



Midlands Voices: Omaha's quality of living appeals to 'Creative Class'

By Bradley Bereitschaft

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My decision to move from Greensboro, N.C., to Omaha this past summer involved careful consideration, not only of the university position I was offered but also of Omaha's "quality of place."

It is precisely this kind of inter-city migration that fascinates Richard Florida, head of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto and author of the 2002 New York Times best-seller, "The Rise of the Creative Class."

In today's "post-industrial," technology-driven economy, people are more footloose than ever, frequently shifting jobs and geography to take advantage of new opportunities. This may be particularly true of a growing socioeconomic segment of society that Florida terms the "Creative Class."

The Creative Class includes individuals employed in "creative" occupations, such as art and design, music, education, information technology and engineering. Members are more broadly defined by their propensity to "create new forms" — be it art, music, software, architectural plans, scientific manuscripts, novels or ballet.

In contrast to the traditional economic paradigm in which workers seek out employers, Florida contends that many companies now follow the talent instead, setting up offices and headquarters in cities with well-established Creative Class labor pools. Florida's central thesis, therefore, is that a city's economic success may depend markedly on its ability to attract and retain members of the Creative Class.

A key question then is: How can cities attract creative individuals? Florida argues that "quality of place," which refers to a location's diversity and inclusiveness, aesthetic beauty and social/cultural/recreational amenities, is crucially important when attempting to attract and retain members of the Creative Class.

Fortunately, Omaha offers many amenities and "territorial assets" that, in combination, provide a high quality of place. Although subjective, I would argue that Omaha's top Creative Class-luring assets include:

>> A vibrant music scene that includes top-notch venues and internationally renowned talent.

>> Lively, authentic-feeling neighborhoods, including the Old Market, Benson and Dundee.

>> An extensive, growing network of bike/pedestrian trails.

>> A well-established community of artists and art galleries, including the Bemis Center.

>> World-class cultural and entertainment attractions such as the Henry Doorly Zoo, Joslyn Art Museum, Holland Performing Arts Center and the CenturyLink Center.

>> A low cost of living and affordable homes in the city as well as the suburbs.

Omaha clearly has a lot to offer, but how successful has it been at cultivating a Creative Class? Based on Florida's initial calculations in 1999, Omaha ranked 43rd out of 124 metropolitan areas in percentage of workers (30.6 percent) employed in creative occupations. A revised list published in 2012, using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Occupational Employment Survey, showed that the Creative Class in Omaha grew to 32.1 percent of the area's work force, a numerical gain of about 19,570 workers.

So how does Omaha compare regionally? Our nearest metropolitan neighbor, Lincoln, currently boasts 49,680 Creative Class workers who make up 31.4 percent of their work force — nearly on par with Omaha. The next closest metropolitan area, Sioux City, has been somewhat less successful in attracting “creatives,” with only 23.5 percent of its work force associated with creative occupations.

As odd as it may sound, Omaha also may be a creativity magnet for what it lacks. There is an unmistakable feeling that Omaha is still a work in progress, that every person can make a real and lasting contribution. What artist, after all, does not appreciate a blank (or at least unfinished) slate?

Omaha is replete with excellent grass-roots volunteer organizations, such as the Greater Omaha Young Professionals, the Green Omaha Coalition and Omaha By Design, that help individuals translate their creative energies into community improvement. The chance to make a difference, and the intrinsic rewards such participation brings, proved, for me at least, to be undeniably alluring.