

An International Affair

The Hamiltons have been there/done that,
but they're calling Knoxville home

By Leslie Wylie

Photography by Elton Howard

Kimberly Dixon Hamilton and husband Trey have been to faraway lands. "We love to travel," says Kimberly, a sprightly downtown real estate agent with long brunette hair and an effervescent smile. Their condominium home on West Church Avenue reflects as much; it's a multi-cultural pastiche of memories from various corners of the world. The light emanating from a colorful Moroccan lantern is as likely to illuminate a Turkish rug or a painting by a Parisian street artist as it is to dance upon a Spanish-tiled table or the scarlet-hued leaves of a Japanese maple. But still, they insist, there's no place like home. And home, for the Hamiltons, is downtown Knoxville.

This is ironic, in a sense, because neither Kimberly nor Trey is originally from Knoxville. They moved here three and a half years ago after meeting one another in Washington, D.C., where they were both working at the time. Immediately after re-locating south, they fell in love with Knoxville's charm. Today, they can't imagine living anywhere else.

"It's not just our home that is great; it's the quality of life," Kimberly explains, gazing thoughtfully out into the shady expanse of their enclosed and partially canopied backyard. Beneath the summer sky, the rich foliage takes on an almost supernatural green glow. Flowers of all shapes and sizes—lavender, hydrangeas, impatiens and Gerbera daisies—peek sleepily out from terra cotta pots. A collection of fragrant herbs is accumulating in the corner.

"We like to get a lot of herbs and things at the Farmers' Market," Kimberly says, referring to one element of the Hamiltons' Saturday summer ritual. They start the morning off with a spin class at the downtown YMCA, just a short walk away, then head to Market Square for brunch. Afterwards, they peruse the Square's Farmers' Market, an alley of stands and truck beds showcasing a sprawling assortment of goods and produce. Leafy bundles of organic spinach and crates of glossy vegetables sit side by side with free-range meats, gourmet roasted coffees, homemade soaps and bouquets of carefully arranged flowers.

Kimberly and Trey enjoy incorporating their finds into the upcoming week's dinner menu. Some of Kimberly's favorite meals to prepare are Spanish in nature, recipes she learned while studying in the country as a student—gazpacho and paella are her specialties—although she has a soft spot for pesto made from fresh basil leaves as well. The kitchen, with its copper-flecked black granite countertops, hardwood floor and honey-colored cabinets, creates an aesthetically comfortable yet efficient environment for such culinary tasks.



Throughout the condominium, each new room and twist of hallway bring with it some new cultural curiosity—an old-fashioned British bar, an expressionist painting of a matador, an oriental pillow in vibrant hues of silk. Each item, whether from Italy or Vietnam, carries with it a personal meaning, says Kimberly. “They’re sentimental things. They all have stories.”

But mixed in with the international accoutrements, there is a distinct sense of Knoxville. The building itself is a historical relic; a plaque outside its keyhole-shaped entranceway notes the year 1893, when it was constructed as the “Dr. S. M. Miller Building.” Decades later, in 1947, it would become Knoxville Business College. Today, the building has been divided into five condominiums, with the Hamiltons occupying the lowest level.

History surrounds the building as well. Next door, the Elliot Hotel and the Glencoe Building, built between 1906 and 1907 in a neo-classical style, were condemned earlier this year, but the Hamiltons hope to see them restored and renovated as condominiums soon.

The Hamiltons are glad to retain some of that old-Knoxville charisma inside their own home. Exposed brick adds texture, while ductwork is painted white to tone down the building’s industrial feel to what Kimberly calls a “soft loft” style. Wood-framed arched windows opening to Church Street face south toward the river, ushering plenty of natural light into the living room. Throughout the rest of the condominium, a combination of track and pendant lighting modernizes the home’s look. They cast light in different directions, bringing out the myriad colors in the home’s various works of art.

The Hamiltons are excited about the local art scene, and their walls showcase its potential. A dramatic photograph of the Henley Street Bridge by David Massengill (who, as a side note, shot the first cover of Knoxville Magazine) hangs near a vintage Yee-Haw poster announcing the grand opening of Tomato Head, a favorite dining locale. One of Kimberly and Trey’s latest artistic additions is a rendering of Tomato Head itself, painted during the Knoxville Museum of Art’s spring Artists on Location event. Artists gathered in public places to paint, and the works were auctioned off the next day at the museum. Kimberly remembers that Saturday fondly. “It was great; there were all these artists painting in Market Square, and a saxophone player, and the Farmers’ Market was going on as well,” she says.

In another corner, there are photographs of the Smoky Mountains, which the Hamiltons purchased at the now-defunct local photography gallery, Through the Lens. The images remind them of one of their favorite weekend destinations. “We love going up to the mountains,” Kimberly says. “It’s such a great place to relax and recharge.”

The Hamiltons’ enthusiasm for both Knoxville and its environs is contagious, and their home seconds the notion that it’s a great place to live—and getting even better. “Downtown has come such a long way,” Kimberly says. “It’s such a beautiful city. It just had to realize its own potential.”

