

THE HUNT

The Next Chapter, in Harlem

By JOYCE COHEN
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TIME marches on. And David Birdoff was staring down mandatory retirement at his law firm. It meant big changes ahead.

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times
SECOND THOUGHTS A two-bedroom at the Ivy Condominium on East 118th Street had tiny closets.

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times
PERFECT LAYOUT The Kalahari, on West 118th Street, had bedrooms separated by a living room.

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times
FEW LEFT Most of the units at Fiftywest, on West 127th Street, were already sold.

"It shakes your life," said his wife, Shari Birdoff, a teacher. "I don't think you are really prepared, or at least we weren't."

At the same time, the rent was rising on the family's two-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. The Birdoffs decided that it made sense to buy a home before the retirement changed their financial picture. But where? They weren't sure.

Mr. Birdoff, now 63, grew up in East New York, [Brooklyn](#), but his father was a manager of Howard Clothes in [Harlem](#). Mr. Birdoff worked there throughout high school and college. After [Brooklyn College](#) and Brooklyn Law School, he married, moved to [Long Island](#), had two sons and later divorced.

In 1988, just after moving to a one-bedroom in the Key West, a rental building on Columbus Avenue and 96th Street, he met Shari Nosenchuk, a University of Hartford graduate from Oceanside, on Long Island, while standing in the taxi line at LaGuardia Airport. Both had been visiting their mothers in [Florida](#).

"The last thing I was trying to do was pick up a girl," Mr. Birdoff said. "I was in the middle of a divorce; my mother was in the hospital sick; I was dressed like a slob." They shared a cab to the city. A little over a year later, they were married.

She joined him at the Key West, where they moved to a two-bedroom after their daughter, Aliya, was born.

A few years ago, they heard their building would be sold and their rent, around \$3,700, would jump. (Two years ago, the building was sold to Archstone-Smith, one of the nation's largest apartment companies. Two-bedrooms there currently rent for \$4,100 to \$4,800 a month.)

The Birdoffs thought they would leave the city and Mr. Birdoff, who practices commercial litigation, would find another job or open his own practice.

"I don't want to stop working when I am 65," he said. "My own philosophy is, if you retire and don't have anything to do, you die very quickly."

They considered Tucson, where good friends lived, and Phoenix, along with [New England](#), which they also liked.

At the thought of moving, "goose bumps went down my back," said Aliya, now 15, who attends LaGuardia High School near [Lincoln Center](#). "How could you go from New York to Tucson? And the heat and the cowboy boots and the desert?"

Whenever the Birdoffs went house hunting elsewhere, they felt homesick. So they decided to downsize and prepared to buy a place in the city. They moved to a two-bedroom fifth-floor walk-up, for around \$2,600 a month, on East 90th Street. Ms. Birdoff, 48, called it their "transition apartment."



Tina Fineberg for The New York Times
HAPPY David and Shari Birdoff, with their daughter, Aliya, moved in over the summer.

In the evening, Mr. Birdoff would ring the buzzer and Ms. Birdoff would send the family's two dogs downstairs to be walked.

The Birdoffs wanted a pet-friendly two-bedroom condominium for no more than \$700,000, in a location with a good commute for Aliya.

Mr. Birdoff was wary of apartment buildings next to vacant lots, because "you don't know what's going up next to you," he said.

After considering some new condominiums in Long Island City, [Queens](#), and in Brooklyn, they decided to hunt in Harlem, Mr. Birdoff's old stomping ground. Ms. Birdoff, who teaches special education at Public School 57 on East 115th Street, saw many residential buildings rising in the neighborhood.

Buying in preconstruction would be likely to yield a lower price. "We felt we were getting in on the ground floor of something that was new and exciting, and were definitely willing to take that risk," Ms. Birdoff said. Prices in East Harlem were noticeably lower than those farther west.

In April 2007, they left a deposit on a \$695,000 two-bedroom at the Ivy Condominium on East 118th Street. "I wasn't sure and wanted to have my parents come and look at it," Ms. Birdoff said. "There was something not right about it."

Her father and stepmother, who live in Rockland County, noted the limited closet space and the lack of a dining area. Her stepmother "was adamant that we couldn't live there," Ms. Birdoff said. "There were no closets, no place to eat." Their deposit was returned.

Fiftywest, on West 127th Street, had huge closets. Now, "that was the first thing I looked for," Ms. Birdoff said. But most units were already sold, so they saw only the leftovers, which were on low floors. The cost was in the high \$700,000s, more than they could comfortably spend. There was "no formal place to eat, mostly a counter kitchen," Ms. Birdoff said. The eight-story building seemed an anomaly on the brownstone block, and Mr. Birdoff felt the location was too near the busy and noisy corner of Fifth Avenue and 125th Street.

They loved Fifth on the Park, the 30-story tower rising near Mount Morris Park, but that, too, was pricey. Two-bedrooms there range from \$840,000 to \$1.8 million. It wasn't even close to being finished. (Move-in is expected to start early next year.)

Then they arrived at the sales office of the Kalahari, the two towers that had broken ground on a vacant lot on West 116th Street. They found plenty of closets and the kind of layout they wanted, with the bedrooms separated by the living room.

"It wasn't a huge job to convince them of the neighborhood and the potential of it, because Shari worked here," said Essence D. Crockett, the director of sales for the Kalahari.

Just over half of the 249 units are market rate; the rest are subsidized and awarded by lottery. The condominium is around 85 percent sold.

The Birdoffs chose a 1,200-square-foot two-bedroom for \$713,000, with a condominium fee of around \$700 a month. They arrived in the summer, several months after Mr. Birdoff took early retirement from his old law firm and began work at Feldman Weinstein & Smith, which has no retirement policy.

They couldn't be happier there. "The people are extraordinarily courteous," Mr. Birdoff said. "What I find unusual is, on the East Side and West Side there were lots of dogs, so when I went for a walk I would meet lots of different people. We don't have that up here. It's rare I meet another person on the street who is walking a dog."

Ms. Birdoff runs into her students in the neighborhood. While walking to school — it takes her seven minutes — "they see me coming and they wait for me," she said. "They think I walk so fast. I don't dawdle. They tell me I dash to school."

Often, by the time she enters the school, she is surrounded by a handful of happy fourth- and fifth-graders.

E-mail: thehunt@nytimes.com