

## Chapter 7: Turning the corner

**By Christina Nifong** Staff Writer  
**The News & Observer**

**October 24, 2001**

Southern Wake County -- Seven-year-old Tyler came in from his afternoon skateboarding, biking and ball playing. His older sister, Briana, helped their mother finish cooking dinner. Karen Loper set out the casserole and called up to her husband, Scott. "Dinner's ready!" The four of them gathered around the oval table in Karen's prettily decorated kitchen; she had only the gingham curtains to finish making before every detail was done. Scott scooped out chicken, rotini and corn.

"We have green pasta, Tyler," Briana, 16, teased. "Are you going to have some green pasta?"

"It tastes just like regular pasta," Karen said.

"You're going to eat all of it," Scott laid down the law. Tyler lowered his nose to his plate to sniff for himself.

The silverware clanked on the plates and Briana talked of her test scores and teachers. It was the end of the quarter. Report cards were on their way.

Between bites, Tyler showed off his new spelling words. "A-p-p-l-e." "S-e-p-t ... oh, it's too hard. S-e-p-t-e-m? b? e-r!"

It hadn't taken long for the Lopers to become a typical Triangle family.

This time last year, Tyler, Briana, Karen and Scott had no idea what their futures might hold. Scott had signed on as a software engineer at Cisco Systems Inc. and was moving the family east from their southern Arizona home.

Getting from there to here hadn't been easy. Scott lived for six months in a series of corporate apartments and extended-stay hotel rooms. Karen left behind her mother, a collection of dear friends and a job she loved. Even Tyler lost a best friend who lived across the street.

But in the months since the family arrived and began settling in, all the stresses of buying a house and finding their way around a new place had given way to the more mundane. Grades, Halloween costumes, holiday plans.

There had been times when the Lopers thought they'd never recapture this sense of normalcy. Even now, they weren't quite sure how they had.

## **Big breaks**

About a month ago, Briana and Karen stood at the bus stop in the pre-dawn morning, when up drove a car and out stepped a girl named Candace Pittman. She was a junior at Garner High School, the same school Briana went to. Did Briana want a ride to school?

Briana couldn't believe her luck. Of course she wanted a ride. She scrambled into the car.

Until that moment, Briana had met almost no one at her new school. She walked the halls alone. Ate lunch virtually in silence. Went through the motions of her day, miserable.

But Candace's invitation changed everything. Candace was vice president of the junior class. She had an older sister and a big social circle. The two became fast friends and Briana stepped easily into Candace's world.

Briana joined the Alpha Omega service club at school, where Candace was a member. And the two went to the homecoming football game with other friends. They danced the macarena on a chaperoned visit to Bahama Breeze in Raleigh, staying out to nearly 2 a.m. They developed their own inside jokes. For Halloween, Briana planned to go to the carnival at Candace's church.

With this friendship, Briana's confidence soared. Her grades improved. She returned to her carefree, smiling self at home. She even figured out how to make up the classes she needed to catch up with her age group and become a senior next year. She would take some classes after school and others in the summer.

"School's a lot better," she said. "Now that I know people."

For Tyler, too, the unbelievable happened. He had spent the whole summer bugging his parents and throwing tantrums because he had no one to play with. Karen kept scoping their small, rural neighborhood to see if any children Tyler's age had moved in. She got so desperate she considered stopping people at the grocery store with children Tyler's age and asking where they lived.

Then, one late summer day, a new family moved in down the street. They had a 5-year-old boy. He and Tyler hit it off immediately. His name was Tyler, too.

## **A sudden shake-up**

Since the kids went back to school, Scott had established a comfortable routine of working at his Cisco office in Research Triangle Park from roughly 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., sometimes bringing home extra to do late into the night. The schedule kept him busy,

but it was more manageable than the marathon hours he'd put in at his last job. On occasion, he could even work from home all day. The flextime was a perk he was still getting used to.

But Scott was happy to be spending more time with his family. Some afternoons, he shot hoops with Tyler in the driveway. One day, he packed two lunches, moved all the boxes off his boat in the garage and went to Lake Wheeler for a fishing trip with his boy.

