

Canvas Ready, Work Underway at Willow Creek Estates

by Jean Dunn Jun 13, 2018



Raj Bhatia and Jill Sloane are the owner-developers at Willow Creek Estates, Southbury's only gated community. Twenty-four homesites one two cul-de-sacs offer views of the rolling hills, the pond, the pastures, wooden fences and historic barns of the old Riker's Horse Farm, lovingly renovated and brought back to life as Willow Creek Equestrian Center.

SOUTHBURY — Raj Bhatia and Jill Sloane are taking their time.

Raj purchased the old Riker's Horse Farm, a Southbury landmark on North Georges Hill Road, in 2000, and became a part-time resident; Jill came a few years later after their marriage.

The town granted approval for their plans in 2008, but the couple has only recently begun to develop the property now known as Willow Creek Estates, Southbury's only gated community.

"Sometimes the market isn't where you are and you have to wait," said Raj. "So we started by planting trees, building stone walls, putting in the gate. Now the market is starting to show signs of life, and we're ready."

"The canvas is there," said Jill.

Situated along two cul-de-sacs, some two dozen homesites overlook views of the old horse farm, which after years of painstaking restoration work has come back to life as a thriving equine boarding and training facility called Willow Creek Equestrian Center.

The "canvas" of which Jill speaks includes views of rolling hills, historic barns, a tranquil pond, outdoor rings and miles of trails and pasture, as well as two new state-of-the-art barns with indoor arenas.

Fifty-five boarders bring new energy and enthusiasm to the 100-acre property, which is also home to four goats, two donkeys, assorted barn cats and a steady stream of rescue puppies who stay at Willow Creek while transitioning to new homes.

"We have lots with views of the farm and we have lots that are in the woods and very private," said Jill. "Most people just love the landscape of the farm. The horses give it such tranquility."

Six of the 24 lots in Phase I have been sold and the fourth home is currently under construction. The seventh lot contains a 3,800 square foot model home, a shell that can be completed to the buyer's specifications within four months.

The first model home, now a private residence, can also be viewed.

Both models were built by Muratori Builders of Southbury. The couple is also working with Corbo Group out of Roxbury.

"We took our time finding quality builders who build high end custom homes," said Raj. "We do like our two builders, but we're happy to have someone come with their own

builder if they can adhere to our architectural spec requirements."

All homes at Willow Creek will be cedar with stone accents and architectural windows and doors. There is a minimum size restriction of 2,200 square feet.

"We live here too," he said. "When we look up the hill, we want to be proud of what we see."

Raj told Voices that early on, he had an offer from a builder who wanted to take every lot.

"We turned him down," he said. "We wanted to take our time and find the right builders who could build the right homes."

Likewise, Raj had an earlier partner who wanted to build houses everywhere on the land. They have since parted ways. "This is a beautiful property," he said. "It's a Southbury landmark. It deserves something better."

In its heyday, the Riker's Horse Farm was nationally known for raising champion Quarter Horses.

"The Riker family owned Norris Hockey League and pieces of Madison Square Garden," said Raj. "In 1974, they won all four awards for Quarter Horses. The property used to have miles and miles of white fencing. When I found it, it had fallen into disrepair. It's been a labor of love getting the place back in shape."

Raj's idea was to develop a portion of the 103-acre property but put the farm in conservation.

"We went to the town and said, 'this is a historic home and farm. It's on the mural right here in Town Hall. Let's come to an agreement on how to do that.'"

"We decided to put 50 acres of the farm into a PDD, a conservation zone," he explained. "For the other 50 acres, we got a variance to do things a little differently. We have the same number of lots, but there are smaller lots in some places, bigger ones in others."



Twenty-four homesites comprise Phase I at Willow Creek Estates, a gated community located on North Georges Hill Road in Southbury. Homes at Willow Creek will be cedar with stone accents and architectural windows and doors. Two model homes, including the one pictured above, now a private residence, were built by Muratori Builders of Southbury.

“DeLoris Curtis and the boards have been fabulous to deal with.”

Open houses are scheduled at Willow Creek Estates most Sundays, and according to Jill, they’ve been busy. She frequently hears comments that people are looking in Southbury because of the Region 15 school system, and they’re looking at Willow Creek because they feel safe in a gated community.

