fished and explored the gnarly woods that straddle County Road 210 in Ponte Vedra Beach. So he was not surprised when developers wanted to capitalize on the primitive beauty of the acres of land that had been in his family for generations.

Unwilling to sacrifice his family's heritage, West chose to develop the land himself. His goal: to save as many oak trees as possible.

"If I had not done it, someone else would have," says West, who broke ground on Old Palm Valley subdivision nearly a decade ago. "I thought it deserved me."

The result is a roughly 40-acre upscale community set among idyllic Florida woodlands. When you drive down the winding roads of Old Palm Valley, you see the massive oak trees West was determined to save. Then you notice the homes, many of which West built himself.

"I didn't want look-alike houses," says West, who insisted on oversized lots and side-entry garages. Every house overlooks a lake or conservation area.

West named the neighborhood for its location. The Ponte Vedra Beach subdivision is situated in an area that was once considered part of Palm Valley.

"I wanted something down here to retain the history," says West, who still lives nearby. "It came out the way I wanted it. I always get a good feeling when I ride down there."

Eighty families live in Old Palm Valley. Most come together several times a year at block parties, community garage sales, neighborhood cleanups and holiday outings, some of which are held at the park in the heart of the community. Residents are kept informed through a quarterly newsletter, board meetings and a website (www.oldpalmvalley.com).

Meet a few of the people who make Old Palm Valley worth writing about.

In 1998, Tim Early did something many people would envy. Stressed out and overworked, he quit his job as a high-powered executive at a construction company to start his dream business, E-Sports USA.

In his spare time, Early helped the National Football League promote youth flag football and he set up training camps for Gatorade. The rest of the time the stay-at-home dad was up to his elbows in dirty diapers.

"I think every dad should have to do it for at least three months," says Early, who is now the children's program director at Ponte Vedra Presbyterian Church. "Being a full-time parent is the hardest job invented. At work you have time off. But when you're a stay-at-home mom or dad, it's 24-hours-a-day, no down time."

Early moved to Old Palm Valley in 1994 because he wanted to live near the beach. Among one of the first residents there, he convinced developer Tom West to let him build a colonial home that reflected his family's southern roots. He is from Virginia; his wife Maria is from Georgia.

As the couple's family grew, so did their need for more space. Reluctant to leave the community, they built a second home there in 2000.

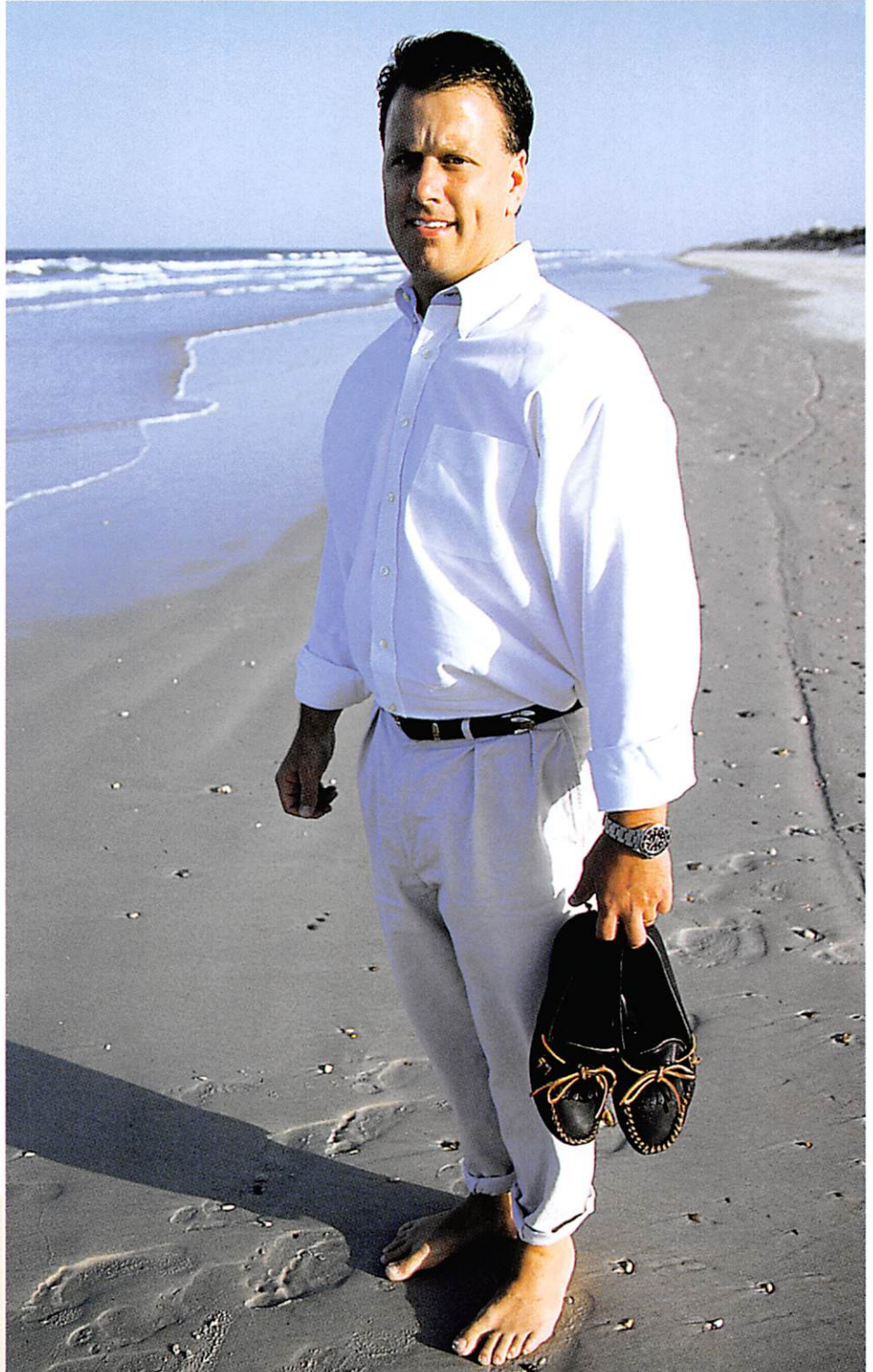
"Everyone knows everybody," Early says. "It's just the perfect neighborhood."

