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College Park native Craig Ustler: changing Orlando's landscape with his small-town roots in mind

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Real estate developer Craig Ustler understands the word “community.” Growing up in College Park, he learned the importance of true neighborhoods. Although he’s behind some large development projects, like the Creative Village, Health Village and the North Quarter, it’s that small-town feel he grew up with that has inspired his ideas and visions for a better Orlando.



What makes College Park a special community to you?

I lived in College Park my whole life until I went to college. I went to Lake Silver Elementary, Lee Middle School and then Edgewater High School. My whole childhood was kind of defined by living there. It was like a small town inside a big town. I don't think growing up I had any sense of it being any different. I just assumed everyone grew up in a small town where everybody knew everybody.

What memories do you have from growing up here?

I played Little League the whole time. We always had guys who were always on the same team together. There were other parents who had this conspiracy theory of how we were rigging the Little League system so we could all be better than everybody else. The parents fretted about this, but we didn't care at all. All we knew was we got free soda at the end of the game and we would just run to the concession stand. We were just into having fun and playing baseball.

When did you know you wanted to go into real estate?

I had thought about development and construction but I hadn't made the connection as to what that really

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become a neighborhood builder instead of just a real estate developer, that's when I decided that's what I wanted to do.

How did growing up in College Park help in your development ideas for some of your projects?

The market wants these authentic and unique urban and walkable neighborhoods. College Park gets that and already has a community identity. I try to remember that. Every community is different. It's not a formula-based approach. College Park is pretty comfortable in its own skin. It's not a retail street you stroll down and go shopping. It doesn't have the highest concentration of restaurants in the world or huge apartment buildings. It's this mix of whatever it has that's appropriate for it.

What is the idea behind the Creative Village?

Creative Village is 68 acres around the former Amway Arena site in downtown Orlando. It's an urban infill neighborhood anchored by the University of Central Florida and Valencia. It has a significant education component, and it's meant to attract what we refer to as the creative class or what some people still say is the tech community. It's all about the next economy, this idea that brainpower is the economic generator of the 21st century. You've got to get smart people in your community working on smart things so you can compete economically, and you have to build a place for those people.

What kind of impact do you see Creative Village having on College Park?

I hope that Creative Village will give College Park a real reason to come downtown more. I think the performing arts center does that for the culturally-minded and the Amway does that for the Magic fans. I hope that Creative Village can do that for education, whether it's just weekend or graduate classes or continuing education.

Do you see this project having an impact on the part of College Park that borders Colonial Drive?

There's a public safety issue along Colonial Drive. We've got to figure out how to make that a seamless transition. Growing up, we lived in the neighborhood behind the country club that backed up to Kmart, and we went to Colonial Drive with no problem. We ate there, rode our bikes there and shopped there. We've got to bring that back. We've got to figure out how to make sure the public safety's good and the pedestrian and bike connections are good so [people] want to hang out in Creative Village and feel safe in doing so.

The Ivy apartment development by Florida Hospital is one of your properties. Do you think there are ever too many apartments?

I do think that's a fair question. Can you just keep building apartments forever? The answer to that is no. For a city our size we are still significantly undersupplied in urban apartments, because that's where the apartment dweller wants to live. There's no way to do the math and think it's a good idea to have the 10,000 people working at Florida Hospital living all up and down the I-4 corridor and commuting to work versus

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No, because The Ivy is targeted at hospital employees, is within walking distance of the hospital and SunRail, and is within Health Village. We think it has a specific market niche. Also, The Ivy is now open and leasing, and expected to be stabilized in 2015, whereas The Princeton has not started yet and will take a couple of years to complete. By the time The Princeton is completed and stabilized, The Ivy will have been around for a few years and have an established market presence and identity.

Why did you choose what used to be the Uptown District in downtown Orlando as a development site?

The North Quarter is almost like part of College Park but definitely a little bit of an offshoot. It's always been, to me, a place where you can do some of the things that you can't do in College Park. You can build several apartment projects, whereas in College Park you can maybe build one apartment project that ends up being controversial. I saw the North Quarter as this happy medium between downtown and College Park and also very convenient to the hospital. We get a lot of business at Citrus Restaurant from College Park, so we know people will come for lunch and dinner.

What do you do in your down time?

If you do what I do for a living, you believe in the lifestyle and you live it 24/7. I live downtown. I work downtown, and College Park is as far as I ever go. I still shop in College Park because I know where everything is and I'm comfortable there. Out to dinner for me means downtown or College Park. I also have an apartment in New York City, and that's where I go as often as I can to be inspired. I think of New York as kind of an urban laboratory.

You are not only helping to build the community, but you are giving back to it as well.

My mom and I have been very involved in the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts since the beginning. I grew up valuing the arts and started taking trips to New York City at a very young age. I appreciate the arts and the role they play in a city. I've been on that board since almost the beginning. I'm also a huge believer in children's literacy, creativity and writing. I'm the co-chair of the Urban Think Foundation, which is a children's literacy organization. We're very active in the Parramore community and I've been involved in that for years.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I'd like to work on Creative Village as long as it takes. In 10 years or so, I'd like to teach there and explain my take — my view on the world and how you use real estate development as a way of building community — which isn't a view shared by a wide number of people right now.

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