

Restless heart - Chapter 1

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Sierra Vista, Ariz. -- The Loper family's great adventure began with a dream. It was mostly Scott Loper's dream in the beginning. A dream of returning home to the wide-open cornfields and sparsely traveled roads of his rural Midwest childhood. He'd be closer to his brother, his parents, his practical-joking uncles. And he'd be living once again in a place that felt right. Where lakes for fishing were a cast away and lands for hunting were your neighbors'. Where there was cold and snow and biting flies and summer was never long enough to do all you wanted.

This is what he'd longed for ever since moving to Arizona 10 years earlier. Now, with a 6-year-old son to teach the ways of the world to, getting home was only that much more pressing.

Soon, Scott had his wife, Karen, on board, too. She'd spent all her life in the Southwest, in Utah and Arizona, so she couldn't relate to his yearning for home. But she was ready for a change. She'd never planned to stay so long in Sierra Vista, the hot desert town outside Tucson birthed by Fort Huachuca military base. This was where she'd fled when her first marriage failed and she and her young daughter had needed the help of Mom and Stepdad. Somehow, over the years, she'd never left.

If this were her dream, she'd move to Salt Lake City. There, she would be surrounded by her family -- and those beautiful snow-capped mountains. But to hear Scott wax on and on about Indiana, Michigan, those trips to Canada he'd taken as a teen, she couldn't help but catch his fever. Besides, it would be good for their son Tyler to spend more time with his Loper grandparents. And it would be a chance for her 15-year-old daughter, Briana, to get the fresh start she was in need of these days.

The more the couple thought of uprooting, the more intoxicated they became. No more driving hours and hours to find a lake for that new boat they'd bought. No more oppressive heat that lasted nearly all year. With this move, they'd get a new house, with more closets, a garden tub, a roomy kitchen. And a yard, big as they wanted, big enough for Scott and Tyler to play football in on the weekends.

So Scott started to look for work as a software engineer. He began in earnest last August, sending out his resume, answering ads, networking. And he got some good leads. First, he heard about lucrative contract work, but that didn't seem stable enough. Later he interviewed at the University of Notre Dame. It went well, but he had to

wonder if he'd be happy leaving cutting-edge research to baby-sit college students' computers. He kept his options open.

Then a friend phoned. A company named Cisco Systems was hiring in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Scott should really consider the job. Just visit and see.

Scott wasn't interested. North Carolina? The Triangle? He'd read about how built up that area had become. The last thing he wanted was traffic and crowds and city living. This was his chance to move back to his boyhood.

But he set up an interview anyway. He got on the plane.

And nothing was the same after that.

Cisco comes calling

To know Scott, you must know this: As much as he talks of forests and fishing, of bathing naked in chilled lake water and close encounters with grizzlies, in his heart, he's a workaholic.

Since joining the Army in 1987 at 19, Scott has pushed himself as hard as he could go. In 1991, he left the Army behind, but not the military. He had become a systems guy. And took a job at Fort Huachuca in southern Arizona as a civilian working under military command to help the Army, Navy and Air Force communicate with one another. His job took him all over the world, setting up telephone and computer networks and sorting out their kinks. He worked 70, 80, 90 hours a week.

By then, though, it wasn't just his drive that kept him at the office. Scott had discovered he absolutely loved the work he'd happened into.

To keep moving up in his field, he decided he had to go back to college. It didn't matter that he had a wife now and a stepdaughter and his own baby boy to raise. College was the next step. So he signed up for weekend and night classes at the University of Phoenix.

Then, in and around the chemistry, engineering and computer programming, he landed a job so good he couldn't believe his luck. His new company was The MITRE Corp., a nonprofit specializing in federally funded research and development. It was the best of government-financed R&D. Scott felt honored to be there.

But after two years, the travel had drained him. His project was moving in a direction he wasn't interested in going. And the work he was doing would be taking him to Fort Hood, Texas. After visiting, Scott knew Texas was not where he wanted to go.

He'd earned his bachelor's degree. The high-tech industry was booming. It was time to make his move.

That was when Cisco found him.

