

■ Kevin McGhaw got a job offer and was pleasantly surprised when he and his wife Rotrice made the trip from Washington, D.C., to check out Huntsville. Now the McGhaw family are among the many newcomers to the area. Rotrice and Kevin McGhaw stand behind their children, Kaiya and Kevin Jr.

Photo by Bob Gathary.



A Balanced Place

NEW ARRIVALS ARE IMPRESSED WITH WHAT THEY FIND

By Diana LaChance

Huntsville has earned an impressive array of accolades over the years, including being named by *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* as one of the country's Top 10 Cities for Raising Families and by *CNN/Money* as one of the nation's Most Affordable Cities.

Huntsville has been atop the latter's list of one of America's Top 25 Places to Retire for the past two years running. But people who move to the Huntsville/Madison County area often find something extra beyond what the accolades can convey, and they discover a fuller understanding of exactly what these impressive achievements mean.

Take it from Aaron King, Kevin McGhaw and Becky Pillsbury, all of whom began their lives and their careers elsewhere, but ended up relocating to Huntsville in recent years.

For Aaron King, a former Army officer and West Point graduate, moving to Huntsville probably seemed like just another stop on the military train.

"I've lived in San Diego, Indianapolis, Lawton, West Point, and a dozen other cities and towns around the United States," he said.

But what he discovered when he got here was a place like no other he'd lived. "I have found home here in Huntsville," he said. "I can honestly say there is no other place I would rather call home."

King and his family, wife Kristen and 3-year-old daughter Elizabeth, arrived in the Rocket City in July 2011. He had been recruited for the position of director of transition for Huntsville City Schools by Superintendent Dr. Casey Wardynski to help with the "transformational reform and system overhaul."

Despite holding a master's degree in educational leadership, King said, "I had apprehensions, as anyone might." Today, those apprehensions have given way to pride at what has been accomplished – "the district went from \$19.5 million in the red to over \$3 million in the black" – and optimism for the future.

"As a school system, we are on the move and we'll soon pass the rest of the state," he said. "We are looking to be the best school system in the country, and that's just one of our goals."

King is quick to share credit, however. He said that a lot of the success is due to the city leadership's support and involvement.

"I cannot tell you how many times I have had the opportunity to sit and talk with the mayor, city council, county commissioners and state representatives. For most cities this size, that's

unusual," he said. "The best part is that they actually listen and tend to make sound judgments based on the best information available. I cannot say enough good things about the Chamber and our local businesses; they are all working diligently to aid us in the revamp of our schools."

He added that the commitment among the leadership extends to the community as a whole. "I think Huntsville's leaders are doing a fine job in making the city a great place to live," said King. "I'm impressed with the transparency of the city's officials, the police department and the fire department, as well as our elected leaders."

He and his wife especially appreciate the city's "small-town feel," he said, and spend many a warm evening "taking walks in our neighborhood and in general just spending time together." In short, said King, "I feel lucky to be in the position I am in and even luckier to lay my head down in one of the greatest cities in the United States: Huntsville, Alabama."

Like King, Kevin McGhaw is another recent transplant. He, his wife Rotrice, and two children moved to Huntsville in the winter of 2008 when he took a position at Marshall Space Flight Center as legislative affairs specialist for NASA. Although he was excited about his new job opportunity, he was less than enthusiastic about the move it entailed.

"It wasn't an anti-Alabama stance," he said. "I just didn't know anything about Huntsville.

I had grown up in Washington, D.C., and figured I'd grow old there and maybe move to Miami... I didn't know a soul here!"

It wasn't until he received the job offer and he and his wife came down to take a closer look at Huntsville that he realized what he'd be missing out on by not moving. "We went to Bridge Street, Jones Valley – we loved it! Madison County, Huntsville, the whole region," he said.

So he and his wife made an agreement: If the city was able to meet their top three criteria, they would move here. Those criteria: A church home where they could feel like they were part of a community, a school system that would challenge their kids and a great home in a great neighborhood where their kids could play.

