

The Story of the Town of Harmony

Reconnecting Us to Each Other, and to the Natural World

Jim and Martha Lentz, like most of us, recognized that they needed to make a change in their lifestyle after working in high stress jobs most of their lives. Years of research indicated that living close to, and interacting with, nature improved well-being. They began to plan a dream community where they could enjoy the benefits and beauty of nature while living with the latest advances in energy-efficiency and cutting-edge building practices. The community would reflect the charm and natural beauty of Old Florida and offer benefits for families, singles and empty-nesters.

Jim and Martha spent 5 years designing their dream community. Now, their dream is taking root among pristine forest and pastureland in Osceola County, Florida.

“This is an incredibly ambitious endeavor,” Jim said. “We’re literally building a new kind of home town.”

Located on land that was once the Triple E Ranch, for many years a working citrus and cattle farm on U.S. Route 192 just 10 miles east of the small town of St. Cloud, Harmony is strategically located. It’s a mere 10 minutes from shopping, 25 minutes from Orlando International Airport, 25 minutes from I-95, 35 minutes from the Walt Disney World® Resort, and about 40 minutes from Melbourne Beach.

But Harmony is worlds away from the cheerless suburbia that threatens to engulf much of Florida and the rest of our nation.

The land is a true treasure – a whopping 11,000 acres of broad meadows, towering stands of southern pines and two shimmering 500-acre natural lakes – and Harmony’s stewards want to make sure it stays that way.

No home sites will be developed on the shores of Harmony’s two sandy-bottom private lakes (something that no doubt stuns most developers and planners); reclaimed water is available to every home for lawn maintenance; more trees are planted on the site than removed; all outdoor light fixtures are aimed downward to minimize light pollution; and only 30 percent of the vast property will actually be developed. The rest of the land will remain forever wild, save for unpaved footpaths that will follow the natural contours of the woods and wetlands.

“To ensure that Harmony remains a true sanctuary for us, our children, and their children, we will in the coming years place most of the untouched land in a separate trust,” Jim said.

This commitment to preservation goes to the soul of what Harmony is all about. Indeed, the first step in building Harmony really had nothing to do with development at all. Before the first spade of dirt was turned, plans began for The Harmony Institute, a non-

profit organization that encourages healthier living through the interactions of people, animals and the environment. The Harmony Institute is a cornerstone of Harmony's essence, and its permanent headquarters will be located on 100 acres within the town of Harmony.

"The Harmony Institute is in many ways the soul of the town of Harmony," Martha said, adding that the Institute strives to find fresh ways to draw people closer together to their natural surroundings.

Rather than scrape away the topsoil and squeeze in as many home sites as possible, the Lentz's and their strategic partners worked on a plan that would bring about a complete community while being respectful of the natural areas and resident animals. The ancient land is home to tremendously diverse plant and animal life, including deer, otters, sandhill cranes, bobcats, foxes, ospreys and owls, as well as hundreds of types of plants, including at least one kind of rare orchid. The twin 4,000-year-old Buck and Cat lakes are chock full of wild bass and bream. Only kayaks, canoes and a limited number of special electric and solar powered boats are allowed on the lakes. Besides leaving 70 percent of the land undisturbed, Harmony requires responsible site development, and removes existing culverts and drainage systems in order to restore natural wetlands.

All of Harmony's homes are Energy Star®-certified, meaning that all the homes comply with standards established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and consume 10 percent less energy than national home averages.

Prices for townhomes begin at \$180,000. Single family houses include a variety of architectural styles. And while most planned communities prefer to segregate houses into enclaves based on price, Harmony home styles and sizes vary from neighbor to neighbor.

"Few things sadden me more about a planned development than when I see how wealthy people get to live over here and less well- to-do are shunted over there," Jim said. "That's not a community. That's a compound."

Harmony will be home to approximately 18,000 people when completed.

Jim hopes Harmony will inspire other builders and developers.

"We all want to do what's right for our families – and the environment – but few developers and bankers understand yet that the two aren't mutually exclusive," Jim said. "We strongly believe that we can live in an environmentally intelligent community, where we can live in concert with nature while still being successful, and that is what Harmony is really about."

Education is a top priority for the developers of Harmony. Harmony was developed so residents could walk to school safely (K-12).

"Good schools that kids and parents can walk to are so vital in encouraging a real

community,” Jim said. “That’s why we began building the schools before we’d even broken ground on one home.”

A downtown commercial district is planned that will include restaurants, shops, cultural amenities, and other facilities that will draw residents together.

Architectural flourishes, no matter how subtle, have been painstakingly considered.

“We approached every detail, even the design of street signs and lamps, as if we were designing our own dream home, which in a sense we are,” Jim said.

A beautiful and challenging Johnny Miller-designed Harmony Golf Preserve wraps around existing wetlands. Just as home sites will not be offered on Harmony’s lakes, no homes will front on the golf course although several homesites offer amazing views of the course.

“Martha and I simply wanted to create what more and more people these days are craving,” Jim said of the dream that is Harmony. “A place where you can sit on your front porch and point out the Big Dipper in the night sky to your daughter. Or stroll to the nearby Town Square on Saturday afternoon for a double scoop of peppermint ice cream with your neighbors. These are the rituals and joys that bring us all together.”

The vision for Harmony has attracted national attention. Many planners and urban designers are looking to Harmony as a model for how real communities can be fostered across the country. The University of California at Davis has been filming a documentary about the evolving community of Harmony.

“What’s truly amazing about Harmony is that no one has thought of applying these real-world values of community and living in harmony with nature to development before,” Jim said. “We think it’s about time.”

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