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'Homeownership is an attainable goal in the United States, if you want it.'



CHARISSA SORIANO FOR WSJ (2) Daniel and Jackson Duran-Pincus moved to Bremerton in 2023.



Betsy and Chris Kornelis bought their first Bremerton home in 2006.

First-Time Homebuyers Learn to Compromise

Today's high housing prices force younger Americans to cast wide net

BY CHRIS KORNELIS

Daniel and Jackson Duran- Pincus never dreamed of living in my neighborhood. And who could blame them? In my corner of Bremerton, Wash., an industrial, Navy town across the water from Seattle, the sidewalks are lousy with aggressive squirrels and rotting apples, our neighborhood pizza joint is Pizza Hut and the smoke-shop-to-coffee-shop ratio has got to be 10-to-1.

A few years ago, the couple was renting in Seattle when they decided they wanted to be homeowners. They couldn't afford Seattle, but they could afford Bremerton, where the median sale price of a home is a little more than half that of Seattle.

In 2023, the couple spent just under \$270,000 for a one-bedroom, one-bathroom, single family home in my neighborhood. Their mortgage payment is roughly the same as their rent payment, though they have half as much space. But they managed to become homeowners in their mid-20s.

The trade-offs they and others are making are the counterpoint to today's seemingly impossible housing market. Mortgage rates are ticking back up toward 7%. Home prices are high relative to median incomes. Student loans and inflation are posing still more burdens. It is one of the least affordable housing markets in decades.

Still, many of those who are willing to move a little farther from the city, or buy a smaller home or settle for more modest finishes, are figuring out that it is still possible to buy.

"Homeownership is an attainable goal in the United States, if you want it," says Kenneth T. Jackson, an emeritus professor of history at Columbia University and the author of "Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States."

Some 29% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 29 owned their homes in 2025, down from 32% a decade earlier, according to data from the Federal Reserve. And 58% between the ages of 30 and 44 owned, versus 59% in 2015.

The New York Fed reported last year that the income levels of the places where first-time home buyers are making purchases have been trending downward. One strategy among younger buyers, the report said, "may have been to focus their house search in lower-income zip codes."

In many ways, moving to where you can afford to buy is a central feature of the American dream of homeownership. It is certainly part of the Duran-Pincuses' story. And it is the story of my family.

I grew up on Bainbridge Island, which, like Bremerton, is across the water from Seattle. My parents ended up renting there in the 1970s because my dad got a job at the local lumber yard. When he later got a job in Seattle, my folks wanted to move there, but they couldn't afford it. So, they bought on Bainbridge. They loved it.

My wife and I never pined for Bremerton. In fact, initially, we picked Bainbridge.

We moved to the island after I graduated from college in 2005. We loved it. But, like many onceaffordable places across America, Bainbridge had become different since my parents bought their first home there, which now Zillows for more than \$1.3 million. When we decided to buy, we knew it was going to have to be in a more affordable ZIP Code. So, in July 2006, when I was 24, we moved to Bremerton, where we paid \$187,00 for a house with three bedrooms, one bath and was about 950 square feet, across the street from a Superfund site. Our interest rate was 5.37%, and our monthly mortgage payment was about \$1,325. I made around \$28,000 a year at the local paper and my wife, Betsy, worked in retail.

Six months later, I got a job in Seattle. We couldn't afford to buy there, so I commuted by ferry for years. Door to door, it was nearly two hours each way. A few years ago, we moved to a bigger home about a mile away.

You could say we never really *wanted* to live in Bremerton. You end up here because you get stationed at the Navy base or you get a job at the shipyard. Or you decide you would like to own, and you discover that, while home prices are higher than the national average, they are still much cheaper than Seattle.

"We were paying so much in rent," Jackson Duran-Pincus told me, "that even though we were giving up a lot to buy a place, it just felt silly to throw so much money down the drain."

To be sure, there are many people in the U.S. who can't afford to buy a home. But not all young people are out of the market against their will. Just as every generation faces different challenges when entering the housing market, they also have different priorities. Gen Z appears to be marrying later and spending their money differently than previous generations, saving more for things like travel.

Jackson, the author of "Crabgrass Frontier," doesn't think owning a home is as much a priority for younger Americans as it was after World War II. "If it was, they'd give up vacations and cars and other expensive things for the house," he said, "but they don't as much now."

Alex Hubben made it a priority. Like the rest of us, he never dreamed of moving to Bremerton.

But he got a job as a mechanical engineer at the local shipyard. He rented a house with a roommate for a while, paying \$1,000 a month. Then, in November, when he was 25, he spent just under \$400,000 to buy the home across the street from me. His mortgage payment is around \$3,000.

Hubben buys as much as he can from Goodwill and Facebook Marketplace. When he went on a hiking trip over the summer, his friends split a hotel room, while he slept in his car. His roommate, the same one he rented with, helps him pay the mortgage.

Hubben said he wanted to get into the market before prices went up. "It felt like someone was pulling up, like in those movies, they are pulling up the ladder," he said, "and it is like: 'Oh, if I don't grab on now, if I hesitate, it's not going to be good.'"

Nadia Evangelou, an economist at the National Association of Realtors, says that what people want from their homes has also changed drastically. The famous Levittown homes that went up on Long Island in the late 1940s were about 750 square feet.

Today, the median price of a home in the U.S. is high, but homes are also much bigger—the median square footage of new homes has exceeded 2,000 for decades.

Those who cast their sights more modestly may find more approachable options. While the median price of existing homes in the U.S. home sits around \$430,000, Zillow reports that in June, the median sale price of single-family homes in the U.S. with three bedrooms or less (59% of its listings) was \$330,000. The median sale price of a single-family home with two bedrooms or less was \$265,000. That is, if you can find one. They constituted only 14% of listings in June. Then, you have to be willing to live in what you can afford. The Duran-Pincuses were willing to live in a small home. They gave up the amenities of Seattle. Daniel has a commute that is close to three hours round trip. But they felt it would help them get closer to their goal of buying a larger home in the future.

My neighbors tell me they are happy with where they have ended up, though Jackson Duran-Pincus says they would like to move closer to their family one day.

We'll see. Something happens when you settle in, even to a place that's on nobody's bucket list. Neighbors become friends. Friends become family. And the Navy town you got stuck in becomes home.

Where else can I own a home that comes with access to an alley where I can cozy up next to my garbage cans, sip Costco bourbon and watch the sun set behind the Olympic mountains?

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