Nearly five years later, the McGhaw family said they're here to stay. "The things we're looking for in quality of life, we've found right here," said McGhaw.

That's because the city has exceeded McGhaw's criteria. "The role that faith plays here is very different from D.C., and for us that's a huge positive," he said. "It speaks to the kind of environment in which you want to raise your kids."

On top of that, he feels safe here.

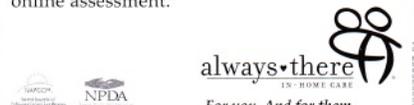
"There are so many families here – my son has three friends within a 10-house radius, and three of my daughter's best friends live in the neighborhood, so they can walk to their friends' house and we're more at ease about them making it there," he said.

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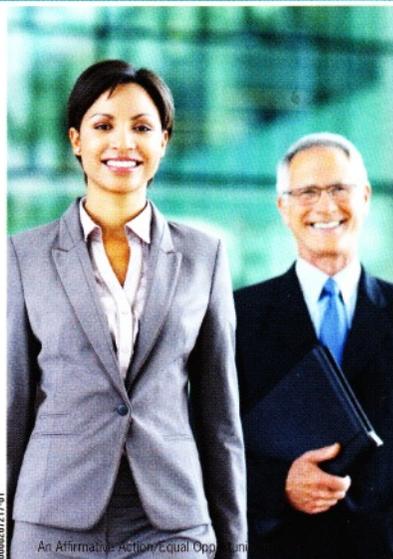
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And for McGhaw and Rotrice, there's one other noticeable improvement: Their commute times. On a good day in D.C., it would take him 50 minutes to an hour to get to work. That meant regularly missing his kids' after-school activities.

"Now I can coach my kid's little league football team," he said. "I'm able to take the kids to Bible study and choir practice and saxophone lessons."

As for Rotrice, she now works from home. "That absolutely adds to our quality of life," said McGhaw.

McGhaw anticipates that quality will improve, thanks to what he's seen since becoming the legislative affairs specialist.

"I work with the mayors of both Madison and Huntsville, as well as the county commissioner, and they have a team approach to leadership," he said. "The borders aren't as important to them as improving the quality of life for the region. I just can't commend enough the way the three have worked together in collaboration. They collectively go to the state or D.C. to lobby for resources because it's best for the entire region – that's unique."

Some stores and restaurants close earlier at night than in D.C., but McGhaw said that is a small trade-off.

"Yes, things do close a little early or don't open on Sunday, but the people here want to go to their kids' games like I want to go to mine," he said. "And it's that community support, even among people who don't have kids, that makes the city such a great place to raise a family."

McGhaw suggests potential residents check out the area for a day or two.

"If your job is relocating and you're apprehensive, just fly down and visit," he said. "I suspect you will leave with a very different perspective."

That's advice Becky Pillsbury probably should have taken before she and her husband, Jim, decided to buy a retirement property in Kentucky. As a military family, the Pillsburys had lived all over the country, but had decided to spend their sunset years on a golf course residence they had purchased while Jim was stationed in Kentucky.

Then in 2003, Lt. Gen. Pillsbury was promoted to commander of Redstone Arsenal and the Army Aviation and Missile Command.

"We were here for all of six months when Jim looked at me and said 'We'd better sell that property in Kentucky and buy something here,'" Becky said. "And I said, 'You're absolutely right.' It was that quick."

Becky wasn't initially thrilled about the move to northern Alabama. For one thing, she didn't know much about it. Her only exposure to Huntsville had been a short visit with her son and daughter to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center while Jim was deployed during the Gulf War.

For another thing, she and Jim had only recently moved to Germany, where she said she "still had so much to buy and see and do!" But she put those unfulfilled aspirations aside for her





■ Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Jim Pillsbury, his wife, Becky, and daughter Katherine spend time at home with their dogs, Pepper in the back and Trooper in the front. The Pillsburys already had a retirement home purchased in Kentucky, but once Jim was promoted to commander of Redstone Arsenal, the family fell in love with Huntsville.

