

A Moving Experience

An Insider's Guide to Where to Live in the DC Area

By Vicki Wilson

I'll never forget the day my husband announced, "We're moving to Virginia."

I was devastated – I knew no one in the state; Virginia sounded like another planet to me. I loved Oak Park, IL, my home for 10 years. It was culturally and socio-economically diverse, and it had an old-fashioned downtown with a movie theater, independent bookstores and cute boutiques. Plus, as the site of Frank Lloyd Wright's home and studio, it was a beautiful place to live.

I was fully settled in the community. In fact, when I told a friend I was moving, she responded by saying, "The 'mayor' of Oak Park can't move!!"

Well, I can't say I held a political office, but I certainly considered myself an insider – the kind of person who could tell a new neighbor "the scoop" – from where to get the best ice cream to which dry cleaner to use to who the most popular pediatrician was. So, it made sense that I didn't want my search for a new community to be guided by generic information from realtors and travel guides – I wanted inside information.

I started a campaign. I asked all my friends who they knew in the DC area. Then, armed with phone numbers and email addresses, I wrote something like a personals ad describing what I was looking for. "Liberal, Jewish, NPR loving, movies-with-subtitles viewing, PTA-chairing, freelance-writing wife and mom of two who wants to be surrounded by same seeks new hometown."

Soon the responses began to pour in. In the end, we found a home in the Bannockburn neighborhood of Bethesda, and we've been here for a year. I've joined the PTA and am serving on the board of our community club. I'm also editing the community

newsletter. More importantly, everyone in my family has found lots of new friends in our new home. We're near the canal, close to DC and Bethesda's shopping and dining, and living in a neighborhood that throws potlucks, Halloween parades and an annual Spring Show. Slowly, I find myself becoming an insider.

Maybe you and your family are finding yourselves in the same situation. *Washington Parent* is here to help. We've asked insiders from all kinds of neighborhoods how they came to call their town "home."

VIRGINIA

"When I come home, I'm in a little piece of the Shenandoah Valley, with ridges and ravines, yet I'm five minutes from National Airport," says Carolyn Lundberg describing her South Arlington home. Lundberg and her husband have had several different addresses in the neighborhood over the last 15 years. They started out in an apartment, moved on to a small bungalow and finally landed in their current home, which is large enough for their family of four.

When the Lundbergs decided they needed more space, they looked in both North Arlington and Montgomery County, but ultimately decided to stay in South Arlington.

"To get a comparable house in [either of those places], it would have been at least \$200,000 more," explains Lundberg. Plus, Virginia was more their style.

"We both went to the University of Virginia, we prefer the politics here, and we felt there was a lot more to choose from, college-wise, in Virginia over Maryland."

Living in South Arlington offers the Lundbergs the best of two worlds. "The growth in the last 10 years has been explosive," Lundberg says. "Yet our neighborhood has still maintained a small-town, residential feel. Neighbors know each other. It would be hard to walk away [from the roots we've put down here]. This really is a small town in the heart of a large city."

Lundberg cites many neighborhood institutions as points of intersection where neighbors can get to know each other. These include a babysitting co-

op with a 30-year history, as well as the local preschool that Lundberg helped found.

Best kept secrets: *Cafe Italia, parks, playgrounds, libraries.*

“We came to Northern Virginia because all the job opportunities here made it a natural migration for Virginia Tech grads,” says Julie Stevens who lives with her husband and daughter in Fairfax.

The Stevens family can’t underestimate the power of Route 66, the main artery that takes them all sorts of places. They use it to get to their jobs, go to theaters and restaurants, and to visit friends. “It takes us wherever we want to go.”

Proximity to a variety of destinations was a factor in the Stevens’s decision about where to live. They like being close to Washington, but they also like that they are “three hours from the beach and three hours from the mountains.”

Best kept secrets: *Cox Farm, Reston Petting Zoo, parks full of kids.*

“I feel like we’re right in the middle of a lot of neat things,” says Daniella Harris of her home in Sterling. The growth in the area has been a pleasant surprise – when the Harrises relocated from Woodbridge seven years ago, Daniella considered the area pretty rural. The farmers were in for a high-tech surprise!

“This area is now the second Silicon Valley – AOL, PSINet and MCI Worldcom are all headquartered here,” Harris explains. Plus, Harris says, Sterling is not as far out there as people think. “We’re only 23 miles from DC.”

