

BOUNTIFUL BALLANTYNE

The thriving suburban metropolis has been one
of the Carolinas' great success stories

By Mary Elizabeth DeAngelis

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BISSELL COMPANIES

When Victoria and Nicholas Nwasike planned their move to Charlotte, they made a list.

They wanted good schools for their two young sons; a spacious house with a yard in a safe, family-oriented neighborhood; and easy access to work, restaurants, shopping and entertainment.

They found it all in Ballantyne. From its glistening corporate park to the elegant Ballantyne Hotel to its golf courses, upscale homes, stores and eateries, the area is one of Charlotte's most sought-after destinations.

"It's just so beautiful, from the homes, down to the landscaping... it feels so new," says Victoria Nwasike, a former lawyer who's now an international business consultant. Her husband is a technology manager for Wells Fargo.

"We have this wonderful mix of neighbors from all over the world," she said. "It's a perfect place to raise kids and have a family."

THE QUEEN CITY'S CROWN PRINCE

Just 25 years ago, the area was mostly dirt, woods and two-lane roads. Today, Ballantyne is the Queen City's Crown Prince — an enterprising upstart that turned a big chunk of the middle of nowhere into the center of a thriving suburban metropolis.

"I knew it was going to be big, but it turned out to be so much bigger than I ever thought," said Dana Rader, a former LPGA golfer and a top instructor recruited to relocate her golf school to Ballantyne in its early days. "It's a pretty incredible place."

H.C. "Smoky" Bissell had a long, successful track record in residential and commercial development before tackling what would become his biggest venture. Like much of south Charlotte's growth, Ballantyne's story begins with his in-laws, the Harris family.

In the early 1990s, his brother-in-law and then-business partner, Johnny Harris, set out to transform some 2,000 acres of a former hunting preserve into a huge commercial development. The land was about 17 miles south of Charlotte's downtown. Johnny and his siblings, Cameron Harris and Sara Harris Bissell,



(Smoky's wife) had inherited most of it from their father, James Harris.

They envisioned a community centered around a business park. Company executives would buy luxurious homes in a neighboring country club development. They'd make deals during rounds of golf while spouses and children made friends at the tennis courts and swimming pool. Trails and bike paths would encourage walking, riding and jogging. "It was a new way of life," Bissell said.

The family sold some of the land to Crescent Resources to develop the Ballantyne Country Club and homes, then used the money to pay for new roads, water and sewer lines. A potential buyer emerged in 1995 and the siblings considered selling. But Bissell stepped in with his own offer, and bought the land that's now the Ballantyne Corporate Park.

It was a gamble, one that had some friends questioning: "Are you out of your mind?" or declaring: "You're the damndest fool I've ever met." Some said it wouldn't work and he'd end up broke.

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Others saw Bissell as a gutsy visionary who could pull it off.

"He was willing to put everything on the line," said Ned Curran, president and CEO of The Bissell Companies.

By 1996 Bissell was on a building spree, breaking ground for his first commercial office building and clearing land for the hotel's golf course. He remembers setting up cookies and iced tea for a prospective corporate tenant who never showed up. He learned that the executive had driven to the site with his broker but refused to get out of the car.

"Why have you brought me out to this God-forsaken place?" the man asked.

Bissell persevered, hanging tough to the philosophy that tenants would follow the bulldozers: "If I built it, they would come."

And he sold it, so that people who only ventured near the area when they were traveling to the beach would read billboards with ads such as, "If your office were here, your commute would be over now."

"We did anything we could to put ourselves on the map," Bissell said.

The ongoing construction of Interstate 485 dramatically changed the landscape and the ensuing explosion of residential and commercial development during the next two decades turned Ballantyne into a thriving edge city.

Things slowed down during the Recession, but Bissell kept an optimistic view that a recovery



would follow and his company would be ready. By 2012, with many developers still skittish, Bissell had two new 10-story office spec buildings in the works.

The next year, when MetLife planned to move its U.S. retail division headquarters to Charlotte, Bissell had the space for the 1,500 employees now at the company's Ballantyne offices.

Today, Ballantyne Corporate Park has more than four million square feet of office space that houses some 300 companies, including Snyder's-Lance, Lending Tree, ESPN, Liberty Mutual and The Bissell Companies.

"It's the ultimate suburban corporate address, it's a very well-done community," says Bob Morgan, president and CEO of the Charlotte Chamber. "Everything the Bissell Company touches is top-of-the-line, first class — and corporate America is very attracted to that."

EVERY STRUCTURE TELLS A STORY

History, friendship and family played a huge role in Ballantyne's planning.

Four 30-foot-tall clay monuments flank the corners of its hub at the Ballantyne Commons Parkway and Johnston Road intersection. Johnny Harris commissioned artist Boris Tomic to create the monuments to symbolize Charlotte's emergence as a city. The artwork depicts its early beginnings in agriculture, textiles, and transportation and its future in finance and technology.

