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Goodbye, West Hartford – Hello New Haven

After Seven Years, Single Twentysomething Finds Suburban Life Loses Its Charms

By Tara Weiss

I distinctly remember my first day in West Hartford. Walking through West Hartford Center to open a bank account, I thought: This place is adorable. As someone who grew up in very unbucolic South Florida, I was charmed by the town green, neighbors stopping to chat at the local bagel place and people strolling through the center with their dogs.

I had stepped into a Norman Rockwell painting. I thought: If only I could get a permanent job here after my summer internship at The Courant, I'd never want to leave...

Be careful what you wish for. Nearly seven years later, West Hartford isn't looking as appealing as it once did for this twentysomething. I'm still tickled by all those things that first attracted me to this town, but the frustrations of being young, single and living in a suburb has taken its toll.

So I'm leaving. I'm sacrificing the convenient 10-minute drive up Farmington Avenue to the newspaper for a 40-minute commute from New Haven.

But I'm getting so much more.

There's an abundance of restaurants whose staff doesn't give you that incredulous look when you walk in at 10 p.m. hoping for a late dinner. There is an independent movie theater just a two-minute walk from my apartment. There

are distinct neighborhoods. There's Ikea. The train to New York City is a two-minute cab ride away. There are scores of takeout options. There is an entire guide to New Haven entertainment. People walk places.

But the thing that sold me on the move (aside from the apartment's gorgeous hardwood floors): While I was standing outside chatting with my new landlord, groups of twentysomethings walked by continuously.

At 22, I was so concerned with landing a job at a newspaper that wasn't in North Dakota -- or somewhere equally rural, where many journalists get their first jobs - - that I was thrilled with West Hartford. I already knew a handful of people in the area; it has an active Jewish community and is close to New York and Boston. Back then, I thought: What more do I need than a good job, a steady paycheck, friends and health insurance?

It turns out, a lot more.

The idea of moving began percolating when I found myself becoming agitated at the grocery store. Over the years, I've noticed that the majority of shoppers aren't like me. They're mostly soccer moms and dads loading up the mini van. Notto sound pathetic, but when I spot a young person at Stop & Shop, I inevitably find myself checking to see if he or she is wearing a wedding ring. If they're

not, I've been tempted to introduce myself.

Then there's the face. It's the one that happens when I tell people where I live. They turn their head down, their voice goes up and they ask patronizingly, "What's that like?" Translation: "How could a twentysomething possibly enjoy living in such a family-oriented suburb?"

Here, everyone knows everyone and, therefore, everyone else's business. This is particularly true of the people who grew up here.

The Cow Parade in West Hartford Center was the last straw. In other cities where the colorfully painted ceramic cows were on display, people admired them as they serendipitously walked by. But in West Hartford, it was a destination. So many people came to take pictures in front of them that, at certain points throughout the cows' stay, traffic was backed up to I-84.

There are things I'll miss about West Hartford: Barbecues with neighbors at our apartment complex, with its big backyard. The connectedness of West Hartford, as when I recently slipped on ice, and the news spread around town so fast that people I bumped into at the grocery store said they had heard about my fall and asked if I feeling better.

I recently visited my new urban grocery store. It has a fantastically diverse clientele, with lots of young people. I didn't even check to see if anyone was a wearing ring -- it didn't matter because there were so many twentysomethings.

One thing I didn't see: a soccer mom.

"Transitions" is an occasional series of essays and stories about how we change

homes as we move through our lives, and how the homes change us.

Tara Weiss moved out of West Hartford this month. She will write about her new life in New Haven in a future "Transitions" essay. Weiss can be reached at tweiss@courant.com.