Harris is a consummate insider in her neighborhood because she started out working for the builder as a weekend sales rep. That way, she got to meet all her future neighbors before they even moved in. “After meeting all the neat people who were moving in, I could see that I would like it.”

Her family holds an important record: 7-year-old Ryan was the first baby born in the neighborhood. He has since been joined by 2-year-old Lindsay. Daniella stays involved by serving as president of the homeowner’s association.

Favorite places: *Historic Leesburg, Middleburg and the village at Waterford, VA.*

Besides being a wife, mother and Nordstrom employee, Vienna resident Nancy Efrus is a shopper. And right in her immediate area, she can find all the shopping she could want.

“Neiman Marcus, Tiffany, Fendi – they’re eight minutes from here,” says Nancy. Plus, she loves the charming local stores of downtown Vienna, like Posh, a “fabulous” gift shop.

But that’s not all that attracted the Efrus family to Vienna. When they were ready to move out of Annandale four years ago, they conducted a “total search around the Beltway.” Originally, they wanted to move to Maryland, but, in the end, Virginia was a better value.

“We fell upon Vienna and fell in love with it. We love the old-time downtown, with sidewalks, and little old houses that have been turned into shops.” They also love the schools, and the fact that they can be in the city in 15 minutes.

“We are absolutely at home here,” Efrus says.

Favorite places: *Cenan Bakery, local bead store and stationary store.*

“If you’re bored in Arlington, there’s something wrong with you,” says Teresa Friedlander about her hometown, a place she’s loved for the last 15 years.

Admittedly, the Friedlanders started out wanting to live in the District. When they had trouble finding a good value, they looked in Arlington and are now on their second house in the same north Arlington school district.

Appearances can be deceiving. “When you drive into our neighborhood, it might appear like a typical suburban neighborhood where neighbors go into their houses and then never see each other. But, it’s quite the opposite,” Friedlander says. She cites the pool and Christmas parties sponsored by the local civic association, as well as the Halloween parade, complete with an appearance by a local engine company. The family also enjoys the community center, which offers Arlington citizens classes in many areas such as photography, jewelry-making and pottery.

Best kept secrets: *Fort C.F. Smith (a Civil War fort), Arlington Center for the Dance, “cute” downtown you can walk to.*

MARYLAND

Like many people, a job brought Marilyn Donovan to her home in the town of Bowie in Prince Georges County. The pharmacy where she worked was located there, and the move shortened her commute considerably.

When her family grew to five and they outgrew their townhouse, the choice of where to buy a house was simple. The Donovan kids loved the Bowie Catholic school they attended, so they all just picked up and moved five miles up the road to a single family home.

“Bowie is a real family place, it’s very community-oriented,” says Donovan. And, Bowie boasts the one credential many neighborhoods aspire to – according to Donovan, many people who grew up in Bowie have returned to raise their own families there.

Donovan admits that it isn’t flashy, it isn’t about restaurants and shopping. But, she says, it’s a “great place for our kids to grow up.”

Favorite things: Bowie Boys and Girls Clubs, antique district and community pools.

What brought Liz Schrayner to Rockville? “We wanted to be near the Jewish Day School, so we moved here from Silver Spring in 1991,” she says. Schrayner adds that the difference in housing value for the money in Rockville compared with other towns inside the Beltway was “overwhelming.”

The school was the driving force for the family’s latest move to a second Rockville home a year and a half ago. “I didn’t want my kids to commute, so I found a home near the school.”

Rockville certainly affords the Schrayners plenty of convenience. Schrayner admits that “three-quarters of my life happens within three to four miles of my house.” Plus, their central location makes it easy to go places in every direction.

Schrayner would love it if Rockville had a real old-fashioned downtown, but she admits that she can get whatever she wants in the modern version of Main Street – nearby Rockville Pike.

Favorite places: Cabin John Park, bike trails, dog parks.

For Stephanie Raleigh, moving to Germantown was an idea whose time had come. Born and raised in New York, Raleigh used to visit her aunt in Germantown when she was a little girl. Back then it was pastoral – filled with woods and dotted with farms. “I used to say,

when I grow up, I want to live in a place like this,” she remembers.

Fast-forward to 1990. Raleigh’s sister was already living in Germantown. For Raleigh, walking into a shootout in New York City was the final blow – within three weeks she moved to Germantown, too.

“It was so peaceful; I liked the houses and the amenities like the pools and the tennis courts,” Raleigh says. And, even though subsequent development has encroached on the picturesque qualities she remembers, it hasn’t put a damper on the family activities the area offers.

