



City life and family life are a good match

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I vividly recall a moment on a Historic Albany Foundation house tour in the late 1970s. I was waiting behind two women from Clifton to enter a town house on State Street. One of the women remarked, "I had no idea there were such beautiful homes in Albany."

Since then, as the flight of middle-class families to the suburbs has continued, I've wondered if there was a way for suburbanites to discover the benefits of city living for families.

Last spring, Shawn Morris, a member of the Albany Common Council and a resident of the Delaware Avenue neighborhood, told her story of city living at a meeting with the University Heights Association to encourage employers to offer incentives to their employees to live near work in city neighborhoods.

Shawn said she and her husband bought their two-family home with a five-year plan. "With two very young children, we were within 10 minutes of downtown Albany where we both worked. Commuting time would be minimal and both public and private schools were nearby," she said in a recap of her speech.

"Now we are in year 15. City living very much suits our family life. Living in a two-family home affords us the ability to consider part-time work and extended maternity leaves. Our children, now teenagers, went to schools in the neighborhood, public schools I might add, before leaving the neighborhood for high school. Their standardized test scores demonstrate our boasting about them and their schools is based on fact as much as parental pride."

Shawn said raising her children in a neighborhood with a library, movie theater and pizza shop only a short walk away, has allowed them to "live a whole life, as independently as you want a 14- or 15-year-old" to live.

Jeffrey Gritsavage, a professional engineer and former student of mine in the planning program at the University at Albany, moved with his wife and two children, ages 5 and 8, from the small village of Northville in the Adirondack Park to a condominium at State and Lark streets.

Jeff told me he once thought village life would be perfect for raising children. Now neither his children nor his wife want to be away from their home, so near Washington Park, the Empire State Plaza, a number of churches and an ice cream parlor.

Jeff quickly rattles off the delights he finds in city living. "There is so much stimulus in Albany," he told me. They attended 20 concert performances last summer, at the Empire State Plaza, Washington Park and elsewhere in downtown Albany.

Then he went on about the many friends he has made around his new residence, the social networks his children have established, his son's public school and the children's delight in the attention they get from neighborhood merchants.

Jeff's daughter, Lillian, likes to have breakfast on their balcony overlooking Lark Street. She finds it better than reality TV. Jeff declares "The city streets are not a scary place." City living has "enriched our lives so much I wonder why I wasted the last 30 years before moving downtown."

City living may not work as well for every family. But for many families, it might work much, much better than the prevailing anti-city attitude of our times.

More attention needs to be given to understanding how city living suits family life so more families are not scared off. Our cities might be better well-served if they organized opportunities for resident families to share their stories of city life with suburbanites interested in broadening their perspectives on where to live.

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