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Sense of Neighborhood Attracts Young Professionals to Downtown Lofts

By Ronda Robinson, Special publications correspondent

When Kimberly Dixon Hamilton and her husband moved to Knoxville in 2002, they wanted the closest feeling to the urban environment they had left behind in Washington, D.C. They found it in lofty heights downtown.

The couple rented a loft in an art deco building that combined proximity to theaters, clubs, restaurants and shops with views of the mountains.

Hamilton proudly notes they were the first residents to move into Sterchi Lofts at 116 S. Gay St., one block from the Old City. "A loft is a style of space," explains the young professional, owner of Downtown Realty.

Loft living has caught on in recent years. Downtown entrepreneur Gregg White describes a loft as an open flat. A self-described neat freak who likes the minimalist look, he says his place fits him perfectly.

"I don't have any bedrooms or interior walls," he says. "It's a very flexible living space."

The dictionary defines a loft as an upper story of a business building, warehouse or factory, typically consisting of open, unpartitioned floor area.

White, who lives at 137 S. Gay St., has the upstairs space of what used to be a bank and rents the downstairs to a public relations office. His restaurant, Nama

Sushi Bar, is conveniently located next door, and another called La Costa, on Market Square.

"There are so many great things about it the convenience of living so close to everything," he says. "Everything I do, I walk to." In addition to the restaurants, he hoofs it to his dry cleaner, bank, accountant, attorney and gym.

Other downtown residents echo his joy about being able to walk different places. Bryan Allen, a Scripps Networks executive, lives with his wife and baby daughter in the Fire Street Lofts at 220 W. Jackson Ave. Their home features timber and beam construction, high ceilings, exposed brick, and a glass wall overlooking the mountains and Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

The family walks to restaurants, art galleries, and shows at the Knoxville Convention Center. They also own a residence on Norris Lake.

Downtown their neighbors are mostly young professionals who form a tight-knit community, Allen says. "They put forth an effort to get to know each other. You meet, you greet, you say hello. It's real friendly, real social."

Even though they don't have a boulevard or ball field, downtowners find plenty of places to meet and mingle. At Allen's five-story building constructed in

the 1920s as a textile mill neighbors open up their lofts for floor parties.

Hamilton and friends take turns hosting happy hours at restaurants or their homes. She now lives in Keystone Place Condominiums, an 1893 landmark and site of the old Knoxville Business College on West Church Avenue.

"We go to the theater a lot. I love the Tennessee Theatre, the Bijou Theatre," she says.

The affiliate real estate broker finds kindred spirits all around downtown, from exercise classes at the YMCA to events on Market Square.

"There are so many attractions now that are bringing so many people who had stopped coming," says Hamilton, adding that she looks forward to this year's opening of the Regal Riviera eight-screen movie theater in the 500 block of Gay Street.

White shares her excitement. "I'm a single professional. I go out a lot. I'm looking very forward to the movie theater coming," says the father of an infant girl, for whom he named his office/loft building the Sydney-Claire.

"I've lived in a lot of places, and it's the best sense of neighborhood I've ever felt," White declares. Adds Hamilton, "It's growing very rapidly. The demand for downtown living is stronger than ever."