

Couple finds riches in the city

By MARSHALL MILLER and DORIAN SOLOT

The Capital Region's recent distinction as the least stressful large metropolitan area in the nation makes perfect sense to us.

A month ago, we moved to Albany from the Boston area. We didn't come because of a job offer -- our work as writers and the founders of a small national nonprofit frees us to live anywhere in the country.

A young couple, we'd spent the last six years living 40 minutes outside Boston because we couldn't afford to live closer to the city. Depressed by the isolation of suburban life and frustrated by Boston's exorbitant housing prices, we'd been searching for another city to call home.

On long car rides, we'd make lists of what our dream city would be like. Its neighborhoods would have a real sense of connection, with community bulletin boards and neighbors who knew each other's names. (In the suburbs where we lived, the basic setup of homes separated by driveways and lawns meant neighbors mostly went from house to car without encountering each other).

It would have plenty of inexpensive ethnic food. (We were tired of having to choose between pizza and Chinese food, the only options in our town for a quick bite on an overcommitted night.) There would be a movie theater where we could see independent films and documentaries, and a thriving community of political activists.

It would have bookstores and galleries, lots to do on the weekends, flower boxes and parks, a bike trail (for Marshall) and folk dancing (for Dorian). It would have an airport with discount airlines. It would be affordable enough for us to buy a house. And it would be on the East Coast, in reasonable proximity to our relatives.

Over a period of years, visiting cities became our hobby. We were forced to eliminate most of the big ones because they were too expensive. We crossed some smaller ones off our list because they were too far from our families, and others because their pervasive sense of hopelessness outweighed any feeling of vibrant urban life.

Last July, we stopped in Albany for an afternoon, and in a few short hours we began to suspect we'd stumbled upon a gem. Lark Street hummed with bookstores and ethnic restaurants. The streets were lined with flowers. Banners in Washington Park boasted of a summer of outdoor concerts. The copies of newspapers we picked up listed more appealing events that week alone than we'd ever have time to attend. Most amazing of all were the real estate prices: Beautiful old houses that would have cost more than \$1 million in Boston were selling in the low \$100,000s.

Seduced by that warm July day -- a far cry from this January chill -- we planned a trip back a few weeks later to explore Albany's neighborhoods more closely. On each

subsequent trip, we checked more items off our "dream city" list and became a little more enchanted with Albany. We loved the way it emerges glittering from the mountains as we'd round the curve on 90 West, the way the presence of the state Capitol and multiple colleges ensures a supply of jobs and fresh ideas, the racial and class diversity.

We were blown away by the couple we approached on the street, who, upon hearing we strangers were considering buying a house in their neighborhood, invited us in to show off their house, purchased earlier in the year. Friends who'd gone to college in Albany raved about the Honest Weight Food Co-op and advised us on the best coffee shops in town.

Even in the most economically challenged parts of the city, there seemed to be signs of renewal: abandoned houses being auctioned to new owners, local people hired to help renovate blocks, strong neighborhood associations, historic churches and theaters being restored.

The day we closed on our house in the Mansion neighborhood, our new neighbors invited us for dinner with three others from the block. People welcomed us with unbelievable warmth, inviting us to holiday parties even before we'd moved in, shoveling and salting our steps so they'd be ice-free when we finally arrived with our U-Haul, even helping us unload the truck. In a month, we've met more people here than we knew in six years in the suburbs.

We're not so naive as to think Albany is the land of milk and honey. The lack of residential parking stickers is a hassle. It's as cold as people warned us it would be, even for us New Englanders. As in most places, there are gaping divides between those who dine in Albany's finest restaurants and those who struggle to afford groceries. The recent tragic deaths in the news have given us all pause.

But as we spackle walls, get library cards and stock up on long underwear, we're thrilled to call Albany home, and eager to join the many people working to make it even better. Our next project is to convince our Boston friends to move here to join us. In order to answer that puzzled question we heard a hundred times, ``You're moving to *Albany*? Why Albany?``, we plan to invite them for a visit.

We think we'll wait until July.

Marshall Miler and Dorian Solot are the authors of "Unmarried to Each Other: The Essential Guide to Living Together as an Unmarried Couple," and founders of the Alternatives to Marriage Project.

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