



Homeward bound

Despite the obstacles, young people are fighting to move back to New Brunswick

By Karen Pinchin

They definitely weren't moving back to New Brunswick. That's what Tanya Duffy, 30, and Greg Webber, 31, told each other as they drove into Fredericton for a family visit last May in their green 20-year-old Toyota Camry. After all, Webber had just landed a coveted permanent job in Montreal's English-language school system and Duffy's career, as a graphic designer at a high-powered advertising agency, was taking off. "Next thing you know, we fell in love with a little house and the idea of living close to our friends," says Duffy. "We felt like we belonged here."

While statistics around New Brunswick's decreasing ability to hold onto its young people are grim (as of September 2013, the unemployment rate was 10.7 per cent, 3.8 per cent higher than the national average, and, over the past five years, 50 per cent of people who have left for other provinces were aged 10 to 34), there's a bright light emerging. Quietly and persistently, educated young professionals like Duffy and Webber are fighting to move home.

There are many reasons why young people leave the province, including a hunt for better-paying jobs, the desire for a more urban lifestyle and the pursuit of educational opportunities. Digital game designer Jeff Munde was in the latter category when he left New Brunswick for British Columbia back in 2001. "I needed to be a game designer," he says. "And there was no industry here at all." He lived in Vancouver for a decade, made lots of money, lived in a nice apartment. He met a Fredericton-born woman there, and pretty soon they had a baby on the way; they moved back one year ago.

That is a good example of "social pressure," says University of New Brunswick economics professor Constantine Passaris, and it's hardly a

new phenomenon. After all, the benefits of living near established social structures, like grandparents who can help with childcare, where housing values are cheaper and some families can be sustained by one primary breadwinner, are obvious. The global economic recession didn't hurt either, says Passaris.

"Before 2008 and up to 2011, job opportunities in the west were drying up due to [Canada's] weak economic recovery," he says. "Families were saying, 'You don't have a job out west anymore. Why are you staying there?'" Still, finding a job in a saturated market like New Brunswick is tough. While young people move home with valuable education and experience, they're also competing against hundreds of other applicants, many of whom are older and more socially connected to the workforce.

That's why chef Joel Aubie is currently serving food out of a food truck in his hometown of Bathurst. After nearly a decade of living and cooking in Tofino, Montreal and Halifax, he wanted to head home. He and his Bathurst-born girlfriend sold their cars, packed their couch, mattress and two dogs into an old pass-through truck they planned to refurbish,

and drove back to New Brunswick. "A lot of people ask me, 'Why did you move back here?'" And there were definitely negative connotations there," says Aubie, who just finished his first summer season serving comfort food, including pulled pork and fish tacos, from his foodtruck Jobie's Mobile Kitchen.

One government program designed to keep young people in-province is the Workforce Expansion program's One-Job Pledge initiative, which provides employers with a one-year, 70 per cent wage subsidy if they hire a recent post-secondary graduate for a permanent full-time position at a minimum salary of \$14 an hour. But that program would have been of no use to Duffy, Munde or Aubie, who say the province needs to do more to support young people who aren't recent post-secondary graduates who want to move home.

The province takes its mission to repatriate young New Brunswickers very seriously, says Jody Carr, minister for post-secondary education, training and labour. But it's hard, he says, to quantify and track how various government initiatives, including an effort to convince high school students they don't need to



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leave the province for good education and employment, are doing. One project, which he has high hopes for and which could help young people in Aubie's position, is a revamped resume database that would match people who want to move back to the province with prospective employers.

While he struggled to get financing, Aubie says strong support from Bathurst city council and loans from the Canadian Business Development Corporation, along with his dad, who co-signed his bank loan, helped him realize he still wanted to give Bathurst a shot. "If you want to, you can make it work," he says. "There were many months we thought we might not be able to [stay]. When things started to fall into place for us, we knew it was happening because we were in a place where we were more supported."

Passaris says it is good young entrepreneurs are finding ways into the workforce and making ends meet, but is concerned many won't be able to permanently tolerate self-employment. But game designer Mundee says he's not sure people of his generation are focused on remuneration. Sure, he says, young people who work in mining, forestry or oil and gas industries might be tempted west by big money, but that's not why he thinks ambitious 20- and 30-somethings are heading home. Part of it, says Mundee, is that millennials are realizing their urban lifestyle isn't all it's cracked up to be. "We definitely felt our priorities shift. Now you're thinking about what you're having for dinner and how your dog is doing, not about how much money you have or what clothes you're wearing."

Plus, he says his experience has gone a long way towards helping him succeed here, where the digital industry is simply less developed. He's currently working as a programmer for Fredericton IT company Dealer Instincts. It's possible that young people are moving home without any guarantee of work, says Mundee, because they are more risk-tolerant, willing to commit to contract work or moonlighting while they wait for their dream job.

Duffy agrees, but says she's not naïve about how tough the job market is right now. "I feel bad for the people who are here and don't have jobs," she says. "I'm just lucky that I have the experience that I do." That said, she's still coming to terms with her new employment reality: freelance graphic design. •

Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com; Karen.pinchin@gmail.com, @ABM_Editor, @AtlanticBus @KarenPinchin, @tanya_duffy, @UNB, @jodycarr_mla, #HomewardBound



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