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From Miami to Cullowhee: A Frosty Leap of Reason

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“What should you do in densely-packed snow?” I failed that North Carolina DMV question. I was desperately looking for an answer that involved some snow person building activity. So much for my 22 years of schooling. You may as well have asked me who won the Super Bowl in 2010 (I just checked and it’s New Orleans). Now you know I am TV sports-challenged and I am winter weather clueless. Having moved from Miami, Florida a few months ago to take a faculty position at Western Carolina University (WCU) is my explanation for the latter.

2.2 million; 2.4 million; 74,000. That could be someone’s salary in 1990, 2000, and today, respectively. Rather, it’s the population size of the cities I lived in: Paris, Miami and Asheville. I never said I was cut for rural life, even after a glass of champagne (or two)! Living in Cullowhee would be a stretch for a woman who was Le Louvre’s neighbor for 25 years and a Miami Interstate 95 daily user for another 14 years. Upon landing at Asheville *international* airport for my interview at WCU in 2009, I knew Asheville was where I would want to live. The 2-gate airport did not scare me. However, the flat-out “Original Road Kill Cookbook” (Peterson, 1987) sold at the bookstore near Gate 2 did! Doesn’t the APA formatting make it so much more... digestible? The term organic just got a whole new meaning! What is refreshing is Asheville’s absence of a line for just about anything (including a stall in the girls’ room), and not being searched by Fido, the Transportation Safety Administration’s electronic square-shaped sniff dog trained to find explosive residue.

Teaching 20 year-old undergrad students has been my greatest academic challenge so far. I had been teaching grads or mid-career students forever. Now, although I am still not a pop culture aficionada, I remember to adjust my student learning expectations, and my vernacular. I am embracing the learning experience, nonetheless. I thank them for upgrading my TEXTing vocabulary. I particularly like AAAAA. Many of us know AA. Most of us have heard of AAA. But do you know AAAAA? American Association Against Acronym Abuse. These undergrads are an antidote to aging -- or are they? It took me a few weeks to understand why I would never run into any of my undergrads on campus. Finding them is just a matter of venturing out to the local bar, the campus to-go eateries, or the university library, in that order.

Yet, my department and the university have brought me an incredible amount of support: From setting up my office before I even started my first semester, to providing me with a brand new Mac laptop and its 27-inch monitor; from a phenomenal administrative staff to genuinely caring colleagues; from the prompt technical support, to the endless Hershey’s Kisses supply at the end of my hallway. After all, I am a faculty member in the *Human Services* department. But wait! There is more to this rosy vignette: I even have a jogging coach who is still waiting for me to bring my running shoes to campus! I keep forgetting to put them in the trunk of my car, which, I learned, should contain a 4-ply blanket, a flashlight, and a box of tranquilizers --none of which are to take camping.

So far, the biggest culture shocks have been Ingles and the happy and long-standing marriage between church and state (see rural, small, above). In Florida, we had Publix and Winn-Dixie. Here, I was told, there is *Ingles*. My first reaction was to ask: is it a language school? My question wasn’t that far-fetched. Y’all speak with an accent different from mine and different from those I’ve heard in most U.S. states, Scotland, England, and in the country of its own called Miami.

Maybe I should mention the thermal shock I experienced. Every breathing Asheville has told me this winter has been exceptionally brutal. I'll have to wait another winter to verify if what I hear holds true. In the meantime, I walk on the sunny side of the streets.

I am quite impressed with the city of Asheville. College towns enjoy distinctive demographics. They form a kind of demographic archipelago — distinctive places that exhibit a high degree of cultural coherence. With highly educated and youthful populations, they are far more diverse and cosmopolitan than non-college towns of similar size and location. Professors are perceived as “really smart” and “rich”. I only confess to the former accusation. Finally, I can be a vegetarian without derision. But I'm not, yet (without derision.)

