

A place to stay

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Three springs ago, Sherri Guagliardi launched into what has become a familiar American pastime. She folded together a corrugated box and began placing her life inside.

She and her husband moved from Baltimore to Cary. It hadn't been two years since their last relocation, from Kokomo, Ind. Yet here they were, on the road again.

In the Triangle, the Guagliardis took the standard steps to acclimate themselves. They bought a house in an older subdivision and met their neighbors. Gary started his job as a phone systems sales manager while Guagliardi had a baby. The couple joined Christ the King Lutheran Church.

But it wasn't until this June that Guagliardi began to feel her roots sink into Cary's soil. By then, she had convinced her parents to retire here; they live two miles away. And by then, the Guagliardis had moved again, this time within Cary, to a neighborhood filled with families with young children.

"We weren't really settled till this year," says Guagliardi, 36, who is expecting her second child in November. "But now, I finally feel at home."

Every summer, some 3,600 people move to the Triangle's six-county region, according to Raleigh's Chamber of Commerce. They are lured by a strong job market, a slower pace of life and the area's family friendly reputation.

And each fall, these newcomers begin the long season of settling in.

For some, the friends and familiarity that transform mere streets and stores into a community are acquired within months. For others, the process takes much longer. Still others will move again before they have a chance to become a part of the place they live.

But with each passing day, each name committed to memory, each discovery of a place to eat or dance or unwind, the Triangle feels less like the location where these newest residents have landed and more like a home from which they will grow.

"It's hard to adjust when you were born in one state and lived there a very long time," says Virginia Palmer, Guagliardi's mother, who moved from Ohio at the end of last year. "But it's coming, it's coming."

A steady stream

Census figures show that the Triangle has added a steady stream of newcomers throughout the '90s. The area grew by 26 percent from 1990 to '97 and another 2 percent from '97 to '98.

And behind each percentage point lies someone with his or her own expectations, own ties to someplace else, own pace for fitting in.

Jody Barish and her husband, Jay, moved to Cary from Pittsburgh at the end of June. For them, this move was the realization of a two-year dream. They were ready for a warmer place, a newer place, a place with good jobs - she's in health care, he's in information technology - and good schools for the family they are starting.

So far, they've been delighted by the area's Southern hospitality; when Barish, 35, asked for a recommendation for a doctor, her neighbor supplied a three-page list.

And while they can't yet believe that Cary is their new home (Barish lived her whole life in Pittsburgh), they are nothing if not excited to be here.

"We'll drive around and say, 'We live here,' " Barish says with a grin. "It's still shocking that we're not just visiting."

For others, the move to the Triangle has meant more of a sacrifice. Rosa Jackyra's computer programming husband was transferred to North Carolina from Connecticut - but only for two years. While he moved in January, she stayed behind with their four children to allow them to finish school and confirmation classes and the soccer season. Now they are all living in a rented house, with no idea what awaits them.

"We don't know where the work will go after that," she says. "I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

Those who study the stresses of moving say the reasons behind a newcomer's move can have a huge impact on how quickly he or she is woven into the fabric of the new place. "Part of how long it takes to feel at home has to do with how resistant you are to adapting," says Susan Ginsberg, author of the book "Family Wisdom" and editor and publisher of the Work & Family Life newsletter, based in Manhattan. "Your situation can make a big difference in your attitude about moving."

The Kroger connection

Sometimes it's the little things that make a new place feel familiar.

For Palmer, the simple sight of a Kroger supermarket can lift her spirits. She is originally from Cincinnati, the company's headquarters. "When I first moved here and I saw Kroger, that was a little bit of home," she says.

Regina Wolf knew she could be happy in the Triangle about three weeks after retiring here from New York. That was when she happened onto the crafts scene. She sews, she says, and "the availability of classes and fabric stores here is just wonderful - much to my surprise."

Yvonne Sullivan has moved with her family five times in 10 years, most recently from Greenville. She says settling in has become its own routine: Meet the neighbors, get the kids in school, find one's way around town. For her, whatever city she has moved to becomes home as soon as she gets the house in order - the pictures on the wall, the curtains on the windows. "After moving so many times, I settle in real quick," she says.

But often it's not until newcomers have to make a life-changing decision that they realize their new address has actually become their new home.

Rodrigo Soberano, 31, moved from Gainesville, Fla., to Durham with his wife three years ago - he to work as a broker for Merrill Lynch and she to start a medical practice. Their early days were a blur of work and starting their new family. It wasn't until they decided to buy a house a year ago that they realized they'd made the Triangle their hometown. "For us, this is it," Soberano says.

It was the same for the Littletons. They came to the Triangle via Allentown, Pa., via Chicago via Philadelphia via Washington, and on and on. After a year, Mike Littleton decided to leave his company, but stay in the area. "I guess we never really asked ourselves where home was before that decision," Norma Littleton says. "Now, I think we'll be here forever."

Making a new community home is an ongoing process, author Ginsberg says. First, there's mapping out the surroundings, then building a support system and finally, forging lifelong friendships.

"You adjust on different levels," Ginsberg says. "There's a lot of routine stuff you need to figure out at first and once do that, that's very reassuring. But creating a sense of home is not going to happen overnight."

Settling in

Guagliardi remembers struggling through her first months in Cary. She arrived knowing no one, five months pregnant and making a lifestyle as well as a geographic change: For the first time in 12 years, she would be staying at home, not working as an engineer for General Motors.

"I was just waiting to have the baby," she says.

Once her son, Joey, was born, she entered a new kind of isolation. The few contacts she had made, she dropped for the next six months while she focused on caring for him. Her husband traveled frequently with his job. It was nearly a year after Guagliardi moved to Cary that she even began trying to re-create the wide network of friends she had when she left Indiana.

The good news is she succeeded. These days her weeks are a busy collection of play dates for Joey, Bible discussion groups and meetings of the Cary Newcomer's Club, for which she is vice president in charge of programming.

"I feel like I have a lot of women friends now," she says. The next challenge is helping her husband connect. "He's been so busy, he hasn't had time to make a close guy friend."

But Guagliardi is sure he will. After all, it was his affinity for the area - he had lived and worked in Raleigh years ago, before they met - that brought them here in the first place. And she's sure her parents will make the kind of deep friendships they had before they moved from Ohio.

She's sure because now, 2 1/2 years after moving to Cary, after having one child and with another on the way, after seeing her husband thrive in his new job, after wooing her parents to the area, she knows this corner of North Carolina is her new home.

"Oh, definitely," she says with an easy smile. "We'll be staying put."