

Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)

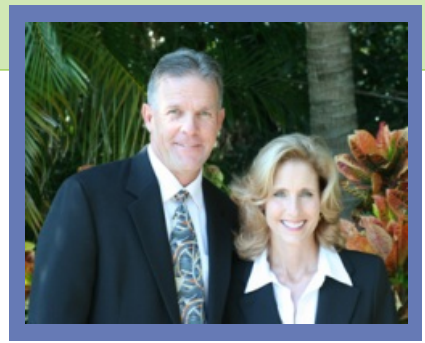
'Living off the land,' but a little differently

January 16, 2006

Section: BUSINESS WEEKLY

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Can a former flower child, who lived in a national forest for more than a decade and who built his home from dilapidated barn boards, find success as a high-end developer and real estate agent in posh Sarasota?

Far out ... seems he can. Carolyn and Gary **Collins** are a husband-and-wife real estate team with swanky SKY Sotheby's International Realty.

The couple, who took wildly different paths to get where they are today, are not just real estate agents but also successful developers, having built four high-quality "spec" homes in Sarasota in recent years.

Carolyn, a Texan by birth, graduated from the University of North Texas and arrived in Sarasota about 13 years ago, after working in New York City as an administrator in a law firm.

Gary, a "fourth-generation Floridian," had a more flowery, roundabout and nontraditional journey.

Collins "lived all over the world," because his father was in the military.

He attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, but left before getting his degree.

"I headed for the hills," he recalled. "Literally."

A self-described former "hippie," **Collins** lived "off the land," for about 15 years as a "subsistence farmer."

"That's someone who grows what they eat," he explained.

Back in the day, **Collins** had few mortgage or real estate-related concerns -- he lived in Virginia's historic Shenandoah National Park, astride a beautiful section of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"We tore barns down and used the planks to build a cabin," he recalled.

After many moons in the seventh house, **Collins** began to develop an interest in renewable energy. So eventually "I cut my hair," he said, and got a job with a retailer of solar panels, who was also in the less prosaic but more profitable business of plumbing supplies.

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Chad Roffers, president of Sky Sotheby's International Realty, said he hired the couple because he felt Carolyn's legal background and real estate experience paired with Gary's skills as a developer would pay dividends.

"This couple clearly understood the transaction process," Roffers said. "I had seen the houses they built, which were done to a very high level of quality, and it was clear to me they'd make a great addition to our team."

Roffers feels "male and female teams are very effective" in real estate brokerage.

The guys can talk about whatever guys talk about while the gals do the same.

Roffers says the **Collins** team is "very complementary," both with SKY Sotheby's and "with each other," as well.

Brigitte von Kessel bought the second of the **Collins**-built homes on Jacinto Court in the Grenada district in 2002 for about \$445,000. She's delighted with the home and thinks she's doubled her investment since then.

"The home is very good quality and reflects the Spanish style that is appropriate in the Grenada section," she says. "Architectural integrity" was important to von Kessel and she found that the home fit in well with others in the neighborhood.

The interior features are "excellent," with lots of tile and "neutral colors and an open feeling."

Having a broker whose husband is the builder was a handy division of labor for Paul Neff, another buyer of a **Collins**-built home on Westmoreland Drive in Sarasota.

This one was a two-story "West Indies-style" house, said Neff, who bought it in 2004 for about \$600,000.

He thinks the house is great and worth almost \$900,000 today. One feature he likes after the recent hurricanes is the house's "block construction, on both levels."

When asked if he had any reservations about buying a home from such a small builder, Neff said he had "no pause at all; I'm a designer by trade and it's easy for me to recognize the quality of the fit and finish."

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