

Passport to Country Properties



Every House Tells a Story

Text by JOHN TORSIELLO

The home that realtor Stacey Matthews shares with her husband, Pels, and the couple's two children is open and airy. On one winter afternoon, sunlight came through a multitude of windows, giving the interior spaces a warm glow that was made even richer by the earth-tone colors in the decor. On the walls were various pieces of artwork, chosen and displayed to accent the understated creature comfort the home provides its occupants and guests.

The pleasant confines of the Matthews home, which also serves as base of operations for Mrs. Matthews' bustling real estate business, The Matthews Group, a division of William Raveis Real Estate, is a reflection of the owners' tastes and values. It is clear that to the Matthews a house is more than walls, ceilings and floors. It is a place where a family lives, plays, relaxes, enjoys the finer things in life—and even works.

Mr. Matthews, who raises capital for hedge funds, stopped by to say hello. He was also working at home after returning from a business trip to Miami. His wife, who was a proprietary equity trader for a major hedge fund in New York City before moving to Litchfield County some 12 years ago and launching a second career, sat on a couch and showed a visitor copies of some the ads she has placed in the local weekly newspaper.

The ads, which form a blue-backed "L" on the left side of the front page, include photos of high-end Litchfield County properties and list the usual litany of items, such as price, size, acreage, number of rooms, etc. But the descriptions go beyond the usual factoids about



Above, Stacey Matthews at home in Washington, Conn. Photo by Laurie Gaboardi. Top, one of her listings on Painter Hill Road in Woodbury, Conn.

the homes. Each one contains a little information about the history of the house, perhaps who lived or lives there, when it was built, why it is special—and why a buyer should take an interest.

One ad describes in prose one of Mrs. Matthews' most fabulous properties, a "castle" in Great Barrington, Mass., designed by famed architect Stanford White and once owned by the world's wealthiest woman of the time (1880s), Mary Hopkins Searles. The ad ▶



The Searles Castle in Great Barrington, Mass., which is listed by Stacey Matthews at \$12.5 million.

describes why the property is special and what it and the surrounding arts-rich Berkshires have to offer potential buyers.

An advertisement in another publication concerns a property Mrs. Matthews is handling, the home of the late author William Styron in Roxbury, Conn. It tells how the home once was inhabited by Russian exiles after the 1917 revolution in that country, and how the tenants made tapestries, jewelry and other crafts.

"During the Styrons' tenure," continues the ad, which is headlined Living the Literary Life, "many, many luminaries passed through [the home's] doors, including Arthur Miller, Walter Matthau, Mia Farrow, Andre Previn, Alexander Calder, Philip Roth, James Baldwin and Frank McCourt. This home has a creative spirit and an antique patina that only comes from many years of love by its inhabitants."

Mrs. Matthews' purpose in going beyond the typical information provided in real estate listings is quite clear. It is to imbue the property with a sense of permanence, history and even a certain mystique, to bring to life the dwelling in a very real sense so that the buyer can consider carrying on the traditions each successive owner brought to the dwelling.

"What I try to do in these ads is to put in each a little story that people would want to read about," said the realtor, who moved to her current home about four years ago after she and her husband had bought, renovated and lived in two other properties in the area. "The story of the Great Barrington castle is important to whoever who buys it. The same thing is true of the Styron house. They raised a family in it and gave it a life of its own."

Mrs. Matthews readily admits that she is not a writer, but she enjoys finding out about the historical and social cachet of each property she lists.

"I just sort of wing it," she said with a laugh when asked how she prepares each ad. "I spend a lot of time driving in the car, going from property to property, and I'll come up with an idea for an ad and then work on it when I get home. It's just a different way to look

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The Washington, Conn., living room of designer Susan Bednar Long; the property is listed by Stacey Matthews.

at a property and explain why each one is special in its own right.”

Mrs. Matthews' late mother, Gail, provided the inspiration not only for her daughter's approach to advertising and marketing but also to her career in general.

