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HOW WE GOT THIS HOUSE



A look inside a real estate market that has turned ultracompetitive for buyers—and how three families sealed the deal

BY RACHEL POMERANCE BERL
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL VENTURA

Alex and Nicki live in their home in Bethesda's Wyngate neighborhood with daughters Kennedy, 2, and Landon, who turns 1 in March



The primary bedroom in the Ilie home. Nicki favors a relaxed Serena & Lily style.

A long search: The Ilies

BY AUGUST 2020, Nicki and Alex Ilie were desperate. They'd been house hunting for nearly two years, ever since they learned that Nicki was pregnant with their first child.

The search began after they listed their one-bedroom condo in downtown Bethesda—and it sold in a day. Then they rented a two-bedroom and started looking on weekends. The breaking point came during that first summer of the pandemic: With a baby girl at home and another on the way—and loud neighbors upstairs—the couple constantly combed the market, their phones cued to Zillow

and Redfin. "It was so exhausting," says Nicki, who sells filler for a biotech company that makes aesthetic and therapeutic products.

Nicki, 36, and Alex, 39, saw hundreds of homes virtually and in person, and lost a dozen to cash offers and waived contingencies. "We just looked everywhere, and we were constantly getting outbid," she says. "We had gotten to a point...If we wanted to live in Bethesda, we [needed] to do a full-ask offer or even over."

Then, on a cold November evening, Alex and Nicki arrived at her sister and brother-in-law's home in East Bethesda for their usual Wednesday dinner with the extended family. They'd just settled in when Alex got an email notification. A home they'd seen in the Wyngate neigh-

borhood, close to where Alex grew up, had come back on the market—and the price had dropped \$114,000 to \$1.435 million.

Alex was soon on the phone with Andres Serafini, his real estate agent and also a friend since their days at Walter Johnson High School.

An hour later they met at a seven-bedroom Craftsman built in 2008 with an upper-level loft and an expansive basement. The financing for the previous would-be buyer had fallen through, and the sellers wanted the deal done, Serafini says. Since Alex works for a home remodeling company, he did his own rough inspection, using a high-powered flashlight to size up the roof and foundation of the nearly 6,000-square-foot structure. Alex FaceTimed Nicki for

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one last look, and they offered the full asking price, no contingencies. "We drafted the paperwork, literally, at the doorstep," Serafini says. The next morning, it was theirs.

After some work to update the home—giving the wooden front door a statement coat of black paint and covering the yellow-tinged interior walls in light gray; sanding the cherrywood floors and staining them a lovely pale blond—the family moved in, two weeks before their daughter Landon was born in March 2021.

Looking back, it was a "roller coaster," Alex says of first loving and then losing houses where they had envisioned their future. And still, there are regrets—like the newer, bigger, cheaper one in Kensington they passed up before the pandemic. "We kick ourselves for that one," he says. "But it is what it is."

After shipping delays made for sparse furnishings for months, Nicki and Alex are at last making this one theirs. With a mix of cozy, coastal and traditional touches, Nicki is going for a scaled-back Serena & Lily style, she explains one evening in her dining room, where a round rattan mirror pops against a wallpapered backdrop of large-scale flowers. She's been working with her friend, designer Kristin Harrison of Bungalow10 Design in Arlington, Virginia. The couple also designed built-ins around a modern new fireplace and knocked down two pairs of pillars to open the first-floor layout. This year they plan to remodel the master bathroom and gut the cream-colored kitchen where, for now, big sister Kennedy flits around joyfully and baby Landon seems content in her Exersaucer.

"We wanted room to grow in," Nicki says.

Now that they have it, the Ilies host the Wednesday night family dinner.

Nicki with daughters Kennedy (left) and Landon. The Ilies opened up the first-floor layout.

