

More find the backyard pool a wellspring of summer joy

By Marianna Riley
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Peter Naunheim (left), 11, swims with Patrick Kelly, 13, on Sunday at Peter's home in Webster Groves. Peter's mother, Kathy Naunheim, said she was tired of spending so much of the summer inside. Her husband, David, agreed. A pool helped them to "take back the summer," he said. (Stephanie S. Cordle)

The bulldozer rumbles, trees topple, the earth shakes. Soon enough: a sparkling blue swimming pool that beckons on a hot summer day.

Like Dorothy in the land of Oz, area residents from Glen Carbon to St. Peters are finding happiness in their own back yards. To hear Kathy Naunheim tell it, her new backyard pool changed her family's life last summer.

Naunheim, of Webster Groves, was tired of spending so much of the muggy summer inside. Her husband, David Naunheim, agreed. A pool and screened-in porch allowed them to "take back the summer," he said.

They reflect a national and local trend of more people putting in their own pools. National figures show the number of backyard pools has increased by about 20 percent in the past five years.

Kelly and Alex Freitas always had wanted an oasis in the back yard of their home in unincorporated St. Charles County. Low interest rates led them to take the plunge last year. Now, they're planning two daughters' birthday celebrations - pool parties for both.

The pool had been in the Naunheims' future ever since the two were married. Kathy Naunheim, a Cleveland native, said then that if she had to live in St. Louis, she would need a pool to get through the steamy summers.

"It took 23 years, but we finally built it," she said.

The flat back yard easily accommodated the pool and screened-in porch, which has become the hangout for sons Geoff, 17, and Peter, 11 - and all of their friends.

"It's made an incredible difference in our lives," Naunheim said.

Their poured concrete pool cost about \$45,000, plus landscaping.

The Freitas family refinanced their house and used some of the equity for their pool. It's a vinyl-lined pool with decking, a fence they will build themselves and landscaping. The total price tag will come to around \$40,000.

Freitas and her children - Alison, 7; Hannah, 5; and Grant, 4 - spent five days a week last summer at the St. Charles Water Park.

"After packing everyone up, packing lunches and all the travel, I started thinking, 'Boy, would it be nice just to go into the back yard and dive in,'" Kelly Freitas said. The hole was dug on May 20; they hope to dive in this coming weekend.

"Nesting" since 9-11

Cultural experts have made much of Americans' "nesting" more since the terrorist attacks in 2001. Todd Gruenewald, president of the St. Louis Chapter of National Spa and Pool Institute, said he believes more people are staying home and putting their money into their houses.

"We're seeing this industry-wide," said Gruenewald, whose group is a nationwide trade organization for the pool industry. "Instead of spending \$10,000 on a vacation, people are putting that money toward backyard entertainment - meaning a pool or spa."

Gruenewald is also the general manager for the in-ground pool department of Munie Leisure Center in Swansea, where he said business increased 30 percent last year over the previous year.

Rick Woemmel owns Bi-State Pools in O'Fallon, Mo. He said many people in the pool industry feared business would decline after the attacks.

"It's actually taken off. People seem to want to spend time in their own back yards. And with a pool, they have an investment that will last for years," he said.

National statistics are scant, but the local picture seems to mirror what's going on across the country. Erika Taylor, editor of the trade publication Pool & Spa News, said that pool-building appears to be on the rise nationwide.

She cites an industry survey that concluded the number of backyard pools has grown from about 253,000 built in 1999 to about 300,000 built by last year.

Pool builders have seen a consistent up-tick in revenue since 1999, Taylor said.

While backyard pools once were considered the purview of the wealthy, experts say they are becoming more bourgeois. "Despite the poor economy, more and

more middle-class families are opting for their own pools," said Danny Stevens, marketing director for Baker Pools in Des Peres.

Baker is building at a furious pace this year - averaging 2 1/2 pools per week.

More pool permits

Many area municipalities are issuing more permits to build pools now than they did five years ago.

For example, Belleville issued 25 pool permits last year, compared to 12 in 1999. Glen Carbon increased to 23 last year from 13 in 1999, while St. Peters increased to 96 last year from 74 five years ago.

Having a backyard pool generally adds value to a home, too, according to a study reported in Pool & Spa News. The seven-year study of a 21-county area in greater Philadelphia was done by the National Association of Realtors. It showed that in-ground swimming pools add 8 percent to 15 percent to the value of a home.

Such a pattern likely would be reflected nationally, too, said David A. Macpherson, an economics professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

In the Midwest, in-ground pools added an average 8 percent to the value of homes, according to other studies the magazine cited.

Jaana Thorarensen, of O'Fallon, Mo., is a real estate agent with Coldwell Banker Gundaker. She believes the pool at her home will increase the value.

Thorarensen and her husband, Atli, and their three children moved to O'Fallon from Michigan in August.

They quickly decided having their own pool was a necessity. Thorarensen's research began in September. Interviews of pool companies took up October. By December, she'd signed a contract with Bi-State for a vinyl-lined, L-shaped pool. It is 45 feet long and 24 feet at its widest dimension. The price tag? About \$30,000.

"We'll do our own landscaping little by little," she said. "I love to garden and to be outside."

Two of the Thorarensens' children, Stefan, 15, and Sandra, 12, are competitive swimmers. Little brother Johannes, 4, is looking forward to learning to swim, with his big brother to teach him.

People don't have to have a back yard to want their own pool. The McGowan Brothers develop downtown lofts, and they're taking private pools to new heights.

A rooftop swimming pool may be the one amenity that will set them apart from other loft developers, said Kevin McGowan.

He said that a soon-to-be built rooftop deck, clubhouse and 10-by-30-foot swimming pool on the brothers' Westgate Lofts at the northeast corner of Jefferson Avenue and Locust Street was responsible for 14 reservations after a recent downtown housing tour.

This pool, he said, will offer something that few backyard pools can:

"It has a 360-degree panoramic view - the best in the city."

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