The Raleigh family enjoys the Germantown Athletic Club and the community center. They also like to take in community events like the annual Fourth of July fireworks, Oktoberfest and the Taste of Germantown. “It’s a homey kind of place, a real close-knit community,” Raleigh says.

Best kept secrets: Winter Festival, East Coast Seafood Market, Woodside Deli, Pelican Pete’s, nearby Old Town Gaithersburg.

Eve Kornhauser moved from Silver Spring last June for two familiar reasons – a bigger house and a new school. After much investigation, the family decided on Potomac.

Initially, she says, they made the move on their kids’ behalf. Kornhauser says she didn’t necessarily want to live somewhere that was “more suburban” than where they already were. They considered close-in Bethesda and Kensington, but, all things considered, Potomac worked out best.

The area certainly is pretty. “Our house backs up to the Cabin John Conservation Area,” Kornhauser says, adding that her neighbors have been friendly and her location is convenient.

“It’s quiet and peaceful, and we are really happy with the school and the friends our kids have made.” Plus, Kornhauser adds that she enjoys easy access to natural areas nearby.

Favorite place: C&O Canal and Towpath.

WASHINGTON DC

The story of Sandra Sands’s move to the Logan Circle neighborhood of DC over 12 years ago could be filed under “Life is what happens when you’re making other plans.”

Sands and her husband came from San Francisco, a city they loved, and fully intended the move to be temporary – no more than five

years. The family started out in a 10-unit condo building in DuPont Circle.

“It reminded me of Manhattan – there was no real obvious sense of community – we only met one neighbor in the building the whole time we were there,” Sands recalls. Plus, it was noisy. “We had to learn to sleep with sirens all night long.”

The family also wanted more space, so they went house shopping. They knew they wanted to stay in the city because they wanted to be close to DC’s culture, plus they wanted an area that met several diversity criteria – racial, cultural and socioeconomic. The Victorian house they bought appealed to them emotionally as well because it reminded them of San Francisco.

“Our neighborhood now is quieter, and it’s a real community where people really know each other – and we don’t have any of the parking problems we had in DuPont Circle,” Sands says.

Two of the Sands kids are grown and out of the house, but the 9- and 12-year-olds can easily get to soccer, tennis and the neighborhood playground.

Safety can be a concern in any inner-city neighborhood. Fortunately, as the children have grown and their world has expanded, Sands feels the neighborhood has gotten safer.

“We always felt safe in our house, but now I think the neighborhood itself is safer. There’s a lot less obvious drug activity, and it’s almost impossible to find an abandoned house [which can often be a magnet for crime],” she says.

The obvious benefits of living downtown include being able to walk or bike to work, and easy access to theater, restaurants and museums.

“I really believe our neighborhood reflects the world we live in, and many of the people who choose to stay here are staying for the same reasons we are. I believe it’s important to keep our cities vital, because I think they’re the keepers of the culture.”

The rural nature of Scaggsville in Howard County was okay with Sheryl Denbo, but when it started getting too suburban, she and her family high-tailed it to the city’s Takoma Park neighborhood. They’ve been there for 10 years.

The move to Takoma Park also brought the family closer to Denbo’s daughter’s private school. But, a major factor in choosing Takoma Park was its well-known acceptance of diversity and multiculturalism.

Denbo feels that Takoma Park’s integration is genuine, and she attributes it to the varied, interspersed housing found on each block.

Admittedly, prices have ratcheted up recently, but you can still find “nice little cottages next to grand Victorians,” which means all kinds of people can live together in one neighborhood.

“We knew we made the right decision when we knocked on our neighbor’s door and found a mixed-race couple,” Denbo recalls.

Denbo cites the annual Fourth of July parade as a perfect example of what Takoma Park is all about. “It starts with the VFW and ends with something more outrageous every year—from lesbians and gays to the push-lawn mower brigade. How could you not love that?”

Denbo’s husband, who grew up in a small town in Rhode Island, now keeps an office in Takoma Park’s small, funky downtown. Denbo says he loves the fact that everyone in town knows him by name.

“It’s a wonderful little town, and we love the feeling of being attached to it. We love all the little independent shops – the Tibetan store, the bead shop, the Chinese antique store. I like to tell my kids that this is what it was like before WalMart.”

Favorite things: Farmer’s Market on Sundays, local bookstore, American Video.

Vicki Wilson is a contributing writer for Washington Parent, mother of two boys and, slowly, but surely, beginning to call the DC area home.