Overall, my situation sounds like a heady combination of career and personal bliss, doesn't it? But there's also a dark side: I have not seen much racial diversity, compared to Miami or Paris. Religious diversity, yes. Tree diversity, yes. Beer diversity, yes. And yet, Asheville's mayor is an African American woman; our Governor is a woman, and so is UNCA's president. And the array of restaurants in Asheville could make your stomach spin. A true United Nations: Japanese, Indian, French, Cuban, Italian, Mexican. Oh, and American. Although the Western North Carolina area has breathtaking sceneries, I love living in downtown Asheville. I truly do. It offers big-city sophistication but small-town ease of life. On a single day, I can pretend to watch the mighty University of North Carolina basketball team play, hear a live performance by violinist Amy Lovinger at the Diana Wortham Theater, watch a French movie at the Fine Arts Theater, and attend the Moody Blues' concert at the Civic Center, all downtown (but not all at the same time).

I confess I don't know Cullowhee as well as I know Asheville. In his article relating results of a survey about Cullowhee's revitalization, Todd Collins (2010) indicated that many employees and students would like to see more pubs, bars, music venues, and other places to socialize in Cullowhee. Please note the “pubs and bars”, will you? He also pointed out that “the area around the University impacts who works and attends the University” (p.2) and that Cullowhee's setting has an impact on faculty recruitment and retention. It has not been the case for me. I knew at the time of my interview that rural living was not for me and that I would live in Asheville, where I would peacefully read my *Road Kill Cookbook*. When I shared that concern with my hiring committee, I was told that many faculty members do the same and that the University of North Carolina at Asheville has offices to accommodate WCU faculty. For me, that was enough to overcome the challenges of working in a more rural area.

I consider myself fortunate to have found a faculty position that fits my career and my personal needs, one that involves a reasonable number of hours per week in the classroom, and NOT another 24 on the Interstate! My commute from downtown Asheville to WCU —in a blizzard — is one hour. By Florida standard, a blizzard is any weather condition that involves water. The drive is painless and rather delightful. I see nature at its best, the breathtaking views of the mountains (and their snow caps), an amazing array of mature evergreen trees, and an avalanche of cultural hints. I did realize that Books on CDs do not work for me; I never seem to find the “right” book. So I make my drive a learning opportunity. Lately, I learned a new word (a backhoe) and that a sheriff, if elected, is expected to have morals. I cannot resist grinning when I pass the city of Balsam. I wonder if its residents know that that very balsam substance is used on a daily basis to keep the long-extinct (since 1924) body of Lenin appealing to the crowd who queue up to see him in his mausoleum in Red Square, Moscow, Russia. Be creative when communing. Fill up your iPod if you have one. Whatever you do, avoid speeding (got caught, got a ticket) and do not TXT while driving (got caught, didn't get a ticket).

Potential faculty should know they have choices. I bet they will come to the same conclusion: I would do it all over again. The collegiality and WCU's support are refreshing, as are the small class sizes. And should new recruits choose to live in Cullowhee, they will realize that WCU is very dynamic, with a calendar of events that makes living in some big cities seem a bother. They, too, will learn. I never knew that people could be so friendly; that organic delicacies could be that affordable; that pedestrians could have the right of way; that my cufflinks are perceived as a sign of European sophistication; and that there is such a thing as an organic mechanic (Haywood Rd, Asheville). Living here has been, so far, a breath of (wintry) fresh air. Some of you may say I'm appallingly naïve and that I have the optimism of a newlywed. I would rather say that my recyclable goblet of organic water is half full.

A Note From The Editor:

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To access the article as a PDF, please select the article link at the following URL: <http://www.wcu.edu/24987.asp>.

The direct link to the main Faculty Forum Webpage is: <http://www.wcu.edu/7480.asp>.

Coulter Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning

Responses to the March Faculty Forum Article entitled

Service Learning in the Academic Setting: Benefits vs. Challenges

Glenn Bowen, Ph.D. Director, Center for Service Learning



That was a very interesting article. Very well written. – Anna McFadden

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