

**BEST
PLACE**

By Julie Rasicot



DANIEL SCHREIBER

Is the Bethesda area the **best place** in the country to live?

The editors at many national media outlets think it's right up there. In 2009, Bethesda ranked second on Forbes.com's list of America's Most Livable Cities (Portland, Maine, was first), and fifth in a similar ranking by CNN.

People in places like Santa Barbara, Calif., might scoff at the idea that the Bethesda area is the best place to live. After all, Santa Barbara has the ocean, the mountains and Oprah—not to mention average monthly highs that range between 65 and 77 degrees. But Santa Barbara also has wildfires, earthquakes and housing prices that make Bethesda-area real estate look like a bargain. (Still, it's a great place to visit.)

And Portland, Maine? Clearly the editors at Forbes.com didn't visit during the winter.

Our neighbors across the Potomac River in Fairfax County, Va., also might raise an eyebrow at the notion. But other than Virginia's extraordinary state colleges, can you think of a single reason why you would rather live there than here? (See story on page 76.)

The Bethesda area has it all: bustling downtowns, great neighborhoods, restaurants galore, one of the nation's best public school systems and some of the best private schools, a relatively recession-proof economy, and more venues for the arts than many large cities. We are also close to the ocean, the Chesapeake Bay,

mountains and, of course, Washington, D.C. We even have great weather—sans July and August—with cool and colorful autumns, moderate winters and lush and lovely springs.

It's the people, though, that set the area apart more than anything. Area residents are among the nation's most affluent, best educated and healthiest, according to government data. They are also among the most interesting. There's no way to measure this, of course, but everyone seems to be doing something unique and important with their lives. People here live large.

Our celebrities aren't actors or athletes, but people who use their minds. Our area is home to countless journalists (eight Pulitzer Prize winners live here), many of the country's most respected pundits (e.g., Tom Friedman, George Will and David Brooks) and countless authors (e.g., award-winning novelist Alice McDermott). And then there are the people who work in politics and government and philanthropy.

Life here isn't perfect. Increasingly, only the wealthy can afford to live here. The traffic is terrible—and getting worse.

The Bethesda area isn't a vacation paradise. It's a place where people live, work and raise families. Can you think of a better place to do so? ►

ERICK GIBSON



destination: DOWNTOWN

Sipping coffee on a bench outside Barnes & Noble in Bethesda. Browsing the shelves of the Rockville Library, the county's largest and first urban library. Watching children splash in the undulating fountain in Silver Spring's downtown plaza.

Residents flock to our downtown areas—from Bethesda to Rockville Town Square to Silver Spring—because they are gathering spots that provide a sense of community. The downtowns are home to everything from stores, restaurants and movie theaters to arts festivals and outdoor concerts.

"Each place has features and amenities that are appropriate for their community," says Jon Eisen, managing principal of

StreetSense, a Bethesda-based urban planning and retail brokerage company. "Each place is a little different."

Bethesda, with its wealth, access to mass transit and stable real estate values, is the shining star, Eisen says. "That is the hub of commerce for Montgomery County. It's really become a major business address. You are comparing it against few places in the country because of its wealthy people."

Ask residents what they love about Bethesda's downtown and they'll answer with one word: accessibility. Just about everything they need is within easy walking distance of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Robin and Julian Mansfield say they bought a house in East Bethesda because they wanted their kids to be able to walk to nearby Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School and to downtown Bethesda.

"The proximity to downtown is just phenomenal. We can walk to literally everything," says Robin, the mother of Natalie, 10, and Jackson, 12. "It reminds me of my own childhood, in which I could hop on a bus and go downtown."

For those who don't live here, Bethesda has become a destination, a place to go for dinner along Bethesda Row or in the Woodmont Triangle, to stroll through shops, or to people-watch from a sidewalk bench.

Empty nesters Evelyn and Rollison Earl



Part of the credit for downtown Bethesda's vitality, including this outdoor concert on the recently opened Bethesda Lane, belongs to the non-profit Bethesda Urban Partnership, says Elizabeth Carven, deputy director of the Maryland State Arts Council. An agency like BUP "really gives you a leg up" on communities that depend on volunteers, she says.

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of Damascus fell in love with Bethesda years ago, when their son took them to dinner one weekend. The couple often whiles away an afternoon with a cup of hot chocolate at Quartermaine Coffee Roasters or catches a movie at Landmark's Bethesda Row Cinema.

