

Open Letter to Young Vermonters

Did you know that you are Vermont's most precious natural resource?

Surely you read and hear a lot about the water—bad algae, Act 250 and phospho-farm runoff. Then there's the weather and tourism—snowfall and rainfall and fall, fall. And of course the wilderness—the doomed ash and boorish bears and tick-ridden moose.

But it is *you*, not our rivers or timbers or critters, we Vermonters value most.

It's about time someone other than mom or dad or your favorite teacher conveyed to you how important you really are. Always will you be family treasures, true enough, but you are something else altogether to those of us who don't know your nickname or worst fear or favorite interest. You are local-grown, premium packages of human potential with vast abilities and ideas to make our communities better places to live.

Writing on behalf of many adult Vermonters, we need you now more than ever.

My purpose within this meager missive is to convince you to make this little great state of ours your long-term home. Don't be surprised if I come up short, given that your life thus far is likewise short, and that your surroundings surely seem so limited and small to someone your age who is intent on seeing the world.

Oh, sweet wanderlust! We, the adults of Vermont, know this curious impulse. It is the strong, singular tugging of elsewhere; an extreme preoccupation surpassed only by love and hate. It's the moxie and desire to pit your wits against the gears of that great machine, and we understand it. Really, we do. Many of us took the first chance we got to cross the friendly borders of this fertile place. Hell, some of us ran. We chose faraway deserts, huge cities and the big blue ocean to define years and decades of our lives, hanging our hats with relative satisfaction in foreign lands, basking in the freedom of our choices.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to see and be in another part of the world. So see it, and be in it. Represent our verdant little wedge with the strength, independence and smarts that describe our founders and friends and future leaders. Show them what you're made of and speak proudly of where you were made. Engage the world in its full range of colors and contrasts and behold its beauty and ugliness. Indulge its adventures and defy its dualities to define you.

Then please come back.

We *value* your minds, muscle and not-on-my-watch defiance of what doesn't work. We *admire* your courage to contradict power and dedication to creating a level playing field where society's maligned can flourish. We *love* your creativity, friendship and compassion.

If you sincerely want to make a positive impact, there's no better place to live. Vermont's small population allows you to significantly and directly influence local policy making. The indelible lessons and experiences of your early life and education will one day provide the crucial knowledge and skills a town needs to form its vision of the future, and there are few if any barriers to having your voice heard in a small community.

Low crime rates, high quality of life, and primary and secondary education that ranks among the nation's best make raising a family in Vermont among the smartest things a parent can do. Sure there are contraction concerns in some districts, and BHS students are taking chemistry in an old Radio Shack. But Vermont ranks #5 in the country for educational quality, according to [U.S. News & World Report](#). If kids are part of your future, Vermont is the place to nurture them.

For gardeners, producers, farmers and consumers, the local food movement in Vermont is strong and its leaders and purveyors are intelligent, dedicated, resilient people. A contoured landscape crisscrossed by rivers that flow through rich, nutrient-filled soil is an ideal place to raise animals and produce crops of all kinds. In the Green Mountain State, you're inevitably close to accessible fresh food if you don't grow it yourself, and there's always a place to pick it up or a person who's happy to share it.

If the underdog role is appealing to you, Vermont plays the part with aplomb. Outsiders generally scoff at our seeming simplicity, sociological isolation and lack of sophistication, and we appreciate the cover it provides us as we go about doing things that matter on a local and national scale. From Ethan Allen to Fred Tuttle, Vermonters love to snub the institution by making big impacts and efficiently handling their business while others are busy griping about theirs.

The bucolic Green Mountain landscape is 9623 square miles of creative inspiration. To all forms and mediums—canvas and clay, photography and film, sonnet and song—it delivers glimmering lakes, riparian wonderlands, rolling old mountains, rustic farms with rust-red barns, and delightful little villages with chalk-white churches galore. Here, no country drive or bike ride is unrewarding to a creator's eye. And here, you're only hours from Boston, New York City and Montreal if mega-metropolitan inspiration is called for.

And aesthetic beauty isn't just the artist's purview; laypeople like a clean look, too. Vermont is one of four U.S. states that prohibit road-side eye garbage, aka billboards. Only if you've lived elsewhere not called Alaska, Hawaii or Maine would you understand how and why this statute is such a significant boon to human well-being and psychology—and should be a national mandate.

Indeed, a general relaxing of the muscles and mind occurs when one visits Vermont after living in the city for some time. There's a reason for this, and if my plea to stick around falls on deaf ears, other things will not: police and fire and ambulance sirens, people yelling, car horns honking, tires squealing, brakes screeching, neighbors fighting like cats, cats fighting like cats, speakers shaking and megaphones spewing nonsense. When all that stuff is gone, life is simply more manageable. Some people say they like the 'energy' of the city. They come back to visit and can't sit still, and can't believe how shitty the signal is here, and they want to go back as soon as their family crap is over. To you all, Vermont will be here with open arms when the buzzing and bells and ringing and roaring has turned your nerves into microscopic ribbons of befouled DNA.

The lifestyle balance in Vermont is undeniable. Burlington is big, busy, and cultured enough for those who crave the city life, while hunters, fisherfolks and all disciplines of sportsmen and enthusiasts live and play among diverse outdoor splendor. The state forests are managed well for the most part, Act 250 puts water health and quality at the top of its regulatory environmental agenda, and Act 171 gives towns a roadmap for designating wildlife corridors and forest blocks to maintain species diversity, ecological health and encourage smart planning. Though there are exceptions, people who use trails, lakes, parks and other facilities are generally respectful and

responsible. The outdoor life in Vermont is highly valued, versatile and like nowhere else on earth, while Burlington is regularly recognized as one of America's best places to live.

There is no time off from fun here, with addictive stuff to do from January through December. Skiing, sure, but for those without means or motivation, ground and lake levels are more than good enough to get the blood up. Hikers, climbers and bikers revel in the remarkable and challenging terrain, turns and pitches. The fly-fishers on the lake at sunrise are the same souls skating on it under the winter's moon, just as the runners on sunny country roads in summer appreciate silent, snowy fields for cross-country skiing. The year-round recreational possibilities in this unpopulated little place are among its greatest treasures.

Vermont's greatest treasure of all, however, is captured by a phrase you'll be hearing more and more of: climate-change resilience. Apart from Maine, Hawaii and Alaska—didn't we run into them before?—Vermont is the most climate-resistant place in the country. What does this mean, exactly? A trio of things, to be sure (I call them the '3 Ws'):

- 1- Water—we have it;
- 2- Weather—disaster-level, extreme events are relatively rare; and
- 3- Who we got—agricultural, engineering, horticultural, medical, military, and intellectual bad asses are everywhere among us, and they've been thinking about this problem for a long time.

The good people of Vermont are navigating the maze of climate change with sincerity, intelligence and a respect for science. When your future and that of your family hangs in the balance, will you want to be among those who've taken this issue seriously for a long time, or those who think logging onto Trulia when their front lawn is disappearing under high tide is the solution to their problems?

Eventually, most of us who came back home realized something wasn't right. Even the city lights illuminating all the possibilities of the night, and a Starbucks and Whole Foods on every corner, and the siren call of the sea and its salt-kissed cuisine, and a sun-soaked patio with a swimming pool and surround speakers resembling rocks so they blend into the geologic landscaping couldn't make the feeling go away.

Despite it all, *something* was still missing.

It's called Vermont. And there's no place like home.