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Emotional ties to Michigan bring entrepreneurs home

JENNIFER YOUSSEF

The Detroit News

Successful careers outside Michigan proved to be not enough for East Lansing natives Joe and Rose Glendinning. The siblings longed to return home and run their own business, looking to create a less-stressful, more relaxed lifestyle closer to family and friends.

Joe Glendinning, a high-paid attorney in Chicago, moved back in 2007 and opened a Biggby Coffee franchise in Bloomfield Hills the following year. After some cajoling, he convinced his little sister, a Boston banking executive, to join him in his entrepreneurial venture.

Today, the pair run two Biggby Coffee franchises; the second opened last month in Birmingham. While there is no data on the return of Michiganians, the Glendinnings are among the stories of natives who are coming back home and partially countering the population exodus from the state. "I'm very glad I came back," Rose said. "Sure it's been through tough times, but you have to have faith in Michigan."



Joe Glendinning, 32, was a lawyer in Chicago. Now he and sister Rose run two Biggby Coffee outlets. (Gary Malerba / Special to The Detroit News)

The reasons many return to Michigan run the gamut. Some are lured by the desire to be near family and friends. Some see an economic landscape ripe for entrepreneurial opportunities, and others are heeding a call to invest in their native state and help bring Michigan out of its lingering slump.

They're also bucking a trend: In what's been dubbed the "brain drain" many college graduates and young professionals are leaving for greener pastures in other states. The repatriated Michiganians are undeterred by the state's high unemployment, the implosion of the automotive industry and a host of other economic woes.

"When times are tough, people tend to move back home," said John Challenger, a consultant at Challenger, Gray and Christmas, a Chicago-based business consulting firm. "Starting (a business) where you know people is crucial."

A nearby network of family, friends and the community creates a stable environment to launch a business, he said. "People have been stranded," he said, explaining that the soft job market nationwide is making it difficult for workers to advance in careers or find other work. "They're saying 'I can't sit on the sidelines anymore.' "

When few job options are available, and the entrepreneurial spirit kicks in, there's no better place to open a business than where the entrepreneur knows people who can help, he said.

People who hail from the Midwest, where families often remain for many generations, tend to return to their home states because of strong family ties, said

Todd Hohaus, a recruiter at Hohaus & Associates, a Troy-based executive recruiting firm.

"There's always folks who are interested in coming back here," he said.

Looking for a place to launch her gourmet granola company, Suzanne Vier, a former Metro Detroiter living in New York City, decided on Michigan, drawn by its diverse agricultural offerings, large manufacturing hubs and robust work force. Vier and company co-founder Randy Tenbrink began selling Randy's Granola at Eastern Market last year. Vier, who is now the sole proprietor, moved the operation from west Michigan to Detroit earlier this year.



Suzanne Vier returned from New York to launch a gourmet granola company. "This is my home." (John T. Greilick / The Detroit News)

"I left New York having built a close network of friends and professional contacts, but I've met and reacquainted with some wonderful people here, and I'm closer to family again," she said. "This is my home, and I'm happy to be back."

Gordon Krater, managing partner at Southfield-based financial services firm Plante & Moran, isn't surprised to hear that native Michiganders are slowly trickling back to the state to start a business.

The timing is perfect for entrepreneurs to open a business in Michigan because a large number of vacant commercial buildings are available, rents are low and there's a big pool of unemployed workers, he said. Another draw for people who have been living in other states and want to move back to Michigan: The housing supply is plentiful and reasonably priced, he said.

"The stars are starting to align," he said, noting that the economy seems to have finally turned the corner, the auto sector apparently has bottomed out, Detroit has a new mayor and the city's school system appears to be on the mend with new leadership in place.

All those things are good reasons for people to come back home and give Michigan another try, he said.

"It's a good time and place to start a business here," he said.

