

Expats to Repats: After the spring break vibe of Florida, South Wales is a perfect family home

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After planning to move for several years, on Thanksgiving Day 2015 Jennifer Staerker pulled into the driveway of her family's new home in South Wales.

Before making the move from Florida, Jennifer had only seen video of her new home, relying on Google Maps and the judgement of her husband, Patrick. He had visited the property firsthand and assured her that this was the perfect location for them.

"I hadn't set foot in the house until the day we moved," Jennifer recalled. "I envision space and layouts pretty well, but it was a blind move."

Patrick's relatives waited on site to greet Jennifer. Twenty minutes behind her arrival, Patrick followed, parking the U-Haul filled with their belongings. Jennifer rushed out and hugged him, overwhelmed.

"She met me in the driveway, crying, saying it's better than she thought it would be," Patrick recalled. He was grateful and relieved.

Patrick, 40, is a Tonawanda native who graduated from Kenmore East High School in 1994 and studied hospitality management at R.I.T. before beginning a semi-pro hockey career. He originally played in Mississippi, but was traded to the Pensacola Ice Pirates. Along the way, he worked in restaurants, dreaming that he would run his own restaurant by age 40.

Jennifer, 43, is a Florida native who spent 10 years in the Navy, traveling the world. After leaving the service, she settled in Panama City Beach, where she opened two day spas.

The couple met in 2007, married, and had a son, Reis, now 7. Jennifer's older son, Henson, is 17.

Amid the tourists and transient residents, they began to consider raising children outside Florida.

"Spring break is chaos," Jennifer agreed. "It's sex and drugs and rock and roll on the beach. It's not much of a family environment."

"We didn't want this type of lifestyle for our son," Patrick said.

Names: Patrick and Jennifer Staerker

Hometowns: Patrick, Town of Tonawanda; Jennifer, south Florida native

Current home: South Wales, since November 2015

Previous home: Panama City Beach, Fla.

Miss about Florida: Orange trees in backyard; Jennifer's 17-year-old son, Henson, who remains there for school.

Love about Buffalo: Generational residents; four seasons; business opportunity with the American Grille in East Aurora.

Jennifer was familiar with Western New York from visiting Patrick's family. Patrick had been eager to leave after college, dreading winter and the declining economy. As time passed, those feelings changed. Jennifer was amazed how families remained in the area, that different generations lived close to one another and spent holidays together.

"In Buffalo, there are four seasons," Patrick said. "In Florida, we had seasons, too. Motorcycle season, tourist season. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, we called it 100 days of hell because so many people came through town."

A few years ago, they began searching for houses around Buffalo, and through a broker, investigated buying a restaurant. Several homes on their radar fell through. Likewise, there were a few restaurants they considered, but couldn't find the right fit until last winter. As they settled into their new home, they pursued a promising lead. On July 11, the Staerkers took ownership of the American Grille on Seneca Street in East Aurora.

Since then, both have logged long hours. Patrick works 13-hour days — and the family couldn't be happier. But there have been some adjustments.

"Where she grew up, my wife could never drive south, because that meant you were going in the ocean," Patrick said. "If you went north, you were going on vacation. When we moved here, she was completely turned around."

Jennifer survived her first northern winter, although natives professed that it was mild. She is looking forward to autumn.

"I'm 43 and I've never seen fall," Jennifer said. "I'm so glad to be here. I love the melting pot. There is a nice resurgence and the seasons are temperate."

Still, there are some Buffalo traditions she doesn't understand. In South Wales, Jennifer stuck a plastic pink flamingo in the yard to symbolize her Florida roots.

"I was representing," she said. "I snapped pictures of it covered in snow. Then one day we had workers come in and they asked if I was Polish. What does a flamingo have to do with being Polish?"

Patrick laughed. The Staerkers plan to be here long enough for Jennifer to learn.

If you or anyone you know has a story to tell about moving back or to Buffalo, or about moving away, email JeffSchober@hotmail.com

Jeff Schober is the author of "Bike Path Rapist," "Growing Up Gronk," and several works of crime fiction set in Buffalo in the 1980s. His newest book, "Faces and Fingertips," is available now. Visit his website at www.jeffschober.com.