

# Professionals find jobs back in rural hometowns

By SUE LINDSEY – Jul 27, 2008

LEBANON, Va. (AP) — Software engineer Keith Brown was conducting a meeting by teleconference at home when he had to call an abrupt halt. Dido, one of the family's two dogs, had just brought in a dead opossum.

Welcome to the professional life in this slice of rural southwest Virginia.

Like many before him, the 42-year-old Brown left this region of rolling hills and verdant valleys after high school because he saw no future outside farming and mining.

"I only left because there were no opportunities," he said.

Now he is one of a growing number bringing their professions back to small-town America thanks to Web-based recruitment campaigns by rural regions beckoning with quality of life.

In isolated southwest Virginia, the program is called Return to Roots. Funded by the Virginia Tobacco Commission and private grants, it lists job openings on its Web site that include positions in information technology, engineering, education and health care.

Similar Web-based efforts have been launched by states ranging from Vermont to South Dakota. An Iowa site calls the state "more livable than 88 percent of the U.S.," while Vermont promises "vibrant small towns and cities and growing opportunities in high technology and other information-based sectors."

West Virginia inserted tear-off postcards in newspaper ads earlier this month and asked residents to send them to friends and family as part of its campaign.

Kansas has a program aimed at professionals in bioscience that it plans to expand to a statewide initiative for all types of jobs, said state Commerce Department spokesman Caleb Asher.

More than 500 job-seekers have moved to South Dakota for a variety of jobs since it launched Dakota Roots in October 2006, said Dawn Dovre, a state Labor Department spokeswoman.

Under southwest Virginia's program, some 30,000 postcards promoting the Web site have been mailed to high school and college graduates from the area, said Carl Mitchell, head of the nonprofit Virginia Economic Bridge that manages the program.

Rural areas have gained appeal among companies looking for a less expensive way to do business without sending jobs overseas. Northrop Grumman's Lebanon office, for instance, is a call center and backup data center for Virginia's state government.

"A call center in northern Virginia would have been unaffordable," said Doug McVicar, a Northrop Grumman vice president.

Brown and his wife Julia, also a software engineer, are among few direct placements the Return to Roots program claims. But Mitchell said it has increased interest in Virginia's southwestern corner. Mitchell counted 4,000 visits in one month to the program's Facebook and MySpace social networking sites.

For the Browns, the target was rural Russell County. CGI Group Inc.'s new quarters, where the couple work, sits opposite Northrop Grumman Corp., forming a mini-technology corridor amid the farm fields.

Glade Spring native Jeremy Honaker found his own way home. After moving to northern Virginia and taking a job at Northrop Grumman headquarters, he transferred to its Lebanon center as a recruiter.

Honaker prefers to find job candidates through the Return to Roots Web site, he said, because "I know that person understands they're looking for a job in rural Virginia."

Keith Brown grew up about an hour's drive north in Bluefield, where his parents still live. Brown stayed close by for college at Emory and Henry. But when he finished, it never even dawned on him to go home.

"It was just expected. You had to leave," he said. "You couldn't get anything hardly above minimum wage or that would hardly be 40 hours a week."

In 2005, the latest year for which U.S. Census Bureau estimates were available, the median household income for Russell County was \$29,865, compared to \$54,207 for the state. The county's population was about 29,000, down from more than 30,300 counted in the 2000 census.

Julia Brown was born in New York and raised in Chicago, but discovered a love for nature at the same time she met Keith at a music camp in the North Carolina mountains.

It was on a camping trip with Keith's close friend from home that they learned of the Return to Roots project.

The Browns were about to leave Cincinnati after 13 years anyway for a move with Lockheed Martin to upstate New York, but they considered the new possibility.

"Once we understood the vision, we chose to come here," Keith Brown said.

He sees it as an opportunity to help his native area, and he likes being able to keep a fishing rod in his office that he sometimes uses on lunch breaks. The Browns are happy to be close to his family, and think this is a safer place to raise their daughter.

Honaker is grateful to be free of Washington, D.C.-area traffic. He drives twice as far to work now, but gets there in half the time. "I bought a motorcycle and commute across Clinch Mountain after work," he said. "It's actually a stress reliever."

The Browns, along with Julia's mother, live on eight acres next to a farm outside Abingdon. With their love of the outdoors they thought they knew what to expect from country life, but a few surprises have come through their dog door.

"We heard a kathunk, kathunk, kathunk in the bedroom" in the middle of the night last fall, Keith Brown said. "One of dogs had found a deer (leg) and brought it in."

They are both classical musicians — Keith an opera soloist whose voice students are spread around the globe, Julia a pianist who studied musicology. They miss the arts of Cincinnati, Keith Brown said, but he hopes to put together an ensemble that he envisions giving outdoor concerts on a platform he'd attach to his barn's silo. The surrounding steep slope creates a natural amphitheater.

Julia Brown is a little troubled by a lack of ethnic diversity, since their daughter Wendy is from China and they plan to adopt a second child from that country. But for the most part, the family has felt welcome in Virginia.

"I think it's much better for her to live in a more wholesome place where we're not caught up in this rat race all the time," Julia Brown said.

The Browns can fly kites in their front yard when the wind is good, and Keith Brown likes to pack a picnic supper and take his daughter on walks up the hill behind their house to view the rolling landscape. Wendy is a big fan of the night sky, a spectacle masked by city lights.

"We'll get out of the car and she'll look up and she'll go 'Wow!' when it's a really clear night," Julia Brown said. "How many 3-year-olds notice that?"

On the Net:

- Return to Roots: <http://www.returntoroots.org>