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The Hunt: Downsizing Without Downsides

THOUGH Wayne Gordon and Margaret Brown loved their three-bedroom condo on the Upper West Side, once their only child had grown up and moved out, they themselves were eager to move. Their home was too big and, especially, too expensive.

The two met while working at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine and married about 30 years ago. They initially rented on the Upper West Side, then in 1992 bought a two-bedroom condo there on a high floor in a prewar building. Water leaked constantly from above. They patched and patched. An old building, they discovered, "was a difficult place to live even though it was gorgeous," Dr. Brown said.

After a sodden decade, they moved to a single-family house in Bronxville. To his surprise, Dr. Gordon disliked the commute to Manhattan and the restrictions imposed by the Metro-North schedule. "You never know about these things until you do them," he said.

The couple never felt right about suburban living. They lasted there two years.

In 2005, they were glad to return to the Upper West Side, where Dr. Gordon had grown up. (Dr. Brown is a native of California.) Prices were high, and their apartment at the newly built Straus Park Condominium, at Broadway and 107th Street, cost around \$1.73 million, with monthly charges around \$1,750. They had a view of the small triangular park below, and enjoyed exercising their Boston terrier, Teddy, at the 105th Street dog run in Riverside Park.

Dr. Gordon, a neuropsychologist and a professor of rehabilitation medicine at Mount Sinai Medical Center, walked to work, while Dr. Brown, a researcher in the same field, worked from home.

It was when their daughter finished college and moved out that their 1,800-square-foot home began feeling burdensome. Every time they paid their mortgage, they were unpleasantly reminded that their housing costs were "more than we could sustain for the long haul," Dr. Gordon said.

The couple decided to hunt for a smaller place in Brooklyn, where they assumed they could get more for their money. They anticipated spending around \$1 million and preferred to avoid prewar buildings.



A condominium on West 110th Street would not have cut housing costs.



The Livmor on West 115th Street offered convenience and a great view.

At every turn, however, they found stairs. With both in their mid-60s, "we refused at our age to move into a place that may, God forbid, become a really difficult environment," Dr. Brown said. "That beautiful old stock in Brooklyn is full of stairs, both getting into the building and once you are in your apartment. A duplex-style apartment is a double whammy."

Because both work with people who have brain and spinal-cord injuries, they are especially "used to thinking of the possibility of disablement in one's life," Dr. Brown said. "It comes out of the blue."

In Williamsburg, the couple found some apartments on one level, but they felt they would be the oldest people in the neighborhood. And the two-train subway trip to Mount Sinai, which is on the Upper East Side, was a crowded one.

"I thought of my poor husband, crammed like a sardine," Dr. Brown said. "So that became a really negative factor about Williamsburg."

The couple sought the help of Greg Kammerer, a senior vice president of the Corcoran Group and a neighbor in the



A skinny hallway and small bedrooms disqualified a condo on West 112th Street.



Margaret Brown and Wayne Gordon at home with Teddy, a Boston terrier.

Straus Park condo. He took them to a 1,440-square-foot two-bedroom condo at 545 West 110th Street, a five-year-old building. The place was listed for \$1.375 million, with monthly charges around \$1,600, and the couple didn't feel it would save them as much money as they wanted. (That one later closed for \$1.291 million.)

Mr. Kammerer suggested they look in Harlem, an area they hadn't considered. They were surprised at how many possibilities they found there.

Some apartments were in neighborhoods they found inconvenient, and others had layouts not quite to their taste. At the Washington Irving, a 13-unit prewar building at 203 West 112th Street, converted to a condominium in 2003, they saw a four-bedroom listed at \$1.2 million with monthly charges of \$1,400. It had an elevator and a part-time doorman. The four bedrooms were small, and off a long, skinny hallway. They preferred a layout with larger bedrooms and fewer nooks and crannies. (The place later sold for \$1.125 million.)

So they moved on, alighting at the Livmor Condominium on West 115th

Street. "I had a feeling they would respond to it," Mr. Kammerer said, "because it reminded me so much of the building we were living in."

The couple liked the airy interior and the neighborhood. A good grocery store, the Best Yet market, was a few blocks away — "the kind of resource I absolutely need because I cook from scratch every night and enjoy that," Dr. Brown said. "We don't do takeout."

The windows overlooked Morningside Park, with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine beyond. It didn't take long for them to know that, "Yup, this is the place," Dr. Brown said.

Dr. Gordon, a former runner, requested an elliptical machine in the gym. The developers added one. "We feel very much our voices were heard," Dr. Brown said.

The couple were in contract for a two-bedroom two-bath apartment on a high floor, but somebody wanted to buy it and combine it with the unit next door. So they were given a similar unit one floor above for the same price. "The view was great," Dr. Gordon said, "and it got better."

They moved in last summer, paying \$895,000 for nearly 1,300 square feet. Monthly charges are just under \$900.

The couple sold their old place for \$1.9 million. Though they were unfortunate enough to buy high and sell low, they were glad to cut their housing costs by half. Their new place feels uncannily like their old place, right down to the park view, only this park is much bigger.

"I wake up every morning seeing the sun rising and shining beautifully on the park and cathedral," Dr. Brown said. "It has become a part of our day."

The only drawback involves Teddy the terrier. The dog run in Morningside Park is often empty, Dr. Brown said. Teddy, an outgoing dog, rarely finds a friend to romp with.

"It sounds ridiculous," Dr. Brown said, "but that was an important part of knowing I was doing right by my dog."

She's hoping more dogs start showing up at Morningside Park. In the meantime, she sometimes takes Teddy back to his former playground, to reunite with his old pals.

