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Becoming Pittsburghers

BY MARY S. GILBERT

Just who is moving into all of the houses being sold in our neighborhoods? More newcomers to the area than you might think.

When the University of Pittsburgh first contacted pulmonologist Dr. Steven Shapiro about a position as chairman of the department of medicine, he politely declined.

He knew the obstacles to such a move were formidable. His wife, Nicole, had never lived west of Washington, D.C. Her entire family lived in Boston. She envisioned Pittsburgh as a dirty industrial town. A diehard New England Patriots fan, she grew up despising (her word) the Pittsburgh Steelers. She was pregnant with their second child, and they were in the midst of renovating their house in Boston.

Fast-forward five years and Nicole Shapiro is singing a different tune—from her Shadyside home. The seeds of her transformation were sown with her first exploratory visit here during her husband's recruitment to Pitt. Believing the job could be the right financial move for their family, she finally agreed to look at the city.

"Steve will tell you that the job clearly was important, but my liking Pittsburgh and being able to see ourselves here was critical," she stresses. "My expectations were very low, and I was really pleasantly surprised. I thought the city was attractive and livable."

The Shapiros and thousands of other newcomers have kicked off what appears to be the first population growth spurt in the region in the last half-century.

2010 U.S. Census data show that Pittsburgh experienced an 8.6 percent loss in residents over the past decade—that's an exodus of 28,865 people. But the latest census figures also suggest that

the longtime regional decline began to reverse in the final year of the decade—and the period from mid-2009 to mid-2010 actually saw a net population gain. While Allegheny County lost 58,318 residents since the 2000 Census, or 4.6 percent of its total, year-by-year estimates suggest the population hit bottom in 2008, picking up nearly 2,000 people since then.

"Relocations are on the uptick," says Ellen A. Roth, president of Getting to the Point, Inc., a premier relocation company based in Point Breeze. "Pittsburgh has been in the spotlight recently. We received a tremendous amount of global press when the G-20 met here. We rate high on so many quality-of-life variables that it resonates with people everywhere."

Getting to the Point has helped many newcomers like the Shapiros from across the United States and the world adjust to life in Pittsburgh. Roth and co-founder Jacqui Fiske Lazo launched their business to offer help they couldn't find themselves



At a March luncheon celebrating the 20th anniversary of Getting to the Point, Inc., company president Dr. Ellen Roth (second from the left) was joined by women she has helped relocate to Pittsburgh, including (from left to right) Vicki Holthaus of Shadyside, Dr. Aletha Akers of Squirrel Hill, and Danielle Mosse of Shadyside.

Photo by Karen Schmidt



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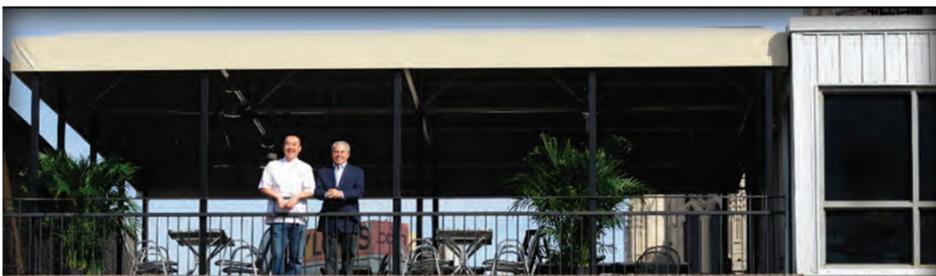
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Becoming Pittsburghers



Jeanne Antonuccio, president of About Pittsburgh, sits flanked by Benjamin and Madeleine Park. She helped relocate the children's parents, April and Matt Park, when they moved to Pittsburgh several years ago.

upon moving here years ago, such as neighborhood and school recommendations, personalized orientation tours, career assistance for spouses, networking and referrals, and six months of "settling in" services.

Many of the people they serve are health care professionals, executives, and others recruited by the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and UPMC. When these newcomers look for neighborhoods in which to live, our local communities are prime real estate, according to Roth. "Given that the universities and the medical center are in Oakland, the East End and Fox Chapel neighborhoods are quite attractive to newcomers," she says.

Jeanne Antonuccio, president of the Squirrel Hill-based recruiting and relocation consulting firm About Pittsburgh, agrees. "One area in particular that's really growing is Oakland, with its universities and medical," she observes. "It has a lot of condominiums, and people are moving in."

Fox Chapel is also very accessible to the city, Antonuccio adds. "It has great schools, neighborhoods, beautiful country clubs, and public and private school options," she says. "When you live there, you don't think about going into the East End—you just do it."

About Pittsburgh has experienced a recent surge in business as the economy improves and companies lure new prospects, many of them professionals and creative workers. And while a lot of newcomers relocate to Pittsburgh for specific jobs, some young people are first choosing the city itself and then focusing on the opportunities they might find here. These include highly sought-after college graduates. For the first time in years, the Pittsburgh metro area had the tiniest fraction more college graduates arriving than departing—a 0.3 percent "brain gain"—between

2007 and 2009, according to a study by William H. Frey of the Brookings Institution.

"We're not an area that relies on one industry," Antonuccio explains. "We have many different sectors—health care, finance, research, universities, manufacturing—so we're attracting many different personalities. Boomerangers, people who used to live here, are coming back, often starting their own business if they can't find a job."

Last year Bill Nichols was living in Austin, Texas, with his wife, Haven, and daughter, Meris, and looking for a new career challenge. He found it with the Frick Art & Historical Center in Point Breeze and moved last November to become the director of operations and visitor services there. The family resides in O'Hara Township at The Docks apartment complex.

Nichols first arrived here with a preconceived idea that the city was dirty from the steel industry. "I didn't see that," he says, "and I was impressed with the way the city had been flexible and evolved and broadened itself as its economy changed."

About Pittsburgh steered the Nichols to neighborhoods within close proximity to his office, convenient shopping, and places that would appeal to their daughter, such as Squaw Valley Park. An outdoorsman, he was attracted to fly fishing, kayaking, hiking, and camping opportunities in the area. His wife now takes yoga and CPR classes.

"It's good for the city to have newcomers," he says. "It presents an opportunity for a fresh set of eyes to look at things, for innovation, and an exchange of ideas."

The Shapiros would share this opinion. They are still living in Shadyside with their young daughters, Skylar, Ellery, and Mason, two of whom attend The Ellis School. Steven Shapiro has since become senior vice president and chief medical and scientific officer at UPMC, and his wife has become an admitted convert to the area after some adjustment time.

"I wasn't accustomed to such friendly people," she says. "In the Northeast, passersby avert their eyes. Here people make eye contact, smile, and wave. That took some getting used to, and it's been really nice."

While still not a Steelers fan, she pays Pittsburgh the ultimate compliment. "I felt at home here in less than a year," Shapiro confesses. "After a couple of years, Steve asked if I'd want to go back to Boston, and I said, 'No.' I can't imagine what it would take to get us back there." SA

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