

HOST LEDE: There was a time in California when middle class families could easily afford to buy a home. Over the decades those homes have appreciated, leaving many seniors in the state able to continue to afford the good life.

As part of our Graying California series, KPBS's Amita Sharma has this profile.

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CARLOS: Today is the first day of spring, you know. Let's celebrate it with a fire.

Carlos Luis Ituarte piles logs in the fireplace as his wife Gerda Govine Ituarte watches on with a big grin.

GERDA: Luis is a fire master and he has it down to a science.

Luis is 75. Gerda is 77.

They just moved to this three bedroom, Spanish-style home nestled in the hills of San Diego County.

They have a pool, four and a half acres of land.

LUIS: It's like we've gone back to the country.

GERDA: This is our dreamland if you will. It's as though this place was waiting for us all of our lives.

Fate didn't finance the place, though. California real estate did.

The couple bought their new home in Jamul for \$610,000, after selling their Pasadena townhouse last fall for half a million.

GERDA: Without owning that townhouse in Pasadena, there was no way we could buy this place.

Gerda bought the townhouse for \$99,000 in 1985, when homes were still affordable for middle class California families.

She's a retired educator and diversity consultant.

Luis worked in cultural affairs at the city of Los Angeles.

Today, they live off of retirement savings, social security and a pension.

GERDA: It's our survival.

And they know they are fortunate to own and to have a pension, something fewer and fewer Californians can depend on.

GERDA: We have surely benefitted from the fact that we're older and came of age at a certain time.

Benefits they recognize aren't spread evenly. Benefits that allow them to follow their creative passions.

Luis and Gerda are artists.

He's a sculptor and painter. He points to a painting in bright blues, pinks and greens of geometric shapes.

LUIS: This is Seven Moons Without Borders.

And Gerda is a poet.

AMBI poetry reading "I love when he's in paint mode...."

She started writing after both her daughters died.

She's working on her fifth book now.

The couple see this new home as a place for their art to flourish.

They also want other artists to find inspiration here.

Gerda envisions leading weekend retreats.

GERDA: Women, 60 plus, who are writers or poets, but they're shying away from it. I want them to come out and experience the freedom, the air to tap what's already there.

Looking out on their sprawling property, on this overcast day, the couple puts their arms around each other.

GERDA: We're gonna take a chance. We're gonna go into this wide open space and see what happens.

In San Diego, I'm Amita Sharma.