The community's name comes from Barbara Ballantyne, Smoky Bissell's great aunt, a feisty charmer who, at 84, would muscle her Buick Wildcat down the mountain roads near her California home.

The Harper building is named for a former commanding officer during Bissell's stint in the U.S. Navy, "a demanding mentor." The Richardson building honors Carolina Panthers owner Jerry

**There are 14 miles of trails.
People can walk, jog and stop at
20 different exercise stations on
the fitness trail.**

Richardson and his wife, Rosalind, and the Winslow building “a favorite niece, great dance partner and a fine young lady.”

A brand new 25,000-square-foot fitness center, Sara’s YMCA, honors his wife of nearly 50 years, Sara Bissell Harris, who died in 2009. After her death, Bissell remarried, and named the Gragg building for his current wife, Margaret Gragg Bissell.

Fitness is a huge theme at the corporate park, where the grounds have a resort-like quality. Some workers see golf course greens from their windows, others enjoy views of lakes, gardens and mini-parks. There are 14 miles of trails. People can walk, jog and stop at 20 different exercise stations on the

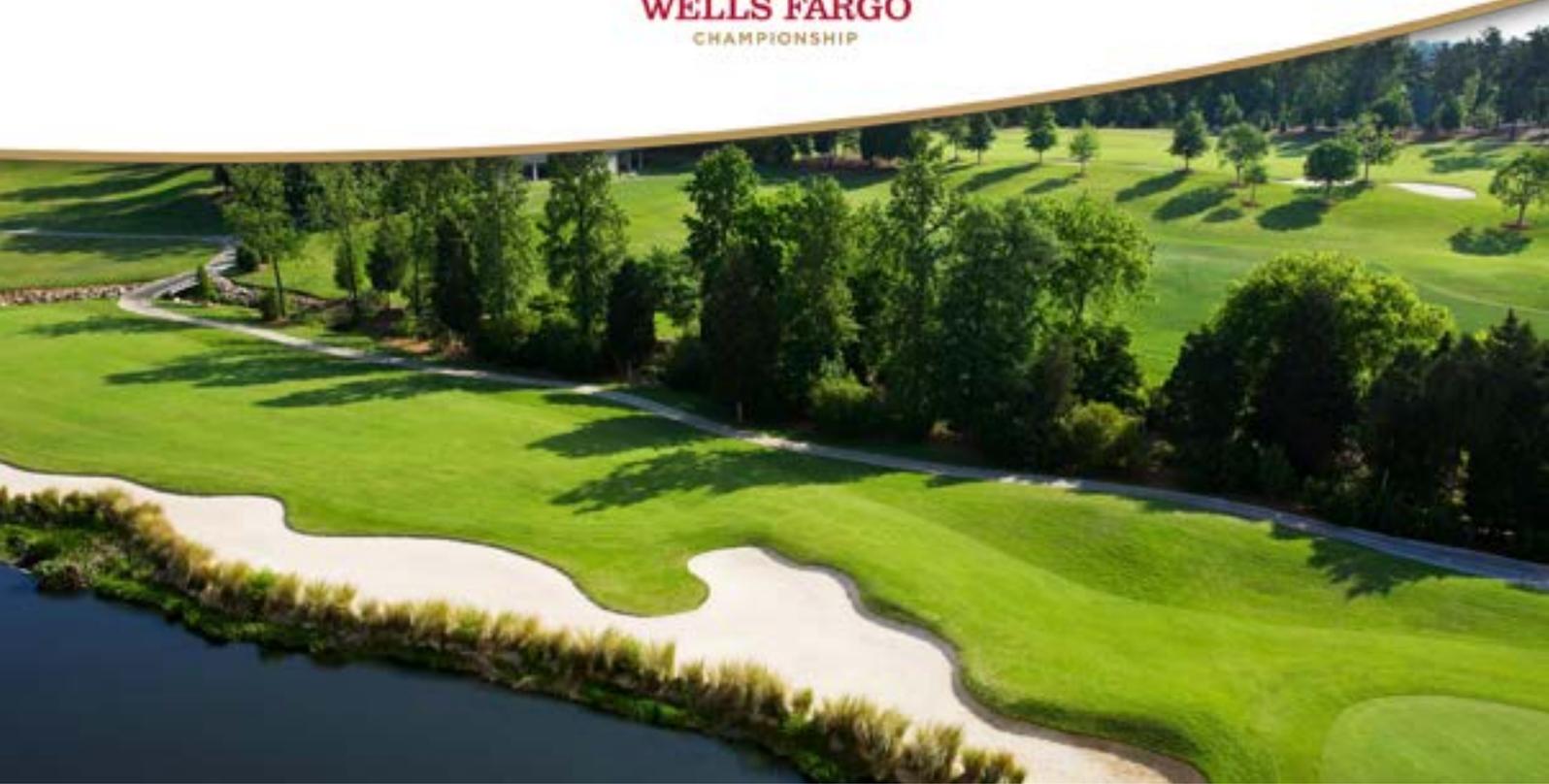
fitness trail. They can eat lunch under a shaded pavilion stocked with tables and chairs. Big events such as the annual Earth Day celebration draw workers outdoors to mingle, while businesses within the center have incorporated fitness-first philosophies, as Carolina Neurosurgery & Spine Associates did with its Titleist Performance Institute Certified Program that helps golfers maximize performance on the course while reducing the chance of injury.

