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BY **ABBY HEUGEL**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MICHAEL BUCK**

CONDO COMMUNITIES

Young professionals are spurning the suburbs
and choosing to live downtown.

Union Square resident Justin Ruehs entered a condo, dropped off his donation of art supplies, picked up his wine glass and spent the next three hours trying new foods in 10 different condos and mingling with more than 100 neighbors — all without leaving the building he calls home.

While more than \$850 was raised for Very Special Arts at the Second Annual Union Square Progressive Dinner, the event also raised the sense of community among the residents. And that's the idea behind the myriad of events the residents hold throughout the year — to give a little more effort and make the building more than just a place to live.

"You see people in the hallway all the time," Ruehs said, "but they may not be your immediate neighbors or someone you share a courtyard with. You don't get

a chance to find out who they really are or what they do. This gives us a chance to see new faces, make new friends and build that sense of familiarity."

As many young professionals in the Grand Rapids area choose downtown condominium living, they're finding more than just a place to sleep: They're finding a connection to the community and the city they call home.

It was the initial appeal of living in a place perfectly located at the intersection of education and recreation that drew Michael Bianco into Hillmount Condominiums on Cherry Street. In his second year of medical school at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, he's not far from any of the city's hospitals.

"I will need to be in the hospitals all next year, so proximity to them was one of the most important aspects of my purchase decision," Bianco said. "It's a central location for all things medical in the

Residents of Hillmount condominiums, from left, Tony Tagliavia, Jordan Beel, Emily Horton, Tamara Beel, John Kim and Mike Bianco walk along Cherry Street.





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Grand Rapids area, which will allow me to get to work earlier and stay later knowing that I’m only a few minutes away. Not to mention the fact that I can walk to a bar or restaurant, go to the symphony or spend some time downtown and know that I’m only a few minutes away from home.”

Fellow Hillmount resident Tamara Beel agreed with Bianco’s sentiment and is more than willing to extol the virtues of downtown living to anyone who asks. Beel and her husband have made friends in the building, hosted many rooftop deck get-togethers and feel their neighbors really care about the building as much as they do. In fact, Beel likes it so much she decided to work there.

“Although I lived in Hillmount first, I now also work for CWD Real Estate Investment, the developer of Hillmount and The Fitzgerald Residences,” Beel said. “I met the CWD team at a co-owner board meeting on the roof deck, and that turned into me taking a position as the

sales manager of the Hillmount building. I love telling everyone we can walk to most everything we do — dine, entertain, shop, attend concerts, visit museums. Everyone has a great attitude and is so happy to live here — not just in Hillmount, but in the city.”

“I think that the idea of living and working in the same space is a relatively new concept for Grand Rapids folks,” said Tina Derusha, a portrait photographer living in Union Square Condominiums on the corner of Turner and Broadway. “It’s one that is long overdue, in my opinion. Even though I’m shooting on location quite a bit, having a downtown studio draws a certain type of clientele to me. They love meeting me for consultations in our condo — the hip, urban lifestyle appeals to many people.”

A couple years after they were married, Tina and her husband, Allen, entertained the thought of moving out of state. Although Tina wanted to return to city

Gathering at Union Square are condo residents, clockwise, Tina Derusha (in orange), Jeff Steinport, Allen Derusha, Justin Ruehs, Lynnette Carpenter, Leta Flikkema, Alberto Garza, Ellen Dunn and Nickolas Morrow.



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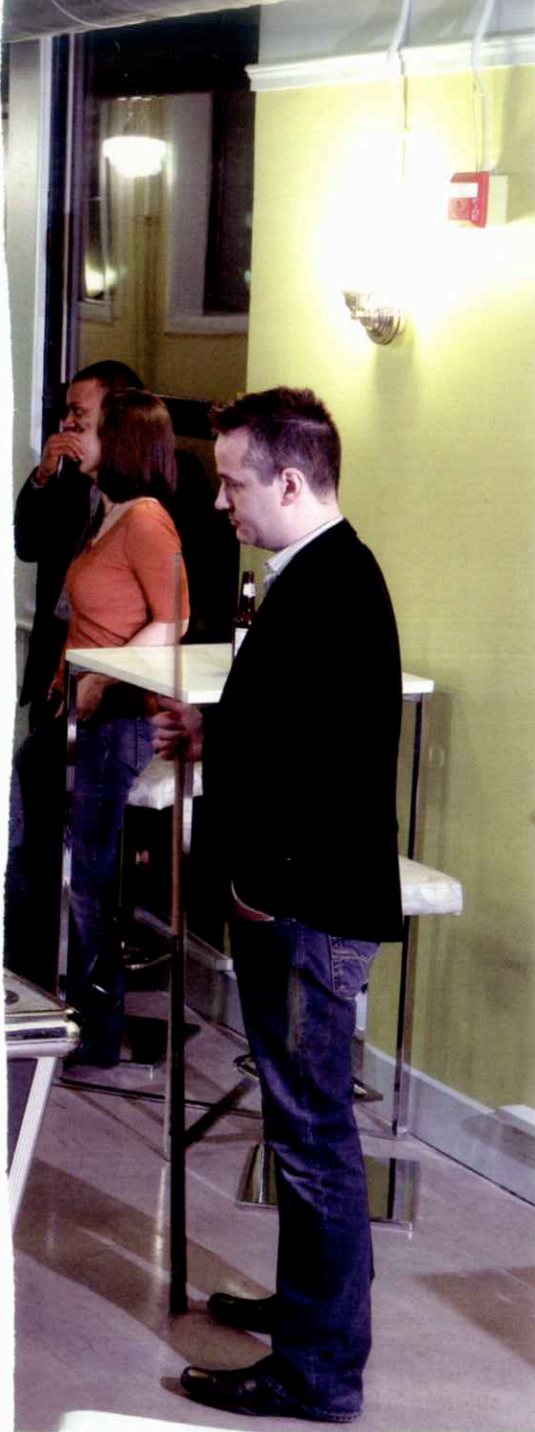
— Michael Bianco

