



Boston Neighborhoods

Healing wounds in paradise



Yoga teacher Deborah Bernstein and her partner, Boston Fire Lieutenant Scott Wahlen, bought a house in the Virgin Islands to help wounded veterans and the families of firefighters killed in action. Money raised from renting Florian Villa (above) in St. John supports their volunteer efforts.

By **Kathleen Burge**, *Globe* staff

The idea for Florian Villa came to the young couple during a vacation on a lush Caribbean island that they couldn't quite enjoy. Deborah Bernstein and Scott Wahlen had just visited wounded soldiers recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, delivering T-shirts and hats and other presents from Massachusetts. Not long after, the Hyde Park couple flew to St. John for a week of relaxation.

But they found the proximity of the two trips last year hard to bear. Walking on glorious beaches of the Virgin Islands, they kept thinking about the injured young men they'd just seen. "I think we both felt like this isn't fair," Bernstein said. "Why are we here and they're in Walter Reed?"

By the end of their vacation, they had an idea: The firefighter and the former management consultant would use their savings to buy a house on St. John where wounded soldiers and

the families of firefighters killed in action could take some time to heal. They'd rent out the house part of the time and host yoga retreats to support their volunteer work.

"We cashed in our life savings, our 401(k) plans," Bernstein said. "We figured we could talk about this for the next 15 years. We figured why not throw it all in?"

Within a few months, they persuaded a bank to give them a mortgage and bought the house they'd name Florian Villa, after the patron saint of firefighters. Paying guests have already started booking yoga retreats and family vacations at the four-bedroom house on a hill above the Caribbean, paying as much as \$800 a night. This summer, some widows and other family members of firefighters killed on the job will stay there for free. For every five paid weeks booked at the villa, the couple plans to donate a week's vacation.

Bernstein, 39, and Wahlen, 36, started dating in 2004, after they met in the South End, near her condo and his

firehouse. When Bernstein got in late, she tried to park in view of the firehouse, feeling safer if the firefighters could see her get out of her car and head home.

As they got to know each other, the couple often talked about their connections to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Bernstein, then a management consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers, was supposed to be on one of the LA-bound planes. Her meeting was canceled and she stayed in Boston. Five of her colleagues from the company's Boston office, including a good friend, died when the plane hit the World Trade Center.

After the attacks, she began to make time for volunteer work, mentoring Boston high school students and teaching them yoga. In 2005, she made a dramatic career switch: She quit her job and opened a yoga studio in Roslindale.

As a firefighter, Wahlen went to more than 50 funerals for firefighters killed on 9/11. He and a few friends would pile into a car on their days off and drive to the funerals, often hitting several over the course of a few days.

"It just seemed like a lot of them had little kids, a lot of

them had families," said Wahlen, now a lieutenant in the Boston Fire Department. He wondered, "What's going to happen in five years?"



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Deborah Bernstein and Scott Wahlen.

Bernstein, who has an MBA from Boston University, now runs Florian Villa full-time, and leads yoga retreats there. Wahlen, a former Marine who later spent two years traveling the world, will lead adventure tours on the island during his vacations. They're raising money, beginning to advertise, and looking for families to help. They worked straight through New Year's Eve, and into New Year's Day, writing letters to families of fallen firefighters, telling them about Florian Villa.

Bernstein and Wahlen have also begun working with a group called Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba, or SUDS, which teaches wounded soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to scuba dive. The soldiers receive some training at Walter Reed, but must dive

in open water to complete their scuba certification.

Next winter, the first group of wounded soldiers will stay free at Florian Villa while they perform their open-water dives.

"It seemed to be a good fit," said John Thompson, the president of SUDS. He hadn't heard of Florian Villa until Bernstein and Wahlen called to offer their services, but he once lived in St. John and knew it would be an ideal spot for the soldiers to dive. And it would be considerably more comfortable than the military bases where the soldiers usually stay.

Bernstein and Wahlen have scaled back their own lives to save money. She sold her condo in the South End and her yoga studio in Roslindale. Earlier this year, she and Wahlen also sold her car, leaving them with a single vehicle: Wahlen's 1999 Honda Civic.

"So whenever it gets stressful, we just have to jerk ourselves back and put it in perspective of the people we're trying to help out here," Bernstein said. "They've got

it a lot worse than us worrying about how to pay the mortgage."