Motivation: His wife, Maria.

"Really, she's played the mom part and the dad part, too." **Fun Fact:** The Earlys attended rival colleges. He went to University of Florida. She graduated from Florida State University.

Noteworthy: Early has served on several committees in Old Palm Valley. **Old Palm Valley strengths:** "This is the Beaver Cleaver neighborhood," Early says. "The strength of this neighborhood is just everyone being so close, not that everyone knows everyone else's business." **Family:** Wife Maria; son Jake, 2; daughters Kailey, 7; Kassie, 5, and Faith, 9 months.

Tim Early



Bob and Ann Bauwens



The grass is greener since Bob and Ann Bauwens moved to Old Palm Valley late last year.

Mr. Bauwens, an executive in the turf industry, began helping neighbors improve the quality and care of their lawns. Mrs. Bauwens, an avid volunteer, could be spotted offering iced tea to the children and sharing ideas with friends.

Together, the couple rallied residents to spruce up an overgrown *cul de sac* in front of their homes, and sparked a flurry of home improvement and community pride.

"I just really believe that part of life is reaching out to people," says Mrs. Bauwens, whose every other word is about her family. The couple's son, Robert, plays tournament hockey in Florida and South Carolina. Daughter, Katie, a student at University of North Florida, earned a service award nomination for her work in Students Against Drunk Driving.

"Mighty things happen when people get involved," says Mrs. Bauwens.

The couple left their home on Black Creek in September in search of a community where their son, Robert, could

expand his horizons. They made dozens of scouting trips to the beaches, but on one particular outing to Old Palm Valley they saw dozens of children playing outside. More important, people waved to them.

"There was just something about this neighborhood. I knew this was home," says Mrs. Bauwens.

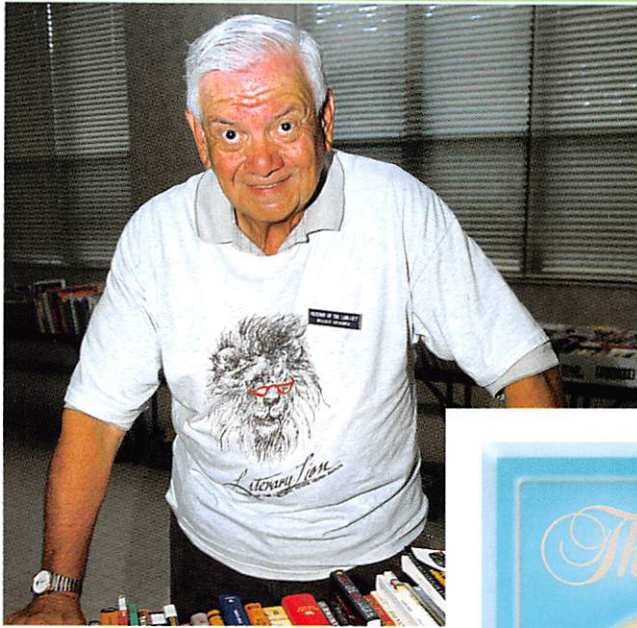
Fun fact: Mrs. Bauwens recently traded in her 13-year volunteer/professional career to produce a half-hour radio ministry program from her home. She has plans for a live nationwide call-in talk show.

Noteworthy: Mr. Bauwens recently was nominated for the community's board of directors.

He can be seen: Roller-blading with son Robert or walking the family's Golden Retriever, Hunter.