life, the idea of living in the suburbs turned her off.

“We wanted to know our neighbors — not just try to keep up with them — help build a close-knit community and sustain a lifestyle that supported greener habits, like walking more,” Derusha said. “With Allen’s offices located on Monroe and my desire to move my portrait photography business home, we were sold a week after touring the building.”

Hillmount resident and WOOD-TV 8 reporter Tony Tagliavia was initially a little wary of living so close to his office, but figured he was going to get called into a major event whether it was a 15-minute drive to work or a 30-second walk.

Union Square residents get together in the common area on the rooftop, featuring a pool table, TV and shuffleboard — plus a pool and hot tub outdoors.



“Living so close to everything and walking to work has been wonderful,” Tagliavia said. “No gas, no (road) construction, and when I need to pop in after hours, it’s not a big deal. Plus, the Hillmount community has been great. I’ve run into neighbors in the elevator who’ll mention they’re getting together with friends on the deck and invite you up. You meet so many different people.”

And while these large buildings offer great professional networking opportunities — with so many neighbors, residents are bound to meet people from all professions and all areas of the work force — it’s the residents who have formed communities.

“The feel we have in our building is so vastly different than the neighborhoods many of us moved from,” said Ruehs. “The residents have made this building one big community. We’ve made it a point to get involved, to reach out and to include everyone. With so many people, there’s always a group with a common interest — running groups, dog-walking groups, wine-tasting groups — and we’ve come to depend on each other. From our friendships these bonds grow, and whether it’s networking to find a job or making sure we all have dinner, we work together.”

At Union Square, that involvement includes potlucks, weekend brunches, pizza nights, pool parties and courtyard get-togethers. This past Christmas, neighbors shared a 14-foot tree in the courtyard and in March had a traditional turkey dinner for 12 to break up the winter doldrums.

“Personally, I’ve grown in community spirit,” Derusha said. “Before living here, I never really felt connected to a place, and I feel like I’m really making a difference now. Last year, a group of Union Square neighbors did a spring community clean-up of several square blocks of the area surrounding our building. It made me feel a sense of pride and well-being for contributing to my neighborhood.”

Many residents say living downtown has opened their eyes to the local community and encouraged them to frequent and support local restaurants, bars and businesses. For Union Square resident Angela Austin, it even encouraged her to start a business of her own.

Austin and her husband moved downtown three years ago from a peaceful subdivision in Kentwood where they were happy but felt like they wanted a greater sense of community. Moving to Union Square, she said, they’ve made many close friends — from single, young professionals to empty-nesters — and it has dramatically changed their way of life.

“Everyone in our building knows your name — or at least your unit — and is willing to lend a hand if needed, even if it’s as small as borrowing household items,” Austin said. “After living here for just a short time, I was encouraged professionally to open my own special occasion boutique, Renee Austin, downtown on Bridge Street. After living in and falling in love with the Stockbridge community and downtown Grand Rapids, I knew this was

the place to open my store.”

Derusha also believes in loyally supporting local businesses, avoiding big box stores and national chains as much as possible. She marveled at what has become such a diverse array of options on any given weekend, remembering that even five years ago, you really had to hunt for something to do downtown.

“It’s been really remarkable to watch the city grow and know that we’re a part of the reason for new businesses springing up and more people wanting to live downtown,” Derusha said. “Because we’re on foot more, we also have an opportunity to notice things we wouldn’t otherwise see from the car.”

Hillmount resident Bianco admitted that he doesn’t have a lot of free time to explore the city, but he said he’s never at a loss for something to do when he does find the time.

“Grand Rapids is really a great place for young professionals since there is pretty much something fun going on every night of the week, and having it all so close is a real asset,” he said. “The city is constantly changing and is never stagnant. It makes you feel good when your hardest decision for the day is what local restaurant to eat at or what downtown coffee shop or pub you want to meet up with friends at.”

As more young professionals in the Grand Rapids area are deciding on downtown living, they’re finding convenience combined with a sense of loyalty to the buildings in which they live, the neighbors they share it with and city they call home.

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Abby Heugel is a freelance writer living in Grand Rapids.