

Neighborhood Profile: Sunset Park, Tampa

By Patti Ewald, Times Staff Writer
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TAMPA

Heather Wakefield fell in love with the lush streets of Sunset Park when she started teaching chemistry at Plant High School 14 years ago.

Then she met construction company owner Rob Vollmer, who was living in Lakewood Ranch, and they found they had some chemistry of their own. Fortunately, it didn't take much persuading to get him to fall in love with the neighborhood, too.

"The South Tampa area reminds me of where I grew up on Long Island," said Vollmer, 45. (He not only grew up there, but he also goes back for a long weekend once a month to visit his parents.)

The couple and their blended family of her two boys and his daughter looked around and found a large, two-story home with a semicircular drive and a walled and gated back yard just west of West Shore Boulevard — in the heart of one of Tampa's wealthiest neighborhoods on Old Tampa Bay south of Interstate 275.

"I've been involved in South Tampa for 14 years, ever since I started teaching here. I took some time off when my boys were born, but I've always been involved," Wakefield said.

"It had everything we were looking for," Vollmer said. "It had a standalone garage. That's important to me. I'm a car guy."

That's not hard to believe. The walls in the home's game room are covered with Vollmer's posters from the Monaco Grand Prix.

"We were looking for this kind of house because we both love antiques," he said.



The European-inspired house with hardwood floors inside and shutters outside was built in 2000 but has the feel of an older house. It also has plenty of room and wall space for their collection of art and antiques.

And plenty of room for Wakefield's Gasparilla costumes. The 42-year-old is on a krewe and rides on a float during the annual pirate invasion.

"We looked at houses that were built in the '20s, but everything needed to be updated," Vollmer said. "This has a lot of character for a newer house."

The family spends a lot of time in the back yard, which is surrounded by a wall covered with ivy.

There is an L-shaped lanai with an outdoor kitchen, with plenty of room for seating overlooking a spa, a waterfall and the landscaped yard.

The wall acts as soundproofing, Wakefield said. "We're right off West Shore, and you can't even hear the cars."

Although the family loves the house and the neighborhood, the most important thing about Sunset Park, Wakefield said, is its top-rated schools.

Kids go to Coleman Middle School, which is at the end of their street, Mabry Elementary School and Plant High School.

"As a teacher, I think that's important," she said.

"I also think it has a sense of community. There are not many transient people here.

"People buy here and stay here," she said.

But not this family.

If they can sell their house, they hope to move — to another home in Sunset Park. A bigger one. With a water view. But still in Sunset Park.

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The Vollmer-Wakefield home

Their home: 3,700 square feet, 4 bedrooms, 3 full and 2 half baths, 2-car detached garage

When they bought: 2011

Current value (from Zillow.com): \$858,136

Why they love it: Heather Wakefield loves it because it's not on a through street. That was really important to her when they were looking for a house. There's a lot of traffic in the area, and she wanted to be off the beaten path. Nineteen-year-old Gina Vollmer likes the fact that they are close to a mall. Trey Wakefield, 12, said he has a lot of friends in the neighborhood, and his brother, Bryce, 9, likes to hit the jackpot on the antique slot machine in the game room. Brunswick, the family's English bulldog, likes the big (for South Tampa) back yard.

Unusual features about the house: In the corner of the game room is a temperature-controlled wine closet that holds 120 bottles. The outdoor kitchen on the lanai, just off the spa, has a full-size four-burner range. The detached two-car garage has plenty of attic storage space. The master bath has a tray ceiling with a sparkling chandelier in the middle of it.

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