After talking to managers there, Scott was psyched. At Cisco, he'd get to do exactly what thrilled him: Testing huge computer conglomerations to see how much they could do and how fast they could do it. His efforts would support companies like AT&T and WorldCom.

"I feel like Cisco just like I felt about MITRE," he says. "That they're better than all the others."

Plus, his trip to the Triangle had eased his fears about RTP being too urban. No, he wouldn't have his brother close by, and there wouldn't be much snow. But the Raleigh area did have trees and lakes and woods. He could camp with his family. He could afford a new house on a big lot. This was workable.

How could he say no?

Ready for a move

Karen was thrown for a loop. North Carolina was so far away. From her family, from Scott's family, from everything they'd talked about. Sure it was a good job, but ...

Yet, if that's what Scott wanted, if he thought this would make him happy, she was game. It would still be an adventure. A fresh start. Her mom and stepdad were retired. She would make them come to her.

As Scott laid plans for the move, Karen kept working as the manager of food services at her daughter's school, minding the kids, visiting her friends, leaning on her folks. She knew she could handle this. She'd just take it one step at a time.

"I don't sweat the small stuff," she says. It's a philosophy that had gotten her through much worse than a cross-country move.

In her nearly 40 years, Karen had bounced back from an ugly divorce and from the frenzied life of a single mom, working and raising a toddler, living in a mobile home. She'd been laid off twice, right after moving to Sierra Vista. In the recession of the early '90s, she'd cleaned hotel rooms to pay the bills.

Over time, she worked her way up to desk clerk at a local hotel, then was hired by Marriott as a secretary in 1991. When the company needed a manager to oversee service at Sierra Vista's high school, they chose Karen. She loved the work. Loved her boss, her schedule.

It took awhile, but Karen's roll-with-the-punches attitude eventually landed her back on top. If only she could teach her daughter Briana that that's how the world worked. And that this move wouldn't be as bad as she imagined it.

Because while Karen thought a change of venue would suit her struggling daughter, 15-year-old Briana had other ideas.

She would be leaving her friends, her grandparents, her home. All she'd ever known. Not that Sierra Vista was so great or anything, but neither was -- where were they going? Raleigh? She would never make friends. Never fit in.

Plus, her school years were all messed up. Her grades had been so bad during the last two years that she would likely have to repeat her freshman year again.

"I don't want to go," she says emphatically. "I don't want to leave my friends. It's scary because it'll be so different."

All Karen could do was talk to her. And hope she'd come around.

With Tyler, it was easier. He was still so young. He'd be quicker to readjust. The hardest part for him had been being away from his father for so long. The move would bring him back to Dad.

About two months after interviewing, Scott packed up the pickup and headed East. Karen put the house on the market. They were headed into the holidays, a tough time to sell a house. The plan was that she would stay in Arizona with the kids till it sold. And until all the machinations of a move could be put into motion.

Part of Karen still couldn't believe that this was really going to happen. That Cisco would be their new livelihood. That it was only a matter of time before they would all be calling North Carolina home.

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Newcomers' timeline:

August, 2000

Scott begins his job search.

September, 2000

Scott interviews at RTP's Cisco Systems.

Nov. 1, 2000

The Lopers put their house on the market.

Nov. 20, 2000

Scott moves to the Triangle

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About the series:

Every month, roughly 2,000 newcomers move to the Triangle. From New York, out West, south of the border. They come for the region's good jobs, pace of life, mild winters. And they've helped push this area's population nearly 40 percent higher in the last decade, according to 2000 census figures.

But for some, it's not so simple to put down new roots -- or to embrace the Triangle's humidity, love of college basketball and lack of upscale shopping. Making friends and feeling connected to a new place takes even longer.

To tell the story of these newcomers, The News & Observer will follow the Lopers -- Karen, Scott, Briana and Tyler -- as they pack up their lives in Arizona, settle into a new home, start new jobs and new schools, adjust to life in the Triangle. Scott started work last November as a software engineer with Cisco Systems. Karen and their 6-year-old son, Tyler, will come in May. Briana, 15, arrives this summer.

Their story is not everyone's story, of course. But we hope this area's many transplants will see something of themselves in the Lopers. And natives will learn more of what it's like to move here as an outsider. Today is the first in this occasional series.