Scott was feeling good about his choices, about this new place and this new life.

Until Sept. 11.

Then, he found himself suddenly missing his old job with The MITRE Corp., a nonprofit that specializes in federally funded research and development and has the bulk of its contracts with the Department of Defense. With MITRE, Scott worked on technology that the 10th Mountain Division and other military units would likely use in a prolonged war against terrorism.

It's not that Scott was unhappy with what he was doing at Cisco, developing ways to securely transfer data between computers. But with his country at war, the Army veteran could see how the work he had done at MITRE really mattered.

Right away, he went to his supervisors at Cisco, laid out his past experience in detail and volunteered to work on any defense contracts they may get in the future. He says they told him they'd keep him in mind.

The attacks brought home another point for Scott, too: how much he missed his MITRE co-workers.

"When the Sept. 11 thing happened, I had to call my old friends to talk to them," he said. "I think that's been the biggest adjustment [with this move]. The social thing. Before I was working with all ex-military. Now it's just not the same type of camaraderie as I was used to."

## **Surprise!**

When Karen landed in the Triangle, she thought there was no way her life could change any more. She was leaving the Southwest she loved and her mother, her best friend. She was going to stay home from work for the first time since Briana was a baby. She was moving into a new house, meeting new neighbors, getting the kids ready for new schools. How could it get more different than that?

Then, it did. At 40, with back troubles and arthritis, Karen found out she was pregnant.

She was shocked at first, then worried. She and Scott had thought of having another child when Tyler -- and Karen -- were younger. But now? After this big move? With Karen not working? Could they afford it? What about her health -- and the baby's?

But as the months went on and the tests came back showing no problems, Karen began to get used to the idea of having another little one around the house.

They found out (to Scott's delight) they would be having a boy. He was due at the end of February. Karen hoped he'd be born on Feb. 18, her birthday.

They didn't have an extra bedroom, but they figured out a place to put him. He would be with Scott and Karen at the beginning, then share a room with Tyler, then, once Briana moved away from home, Tyler and the baby could have their own rooms again.

Everything was working out. Just as Karen knew it always did.

### **Life goes on**

Scott finished washing the chicken casserole dishes and bundled the trash to take out. Briana and Tyler bounded back into the kitchen from watching TV with Karen. Karen followed them in.

The family stood around the island counter. The copper pot rack hanging above it was a gift from Karen's old workplace.

This was how the Lopers passed their evenings now. Together. Enjoying the little things.

Tyler was preoccupied with a loose tooth, twisting and pulling, determined to get it out. When it came -- the fifth tooth he had lost since moving here -- he held it in front of himself like a trophy.

"Tick-tack-toe, three in a row," he said, referring to his three missing front teeth.

But Scott only heard his son's now flawed enunciation.

"Thufferin' Thuccotash," Scott teased, mimicking a Sylvester on the hunt for Tweety.

And all of them, all four -- with another on the way -- dissolved into giggles.

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Newcomers' timeline:

May 22, 2001

The Lopers finally close on their house.

July 2001

Karen finds out she's pregnant.

Aug. 7, 2001

Karen's parents and Briana arrive at the Lopers'.

Aug. 13, 2001

The first day of school for Briana and Tyler.

Aug. 28, 2001

Karen's parents leave, heading back to Arizona.

September 2001

New family moves in across the street with a boy for Tyler to play with.

Sept. 11, 2001

Terrorists attack the United States. The tragedy gets Scott thinking about his old job and his old friends.

Sept. 12, 2001

Briana makes her first friend at school.

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About the series:

The roughly 2,000 newcomers who move to the Triangle every month have helped boost the area's population by nearly 40 percent since 1990. They've also transformed the region.

To tell their story, The News & Observer has been following Scott and Karen Loper and their children, Briana, 16, and Tyler, 7, as they left their Arizona home and settled into a new life in southern Wake County. Scott moved last November to take a job as a software engineer at Cisco Systems. Karen and Tyler arrived in May and Briana in August.