For visitors, the Ballantyne Hotel is a huge draw. Smoky and Sara Harris Bissell spent years planning it. They traveled the world with friends, taking pictures, interviewing people and making





WELLS FARGO
CHAMPIONSHIP



During the Wells Fargo Championship, the Ballantyne community has once again stepped up as a major host, as it has since 2003.

notes about what they liked and collecting art and antiques to furnish it.

They created a luxurious 214-room hotel with designated areas for wedding receptions, meetings and conferences, adjacent to a public golf course that's considered one of the best in the region.

It's extremely popular among business and recreational travelers. A day at the hotel could start with a breakfast meeting, then evolve into a golf game followed by a swim, a massage and manicure at the Spa and dinner at the Gallery Restaurant.

There are "Play and Stay" packages where

golfers looking to up their games can get lessons at the Dana Rader Golf School while enjoying the hotel's many amenities. (Non-golfing spouses rarely complain when they're invited on such junkets.)

During the Wells Fargo Championship, the Ballantyne community has once again stepped up as a major host, as it has since 2003. The Ballantyne Hotel usually serves as a venue for Pro-Am parties. Players, caddies, PGA TOUR staff, vendors and volunteers are among the many guests at Ballantyne area hotels.

Over the weekend, a shuttle service will run thousands of out-of-town guests and area residents from the Ballantyne Corporate Park to the Quail Hollow Club. The tournament also keeps a "Will-Call" office trailer there.

"The Bissell Group has been instrumental in accommodating our patrons, players and caddies



WELLS FARGO
CHAMPIONSHIP



with a safe and convenient environment for all needs,” said Jan Ivey, the tournament’s director of marketing and partner relations. “We thank them and the entire Ballantyne area for a true Southern hospitality experience for all our tournament guests and our functions.”

CREATING A COMMUNITY

It surprises many people to learn that Ballantyne is in Charlotte’s city limits. With more than 68,000 people living in Ballantyne’s 28277 zip code, it often feels like its own city. That population is expected to grow to about 75,000 by 2020, according to Charlotte Chamber predictions.

Ballantyne has an honorary mayor in Ray Eschert. The New York transplant has been promoting, leading and loving his community since its inception. He and his wife, Elaine, moved to south Charlotte in 1978 when sharecroppers tended fields and grazing cows would stop traffic on then sleepy N.C. 51.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RAY ESCHERT (CENTER) WITH BALLANTYNE VISIONARY SMOKY BISSELL AND HIS WIFE MARGARET; THE BALLANTYNE BREAKFAST CLUB WELCOMES INSURANCE GIANT METLIFE TO THE CORPORATE PARK; THE Nwasike family are rightly proud of their new home in Ballantyne. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BALLANTYNE BREAKFAST CLUB AND THE Nwasike family)



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"There was absolutely nothing out here," Ray Eschert said. "Pineville was the big town and you had to go there or to South Boulevard if you wanted to get something to eat. It was thrilling to watch everything grow."

Eschert thought people should know about the rapidly changing landscape, so 16 years ago, he founded the Ballantyne Breakfast Club. Meetings occur six times a year and are open to anyone who wants to know what's happening with development, roads, schools, parks and public safety. Guest speakers include politicians, transportation leaders and school and police chiefs. The Ballantyne Hotel donates meeting space and refreshments.

"I wanted a forum to provide information that was based on truth, not rumors," Ray Eschert said. "It's non-political — I'm Switzerland."

Elaine Eschert is a realtor whose business has grown with the population. When a company relocates to Charlotte, her phone rings. "I have people from all over the country call and ask me specifically about Ballantyne," she said.

Home prices in the area range from the low-to-mid-\$200,000s for starter homes to Ballantyne Country Club estates that run in the low millions.

The mid-priced homes are especially sought after, she said.

"We don't have enough homes for the people who want to live here and you're going to get into a bidding war," Elaine Eschert said. "Good houses go immediately."

She helped the Nwasikes find their home when the family relocated from Des Moines, Iowa, to Charlotte last year.

The Nwasikes love their five-bedroom house in a neighborhood filled with young families who frequently get together for pot-luck dinners, kids' birthday parties and impromptu backyard gatherings.

Many are professionals who relocated from the northeast for career opportunities. There's also a strong international component: some of the Nwasikes' neighbors come from India, Columbia, Thailand, Pakistan, Morocco and Nigeria, "mostly by way of New Jersey," Victoria Nwasike says.

They've all found a community in Ballantyne.

"We had nothing like this before," she said. "When we first moved here, we were like, 'What is this?' People here are just so open and welcoming. It's made me realize I need to be a better neighbor."