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Additional Facts

Camille Jayne, business consultant

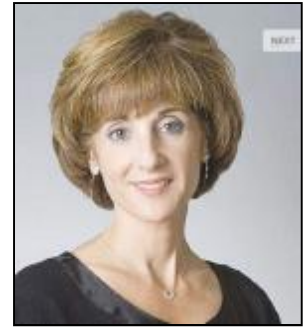
With a little push from Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Camille Jayne is returning to her native state. The California business management consultant was persuaded to move back after reading a Time magazine article in which Granholm urged a former Michiganian in Nebraska to return home. When Jayne casually asked her husband how many business leaders he thought would heed the governor's call, he responded, "You're not."

As soon as he uttered the words, Jayne made up her mind to move home. "Michigan gave me my start," the Dearborn native said. "I love Michigan."

She and her husband, Brad Jayne, also a Michigan native, bought property here in April and put their Irvine, Calif., home on the market. The couple will relocate as soon as their house is sold.

Meanwhile, Camille Jayne is looking for a management position, one that will allow her to use her expertise to help a company expand. She has several interviews lined up.

"It's an exciting time in Michigan and I want to be on a team that helps Michigan grow," she said.



Camille Jayne decided to heed Gov. Jennifer Granholm's call and return home. (Photo courtesy Camille Jayne)

Eric and Kim Bruce, entrepreneurs

After living in Atlanta for 11 years, the Bruces are coming home to bolster the return of a beloved Michigan brand: Velvet Peanut Butter.

The couple began producing and marketing the peanut butter last year; it can be found on grocery shelves throughout Metro Detroit. While they will continue to make the peanut butter in Georgia, where the peanuts are, their administrative and other offices are being moved here.

"We love this state," said Eric Bruce, 43, who grew up in Detroit. "It's our home."

Their 6-year-old son asks them almost every day when they're moving to Michigan, said Kim Bruce, 41, a Waterford native. For the couple, it's important their two kids see their relatives more regularly, she said. "No one's getting any younger," Kim said. "We're very excited to come back."

"You don't realize what a treasure this state is until you leave it," Eric said.



Kim and Eric Bruce are coming back to Michigan to bolster the return of a state favorite, Velvet Peanut Butter, after 11 years in Atlanta. They say they'll be happy to be closer to family. (Photo courtesy Kim and Eric Bruce)

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Jordan Wolfe, software developer

Wolfe, an Oakland County native, moved all over the globe after leaving Michigan to go to college in Indiana in 2000. He returned home in late 2008 for family reasons and with his professional background, he eventually launched an educational software company, uwemp.com.



Jordan Wolfe, 27, who owns an educational software company, says Michigan offers great opportunities. (Todd McInturf / The Detroit News)¹

Wolfe, 27, admitted he had an attitude when he first returned to Metro Detroit, but his thinking did a 180-degree turn after he realized the immense opportunities here for entrepreneurs.

"There are more opportunities in Michigan than anywhere else in the world," said Wolfe, who lives in Royal Oak. "I feel like I'm on cloud nine."

Shane Pliska, family-owned interior landscaping firm

Pliska had been reviewing scripts for a Los Angeles film company when he stepped back and assessed his life. The Franklin native realized that he didn't quite fit in so decided to come back to Michigan and help grow his family's West Bloomfield-based business, Planterra.



Shane Pliska, who grew up in Franklin and lived in Boston and Los Angeles after high school, came back to grow his family's plant business in West Bloomfield. (Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News)

"I loved a lot of things about Los Angeles," said Pliska, who lives in Birmingham. "Part of me said I could do well in Los Angeles, and I was doing well, but it really wasn't me."

Since returning to Michigan a few years ago, Pliska, now company president, accomplished what he set out to do: He diversified the business's customer base, acquired two other companies, opened another office in Las Vegas and put the company on the path to a successful future.

"I'm living the dream, in terms of being an entrepreneur," the 29-year-old said. "I'm just so happy with what I do day to day."