

The rich and the famous find seclusion in Westlake

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Published 18 July 2011 11:11 PM

WESTLAKE — Forget Highland Park or University Park. Forget Southlake. When it comes to having money or fame in North Texas, Westlake is the new place to be.

Drive around the sun-drenched, rolling hills of this ritzy enclave and you almost feel as if you've been transported to Italy or the south of France. BMWs and Mercedes glide down small, winding roads and disappear into gated neighborhoods. Homes topped with clay-tile roofs glisten under skies dotted with puffy clouds. On patches of ranchland, cattle rest under trees.

Over the past several years, this tiny community situated mainly in northeast Tarrant County has become a magnet for the rich and famous. The list of boldfaced names has included the Jonas brothers, the family rock band; professional athletes including Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton; and business leaders, such as the CEO of Burlington Northern Santa Fe, Matthew Rose.

Now Glenn Beck, the former Fox News Channel star, is joining the town's exclusive ranks — in a home originally listed at \$5.4 million and offered for lease at \$20,000 a month, according to Candy Evans, a Dallas real estate blogger.

In January, *Forbes* named the town of 1,000 the most affluent neighborhood in the country, with a median household income of \$250,000. The average home value is \$1.2 million.

What is it about this town that's attracting those with money, power and fame?

"It's a lifestyle," said Brandt Jobe, a pro golfer who lives in Westlake's Vaquero, known for its celebrated golf course. "It's the best of all worlds. What's nice about living here is the freedom. ... We have a country atmosphere out here. It's quiet and peaceful."

Many cite the community's proximity to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. And pro athletes and other celebrities move to Westlake partly because of the gated homes and other security measures, which are necessary for famous people who travel frequently, Jobe said.

"In this day and age, unfortunately, for your kids' security, that's what's nice," he said. "It gives you peace of mind."

Former Rangers executive Chuck Greenberg, who still lives in Westlake, said the recent publicity for the area comes with the territory.

"Success and popularity breeds more success and popularity," Greenberg said, "and the more who move to this area, the more likely others are to be attracted as well."

Westlake has the "USDA stamp of approval for celebrities," said **Randy White**, who sells homes in Westlake and is owner of a Southlake-based real estate firm.

"If a celebrity sees a celebrity live there, it's going to raise their eyebrows," he said.

"They're going to think: 'If it meets their scrutiny, it's something I need to look into.'"

Residents give celebrities their space, said Trish Biddle, an artist who lives in Westlake.

"Local people in our town welcome them with open arms and allow them privacy, even when we see them around town," Biddle said.

Publicity surrounding a high-profile move into Westlake tends to die down after a few weeks, said Laura Wheat, the town's mayor.

"And then those individuals, lucky for them, are able to just lead normal lives within our community," she said.

Westlake is also home to more ordinary residents, including retirees, doctors, lawyers and business leaders, many with young families.

Homebuyers are attracted by the town's location, between Dallas and Fort Worth, White said. The schools are excellent. There's virtually no crime, he said.

"You feel like you're remote but you're in the middle of everything," White said. "That's very hard to achieve."

The green, rolling hills and old oak trees remind Biddle of Tuscany.

"As an artist, I like the serenity and the people here, as well as the celebrity," said Biddle, whose paintings have been used by actress Eva Longoria for her fundraisers. Biddle has also been invited to create art for the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show and the Kentucky Derby.

"Some of my inspiration definitely comes from the lifestyle of the women here," Biddle said. "They travel a lot ... but they also are raising their families."

The Biddles moved to Westlake primarily for Westlake Academy, a charter school run by the town. The school sits on top of a hill, offering a sweeping view of Westlake.

Residents are active in school and city affairs, said Biddle's husband, Bryan, an infrastructure architect. Town Council meetings are packed with residents.

"Everybody's engaged," he said. "There's a potential for a bigger impact with a small town."

Westlake has come a long way since the 1840s, when it was settled by a small group of families.

Recently, the town has attracted more residents — and corporate offices, including Fidelity Investments, Chrysler Financial Services and Deloitte.

But the recession has hit even Westlake. Sales tax revenue has been stagnant, forcing the Town Council last year to adopt Westlake's first-ever city property tax. At 16 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation, it's one of the lowest around.

Some asking prices for homes have been reduced.

But one brand-new beauty, on the 16th fairway at Vaquero, seems recession-proof. It's for sale for \$9 million. It has 15,000 square feet, with five bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a five-car garage and a second kitchen for catering.

A listing for a \$3.4 million home promises that you'll "feel the essence of Italy" with its Murano glass chandeliers and Mediterranean mosaics.

Many of the listings promote Westlake's seclusion, which Wheat, the mayor, found appealing when she moved there in 2005 from Highland Park. She says she loved her time in the Park Cities but was looking to raise her children in a different place.

In Westlake, she has more “room to breathe” and sees longhorns, bison, hawks and coyotes.

“I honestly did not realize I did not see the sunset and did not see the sunrise until we moved out here,” Wheat said. “I’m floored by that. I just pinch myself that we found this.”