“I grew up in Sun Valley, Idaho, and my mom was a realtor. Her slogan was ‘Lifestyles for Sale,’ which I use today. She used that approach in her business and she did very well with it, and I wanted to bring that back to life in what I do. It sort of sums up my business, which really is an extension of my life.”

Mrs. Matthews' approach to real estate works, she noted, because selling a lifestyle in addition to a house appeals to second-home buyers from the New York City area.

“Litchfield County is different than the Hamptons and Westchester County because of the lifestyle we have here. People want to come here because it isn't competitive and all about what kind of car you drive. We have a more intimate group of weekenders, who are very ▶

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family oriented and are looking for the kind of relaxed pace that Litchfield County offers.”

The Matthews Group’s affiliation with William Raveis Real Estate provides a great deal of support. “They offer me an invaluable platform and support system. Bill Raveis gets the power of the Internet and he got it very early on. The Raveis Web site gets around seven million hits a year. That is quite significant when you consider that 90 percent of all real estate searches start out on the Web.”

Mrs. Matthews’ current career was somewhat of a leap of faith, she explained.

“My husband and I were coming up to Litchfield County on weekends to stay with my mother. When she moved, we would still come up and stay at The Mayflower Inn [in Washington] on weekends. That was getting expensive, so we started looking for a small home in the area.”

The couple purchased a Colonial in Roxbury, fixed it up, and spent weekends there for several years.

“We got to extending the weekends to Monday mornings when we would drive back to Chelsea, where we lived in New York. We were weekenders for a short time, but then we began meeting so many people and we really liked the community. We were sad to go back to the city every Monday. We also had twin boys around that time. One day I told my husband that I was quitting my job and we were going to move to Litchfield County because it was where I wanted to raise my family. He said, ‘No, you’re not,’ and I said, ‘Yes, I am,’ and we made the decision to move here full-time.”

Mrs. Matthews did quit her job, moved to Litchfield County with her family and launched her second career. “I had obtained my real estate license before I quit my job in New York. I was able to ramp up my business here very slowly as I got to know the area.”

Her business has grown exponentially and presently includes listings for more than 50 properties, as well as a number of private listings, most of them high-end.

“I love what I do. It’s my business and my time. There is a lot of



A property on Minor Bridge Road in Roxbury, Conn.

juggling, what with running the kids (twin boys who are now 11) to school and their activities. I put in eight hours a day and work weekends showing properties. But when I was a trader in New York I had to be at my desk at 7 a.m. Here, I can be with the kids in the afternoon and then work at night.”

She added, “Flexibility is the key to happiness. There is no one telling me what to do and when to do it.”

The Matthews moved into their current home three and a half years ago. After Roxbury and before the current residence, their second home in the county was on Upper Church Hill Road in Washington.

“We love renovating houses and we pretty much gutted this one and expanded it,” Mrs. Matthews said. “We liked it because it has high ceilings and it’s the right amount of space. I’ve been working on the gardens, and we have a huge vegetable garden during the summer. I think we may stay here for a while.”



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As the conversation came to a close, Mrs. Matthews hurried off to see what her assistant had been doing in the home office. There were texts and messages to check and calls to return. She also had to dig into several listings to find out what stories they have to tell.

"One of the concerns some people have when you talk about a home like the Great Barrington castle or the Styron home is that you might get 'lookers,' people who want to see 'the stuff.' But I can safely say that I've never taken anyone who wasn't a qualified and potential buyer to see a property that I have listed and talked about. I think I do a good job sorting out the people who aren't and are serious about a certain property."

Litchfield County certainly has its share of homes with stories to tell, and Stacey Matthews is ready to tell the world those stories. To learn more, see her Web site at www.staceymatthews.com. 



The Roxbury, Conn., home of the late novelist William Styron and his wife, Rose. Stacey Matthews lists the property at \$1.5 million.



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