

From Gown to Town

Why some alumni decided to make Athens home.

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Athens is often remembered fondly by Ohio University alumni, and every year during Homecoming, they flood the streets in an act of nostalgia. For them, the town represents a symbol of the freedom of youth and is simply a blip on the radar of their lives. However, a different feeling may arise for the students who remain and have become embedded in the community.

Many people living in Ohio are waiting for the chance to leave the Midwest entirely. Marissa McDaid, who graduated from the Scripps College of Communication in 2014, has never seen the appeal.

"I think people are naturally inclined to like escape," McDaid says. "You want to escape where you grew up." McDaid and her husband returned to Athens in 2018 and have no current intentions to leave.

"I feel like the pace of life is very calm here," McDaid says. "I like the community a lot. It seems like a friendly, progressive place." They are certainly not the only ones who found appeal in the community aspect of Athens.

Dakota Fox completed graduate school at OU's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs and, like many, left Southeast Ohio. Fox secured a career in Washington, D.C., and made the move many small-town residents aspire to. But the nation's capital failed to live up to its grandiose reputation. Fatigued by the industrial nature of the

city, and the absence of an altruistic public, Fox ventured back to Athens.

"Here it's much more friendly," Fox says when comparing Athens and Washington's metropolis. "People are typically more inviting and typically can be a little bit more understanding."

Fox explains that despite not having a job lined up or an entirely secure social environment in Athens, it was easier to maneuver the situation than in a massive, urban environment.

"Being alone here is a lot easier than being alone in a city," Fox says. "Which you would think would be the opposite because there's just more people around you, but having some peace and quiet sometimes is the best thing."

The alumni living in Athens are doing so with longevity in mind. Having completed her undergraduate and graduate programs at OU, Mikayla Rochelle expects a foreseeable future in the town.

"It's definitely a place that while I might live somewhere else, I do see myself coming back here to plant roots eventually," Rochelle says. "I'm definitely here by choice. If I wanted to be somewhere else, I would."

For Rochelle, it is not simply what the community can do for her; she is also considering what she can do for the community. Having gained so much from the resources at OU and in Athens, she is trying her best to reciprocate.

"People come here, they learn skills, they get educated and they become



Marissa McDaid poses for a portrait outside her home.



Dakota Fox poses for a portrait outside Heritage Hall.



Mikhayla Rochelle poses for a portrait outside Schoonover Center.



Kayla Zehner poses for a portrait at the Kennedy Museum of Art.

better people,” Rochelle says. “They take that knowledge that they learn, they leave and they don’t put it back into the area. I received these skill sets here. I want to give back. I want to help build Athens up and really try to give back to the Appalachian area.”

In contrast, for some people, there simply is not a market for them to positively apply their skills. Left with very few career opportunities, lingering in Athens can become burdensome. Kayla Zehner was prepared to make her way across the country to Montana after graduating from the College of Fine Arts in 2020, but the pandemic left her on the outs with Athens as one of the few options.

“I basically didn’t know what to do with myself for a while, I found jobs here and there,” Zehner says. “I want to be forgiving because it’s rural Appalachia. But there’s no [jobs], unless you want to work for the university, and that’s not really a job market.”

Zehner also describes her inner conflict as her perspective on the town shifted. “I was starry eyed about it during undergrad and then between COVID, graduating and being stuck here, I was pretty bitter, or at least frustrated, [and] annoyed at first just watching students come through as I’m just kind of trapped,” Zehner says.

After three years and making the move into an area less densely populated by undergrads, Zehner has begun to make peace. “It comes and goes. I think age has made me less upset with it,” she says.

Zehner’s critiques of OU and Athens brought up an issue that other alumni touched on: the disparity between the city itself and the university. As Rochelle points out, students complete their education and move on.

“Many people treat this town like it’s supposed to be transitional, and so nothing stable ever gets developed,” says Zehner.

Fox shares similar sentiments: “Because there’s the university here, so many people are in and out,” he says.

Both Zehner and Fox believe OU should step in, closing the gap between the city and its residents.

“The university could do so much for the greater Athens area, but it’s easier for them to just keep people in,” Zehner says.

Fox has some potential solutions. “I think the university, since they are the largest partner in the area, should do or take the lead on those initiatives rather than the city because the city is ill equipped,” Fox says. “They are underfunded, they don’t have the money resources or people to do it.”

The answer to this problem remains inconclusive, but as more people become aware of the problem, more work can be done in figuring out how to solve it.

“Something to strengthen the bond between full-time residents of Athens, the working professionals and the students,” Fox says. “I don’t know what that looks like, and I think involving the community is important in that and something needs to be done.”

In their own way, alumni act as a bridge between students and full-time residents, as they transition from one to the other. No longer in the role of the student, alumni can begin to branch out and engage with Athens in new ways.

“All these places have changed significantly, but we have also changed, and things are just different now,” McDaid says. “We interact with the town much differently.”

People can discover diverse locations and experiences outside of the cushion of campus.

“You find other little places that were always interesting when you were a student, but you never went to,” Rochelle says.

It is up to the individual to find their place in Athens and to seek out vehicles to a new perspective. As McDaid put it, “Athens is kind of like [a] ‘Choose Your Own Adventure.’” **b**