“It’s not that Southbury isn’t a safe town,” said Raj. “It’s very safe here. But it’s a good feeling when you can walk on the roads and know that everyone you see is supposed to be here. It’s a little thing that makes people feel safer.”

They are also seeing people who are interested in new construction.

“We all know you can buy a very large house in Southbury for \$550,000 to \$600,000,” said Jill, “but most are 20 to 30

years old. The kitchens and baths are outdated.

“That’s what’s bringing a lot of traffic to us. For \$750,000 you can get the dream house you really want with everything new and improved, energy efficiency, the kitchen and bathrooms you love.

“Renovating costs a lot more than people think,” she said. “When you buy a home, that \$750,000 is in your mortgage. When you renovate, it’s out-of-pocket.”

Raj earned his undergraduate degree in electrical engineering from Lehigh University and his MBA from Columbia. He has been a real estate investor in Manhattan since 1997 and is the managing partner of Renwick Capital, LLC.

Jill has been an associate broker with Halstead in New York City and Connecticut



since 1999, and has been one of their top agents for years.

Both are licensed pilots, flying out of Oxford Airport.

“We’re here most of the time now,” said Jill. “We go to the city about two times a week for business, but this is our home.”

Raj and Jill have renovated the property’s historic home as their residence. The center of the house, essentially a cottage, was built in 1938. An addition in 1944 on one side greatly enlarged the home, as did a second addition on the other side in 1970, but the three sections were never fully integrated until now.

Having remained in the house during all phases of construction, Jill says she is finally “in her happy place.”



“I love living in Southbury,” she said. “Everyone is so nice. We love all the great restaurants nearby.”

They may not have lived here for generations, but Jill and Raj are among Southbury’s biggest boosters. Together, they

have produced videos, viewable on YouTube, that promote not only Willow Creek Equestrian Center and Willow Creek Estates, but the town in general.

“We’re not just developers,” Raj said. “We live here. We care about what happens here.

“There’s a social aspect to what we’re doing here,” he said. “We had a Mexican fiesta one Saturday night for all the boarders, and the people who live here are all invited. There are weekend get-togethers in the customer lounge by the silo with pizza and wine. We have a big Christmas party every year with a toy drive for the Salvation Army.

“It’s fun to be here,” he said. “You won’t be bored.”

Evan and Julie Nichols are among those who have built a home at Willow Creek Estates.

“There’s a tremendous feeling of calmness you get when you step outside and soak in the amazing views and sounds of Willow Creek Farm,” said Evan, noting the rolling hills, the pastures, the pond and the equestrian facilities.

“Our kids love it, too,” he said. “Catching fireflies, feeding donkeys and goats and even riding horses — Willow Creek Estates can at times feel like a summer camp for them.

“We’re so happy to have met Jill and Raj and be able to build a house in such an incredible town and community.”

Raj and Jill are looking to take on another project, a proposed subdivision on 68 wooded acres in neighboring Roxbury.

If approved, The Woods will comprise 11 homes on 4+ acres each, with a seven-and-a-half acre conservation area for use by all residents.

“It’s such a beautiful property,” said Jill. “The entire property has a canopy with amazing views. We also had a partner who wanted more yield, but Roxbury regulations call for four-acre zoning, and we stuck with that.

“We found a house that fits on the land like a glove, that won’t require a lot of excavation,” she said. “We’re being very careful with the builder, like we’ve done here.”

Following some fine-tuning, Raj and Jill recently resubmitted their application to Roxbury’s Inland Wetlands Commission.

“We’re sticking to the Roxbury regulations 100 percent,” Raj said. “We’re being sensitive to wetlands considerations, proper setbacks, buffering, habitat creation, everything. We’re not asking for any variances.

“Willow Creek began as our weekend home and a project to take on,” he said. “Roxbury is the same. We’re looking to have a little house on the Roxbury property, a little get-away.

“We want to do it right.”

Those seeking additional information about Willow Creek Estates may visit wcestates.com. Preliminary details on The Woods can be viewed at TheWoodsRoxbury.com.

