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At the desk of: Orin Wilf

The developer on working out of Rockefeller's former digs, his 'easiest' real estate deal, and his love affair with koalas.

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By *Katherine Clarke*

It's an age-old story of the American dream. After leaving Poland as Holocaust survivors in the 1950s, Orin Wilf's grandfather and great uncle got their first jobs as car salesmen in Queens. They eventually began building single-family homes in New Jersey and established a company called Garden Homes. Fast-forward 60 years: Wilf, 42, is today the founder and president of Skyline Developers, a New York affiliate of Garden Homes that specializes in residential development and which owns and manages more than 50,000 apartments across the country and more than 25 million square feet of retail, offices and hotels. In New York, Skyline is the developer of several Manhattan



Orin Wilf (Photos by Michael McWeeney)

condo projects, including 200 East 79th Street. It is currently building a 24-story luxury rental project at 1050 Sixth Avenue. The company, which altogether employs seven family members, has some impressive and unusual office digs: two five-story Beaux Arts Renaissance-style mansions on West 54th Street, purchased in 2004 for \$40 million. Once home to oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, the buildings are said to have underground secret passageways that stretch all the way to Rockefeller Center. "I've never found any of the passages," Wilf said, adding that with all the new construction, "they've probably been shored up."

Family portrait

Wilf, who is currently unmarried, has two sons from a previous marriage, Harley, 14, and Alex, 12. "Alex is really into electronics and is a tough cookie," Wilf said. "I see him as a politician. Harley is my best friend. We talk sports all day." Wilf, who as a young boy aspired to be a baseball player, recently attended Harley's first-ever junior varsity basketball game. "They lost by 80 points," he said.



Tiffany watch

In 2007, Skyline converted an office building at 37 Wall Street into 372 rental apartments. For the ground floor retail space, the company inked a deal with jewelry giant Tiffany & Co. for its first store downtown. As a thank you, Tiffany execs sent Wilf and his colleagues these watches. "We call it the easiest real estate deal ever done in New York City," Wilf said. "The time between their visit to when they signed the lease was one day."



Picture of his girlfriend

Wilf has been dating his girlfriend, Kimberly Cooper, for nearly five years, after meeting her at a Manhattan restaurant. Cooper, who is a mom of two, didn't warm to Wilf at first, calling him pompous. "I was wearing Ferragamo sneakers and khakis, and it was snowing out," he said. "She wouldn't give me her phone number. I walked outside, took my shoes off, put them in her hand and said, 'Can I get your number now?'" The pitch worked. "Sometimes you



Golf trophy

An avid golfer with a handicap of just 11, Wilf won this trophy at his former club in Deal, New Jersey. "It's the only thing I've ever won in 25 years of playing golf," he said. "I hit a 40-foot putt bender on the 18th hole. I threw my golf club in the air."



Koala bear

Wilf picked up this stuffed Koala during a vacation in Australia with his girlfriend last year. He'd been meaning to visit the country for a while but had been advised against it by his father, Leonard, because skin cancer runs in the family. When they finally made it to Oz, Wilf and his girlfriend cuddled up with real koalas at a local park, and Wilf fell in love. "I wanted to take one home as a pet, but they kept telling me it was illegal," he said. In the end, the toy sufficed. "I got my koala," he said.



Painting

This painting by artist Caio Fonseca, who also did some of the hallway art at a Skyline condo at 170 East End Avenue, hangs in Wilf's office. Wilf was introduced to Fonseca by the architect and designer Peter Marino, who has recently garnered controversy over lawsuits involving sexual harassment. "Peter is really a brilliant architect. He designed an unbelievable building," Wilf said. "The only negative is that it's hard to use him for a whole building, rather than one-off apartments. His clients are willing to pay anything. It was tough for him when we had to pull back. [He's into] diamond-encrusted toilets and things."



Bryant Park building plans

Construction is already underway at Skyline's new Bryant Park tower, which was designed by architect Gene Kaufman. Move-ins are slated to begin within the next 18 months. Wilf is now eyeing new projects. "We want to buy probably in the next year," he said. "The \$50 million to \$100 million apartments are dead, and Brooklyn has really slowed down. The sweet spot is one- and two-bedroom apartments priced below \$3 million."



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