"We just love the atmosphere, everything about Bethesda," Evelyn Earl says. "It seems like they have a little bit of everything."

"There's something about a crowd of people in a nice, harmonious mood," Rolison adds. "It just rubs off on you."

Part of the credit for the vitality of Bethesda's downtown belongs to the Bethesda Urban Partnership (BUP), a non-profit organization created by the county in 1994, says Elizabeth Carven, deputy director of the Maryland State Arts Council. A management agency like BUP "really gives you a leg up" on those communities who may depend on volunteers to program downtown activities, she says.

Special events organized by the partnership include the popular "Taste of Bethesda" and "Play In A Day," in which six theater companies are given 24 hours to write and produce their own 10-minute plays.

"You can make a strong argument with all its amenities and cultural facilities for [Bethesda] being a destination," adds Blake Robison, producing artistic director of Round House Theatre on East West Highway. "You don't see that in every county or every neighborhood."

Rockville Town Square, with shops, restaurants, condominiums and offices housed in buildings just about 2 years old, offers a different feel than Bethesda. "It's a great project in my eyes, but a little more manufactured," Eisen says, noting that the Rockville development was built with a certain look in mind, and lacks the inherent charm of Bethesda's mix of old and revamped buildings.

Eisen predicts Rockville Town Square will begin to mature when redevelopment moves beyond the new town center. "You'll

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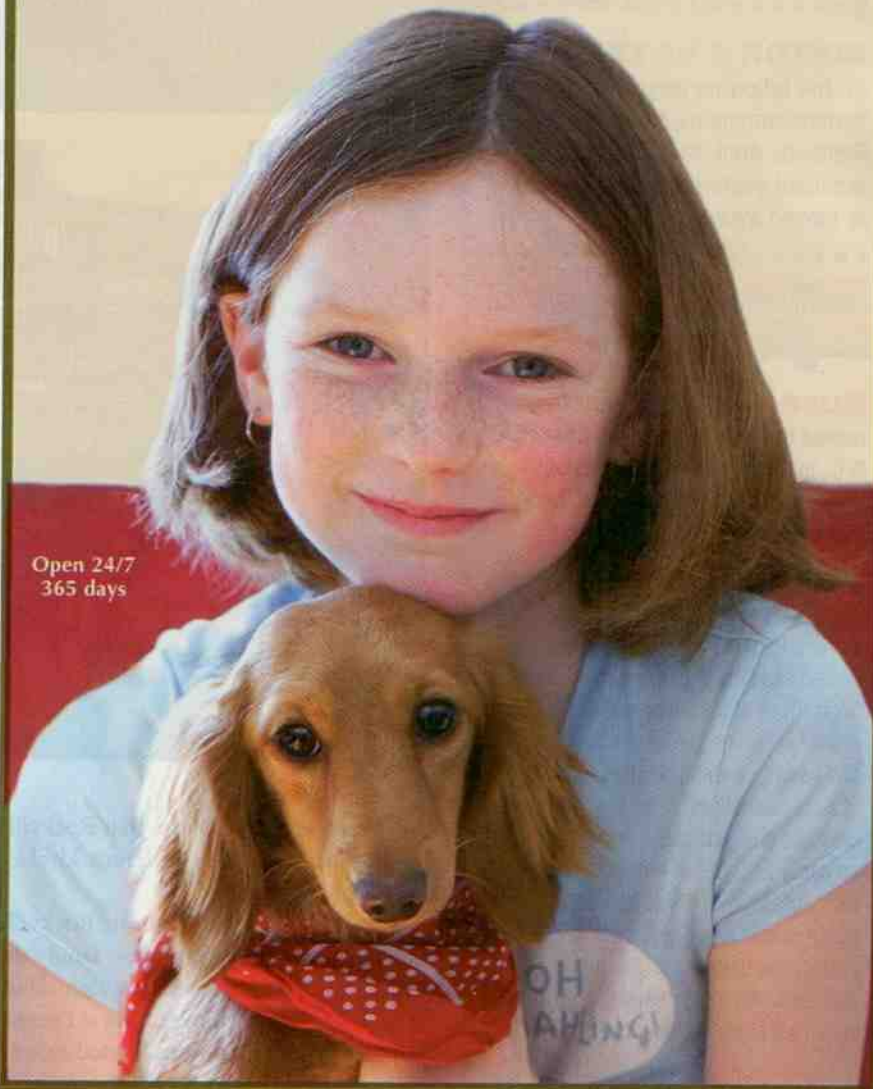


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