Old Palm Valley strengths: "Families," says Mrs. Bauwens. "We love our neighbors. We just love being here."

Family: Bob, Ann, daughter Katie, 21, and Robert, 13.



Other collections: Hot Wheels cars; vintage fire engines; police cars; the original Matchbox Car series; 100,000 baseball cards; old movies including the Marx Brothers and Star Trek; war medals; anything military; and thousands of novelty toys.

Fun fact: DiCarlo has served as treasurer of Old Palm Valley since retiring there in 1996. **Can be seen:** Power walking through Old Palm Valley while wearing headphones.

Other interests: DiCarlo plays golf twice a week at Oak Bridge and serves as chairman of the Friends of the Library of Ponte Vedra. **Family:** Daughter Lisa, 39 and son Guy III, 41.

Given his penchant for planning and organization, it is ironic that Guy DiCarlo decided on a whim to retire in Old Palm Valley. He and his wife, Pat, fell in love with the area while visiting friends in a neighboring subdivision.

"It was perfect," says DiCarlo, who spent 40 years as a stockbroker/trainer for Merrill Lynch. "When Tom West developed this place, he was a great architect with the natural. It is very, very quiet and serene."

That serenity has provided the perfect retreat for DiCarlo, a retired Air Force Lieutenant, to enjoy his collection of 1,200 Civil War history books. DiCarlo's interest goes beyond reading, however. He has taught adult education classes on the subject and conducted research for well-known authors. He founded the Civil War Roundtable of Ponte Vedra and writes a monthly newsletter, "The Courier."

DiCarlo's curiosity was unleashed when his mother gave him a book about Abraham Lincoln at age 8.

Motivation: Putting things together, and a desire to see a complete picture. "I'll do just about anything to make that happen – literally," he says. **Prized possession:** He would not part with his Civil War history books dating from the 1800s. At one time, he owned 5,000.

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Rita Friedman



Like many parents, Rita Friedman was involved in the Parent-Teacher Association and other school councils when her children were young. But it wasn't until she moved from Minnesota to Ponte Vedra Beach as an empty-nester in 1995 that she assumed the role of community activist. With a 10-year sales career at Dale Carnegie behind her, Friedman is now on a first-name basis with members of the St. John's County Commission.

Her call to action? Controlling development in Ponte Vedra.

Friedman attends weekly county commission meetings whenever possible, has the commission agenda faxed to her home, and attends public hearings and writes letters constantly. She also reads everything she can get her hands on. She has served on more than a dozen boards in St. John's County in the past five years, and only recently decided not to run for reelection to the governing board in Old Palm Valley subdivision where she lives. Keeping friends informed on current issues and babysitting the neighborhood children are what she does best.

"I just want to hold babies," says Friedman, who is lobbying for her first grandchild.

Motivation: Wants to meet new people, and has a genuine concern to give back to the community in which she lives. **Fun fact:** She organized a demonstration that influenced the redesign of a new gas station on County Road 210.

Noteworthy: She mentors a special-needs child at a local elementary school. **Personal goal:** Wants to become a personal trainer for women over 50.

Can be seen: Taking leisurely walks in Old Palm Valley with a favorite biography in hand, and distributing flyers for her babysitting services.

Old Palm Valley strengths: "Out of all the other developments, it's small, has a diversity of people and the developer saved the trees," she says.

Family: Husband Sheldon and daughters Debra, 30 and Hillary, 25.

John Parks



While you may not know John Parks personally, it's likely you have seen his work. The unassuming wholesale beauty supply salesman is also a trained artist who has made his mark in Ponte Vedra.

In addition to his personal collection of sketches and other artwork at home, Parks has provided the backdrop for plays at Ponte Vedra Presbyterian

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Church and Ocean Palms Elementary School, where his daughter attends classes. His murals can be found on the walls of several local beauty salons and a prominent dentist's office.

"My signature is all over the community," says Parks, who earned a bachelor's degree from the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale and University of Miami.

Unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to launch a career in art, he pursued sales instead and wound up as an advertising layout designer for a newspaper. After getting married, he took art out of the equation altogether, making it his passion and not his profession.

"It's self-expression," Parks says about his art. "Everyone's trying to find their own unique identity. It's a signature that no one else has." ■

Fun fact: Neighbors and friends have commissioned Parks to create faux-finished walls in their homes and offices.

Prized possession: Two wooden school desks he adorned with murals of Cinderella and Peter Pan and sealed in acrylic for his children. "It encourages them to do their homework and gives them their own little space," he says.

Noteworthy: Parks was the first Old Palm Valley resident in 1993.

Old Palm Valley strengths: "There is more of a community relationship in this area than in other places we've lived," he says.

Interests: Playing golf, strumming on his guitar and spending time with his children.

Family: Wife MaryEllen, son Justin, 12, and daughter Rebecca.

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