Photo by Dave Dieter.

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■ Kristen, Elizabeth and Aaron King arrived in Huntsville in 2011. Aaron says he has “found home here in Huntsville” after having lived in over a dozen other cities and towns around the United States.

Photo by Dave Dieter.

husband, who she said had no such qualms.

“Jim had been here many times before and was so excited about coming here,” said Becky. “He knew the command was open and he was just thrilled he’d been given the honor of earning it.”

Once they got here, Becky never looked back. She was also particularly impressed with the level of volunteerism among residents.

“It’s a city where people who come here want to be involved and see what a marvelous place it is and want to make it better,” she said. “This is a town of fixers.”

A fixer herself, Becky and some colleagues founded Still Serving Veterans (SSV) in 2005, an advocacy center for wounded or disabled veterans which has brought \$21 million back to the Tennessee Valley through benefits, jobs and training. But as much as Becky was growing to love the city, the military had other plans for the Pillsburys.

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After less than four years here, Jim received another promotion, this time as deputy commanding general of the Army Materiel Command (AMC), and the family moved up to Fort Belvoir, outside of Washington, DC.

"When we were sent to D.C., we found out they were moving the AMC to Huntsville as part of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure," Becky said, "so we were thrilled to know we would be coming back."

In the interim, the Pillsburys continued to stay in touch with the friends they had made in Huntsville. Becky also stayed active in SSV.

"I was still helping in D.C., with good access to our state's senators and congressmen," she said. Jim, meanwhile, traveled back and forth regularly for work.

"And every time Jim would come back to Huntsville, he would bring someone with him," said Becky. "And almost every one of them ended up moving here!"

To those who had yet to make the visit, Becky said she would "describe Huntsville as D.C. without all the traffic, without all the people and located in the Bible belt. It's got all the things you want from a large town in a small town."

By the time the Pillsburys themselves returned in January 2011, they were ready to stay. Jim officially retired that July and they ended up settling just outside the Huntsville city limits on two acres right on the Flint River. "

A dollar goes a lot further in Huntsville than it does in D.C.," Becky said. "You can travel 45 minutes out of town here and get 12 acres and a house twice the size of the one you'd find for the same price there."

They also managed to entice their son and daughter to settle here.

"It's very unusual for military children to be in the same town where their parents retire, but my son ended up moving here, getting married and becoming a lawyer, and my daughter moved here after graduating from college and now works here, too," she said. "Even my daughter-in-law's sister moved here – it's almost like we're starting our own community."

What keeps them all here is easy for her to describe.

"We love how diverse it is here, and that there are people who are so different from each other," said Becky. "We love the fact that we can see Broadway plays, but also go up to Monte Sano and see the city lights down below."

The military community is also an important component.

"We still love supporting the military, and we still feel welcome to come and help with different events on post, celebrating the promotions and retirements," she said.

Then there's always the commute.

"When we would go to the theater in D.C., it took about two and a half hours round trip," she said. "Here, from the time we leave the theater to the time we walk into the house, it takes 15 minutes. If that's not quality of life, I don't know what is!" ■

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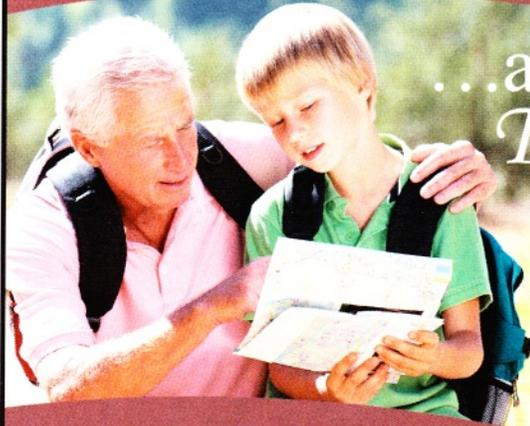


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