

Bringing Hope

What keeps young people on islands?

CHERIE GALYEAN



Peter Rabston (4)

Experience in early childhood education led Melissa Brown to open a licensed day-care business on Long Island.

It's a common refrain heard in all discussions about the future of Maine's islands: "We need to attract young people." Because "young people" bring with them energy, work and children—but most importantly, hope. A young family on an island means a viable workforce, new ideas, children in the school, a future. An island without young people is a dying place. The next step is usually a summer-only settlement.

Up and down the coast, communities can be heard discussing the difficulties they face. Without jobs there will be no young people. Without affordable housing there will be no young people. Without a good school, a strong library, a lively community center . . . there will be no young people. And in Maine, it's a statewide problem. The 2000 census showed that 18 percent of Maine's population was between the ages of 20 and 34, down from 24 percent in 1990. The general belief is that opportunities in Maine, and particularly in small communities like islands, are too limited, too low-paying and too rural to attract the younger generation.

But is it really true? Can island life, with its quirks and difficulties and uncertain future, be an attractive alternative to the younger people and families that are so desperately needed? What are the benefits for younger people? How can communities be more successful at recruiting and keeping this precious resource? Most important, what do young islanders need to keep them there?

Long Island “A great opportunity to be involved”

Deciding to move back to Long Island after living in Portland was a positive choice for Melissa and Cade Brown. Both had strong links to the island: Melissa’s parents, who were originally from Long but lived in Portland for a time, moved back to the island when she was in the fifth grade. Cade used to visit his mother on the island in the summer. When their son, Madison, was born, coming back to Long was the best way to build close family relationships. “Often, parents want to give their children the childhood they didn’t have. I want my son to have the one I had living on Long Island,” Melissa says.

Melissa and Cade consider family and community a priority. “I want him to live in a community where we know everyone’s name and we all wave to each other.” She thinks other people move back to the island for the same reasons. “There is another girl from my childhood who came back [after college], but she also has started her family. I don’t see a lot of college graduates without families coming back to live.”

Melissa also sees the other side growing up on the island. “Growing up on the island I heard many of my friends say (and I’m sure I said it too) that they couldn’t wait to get off ‘the rock.’” After fifth grade she experienced commuting to Portland daily for school. She ended up going to boarding school to finish high school, and is sympathetic to the difficulties that island living imposes: “Catching a boat at 6:45 to make it to an 8:00 class can be taxing on one’s body. Not being able to play many sports, or join many clubs because the games and practices go past 5:45 is something many face. I stayed a lot—several days during the week—with friends on Peaks Island or in town.”

Moving to the island, Melissa and Cade immediately faced a problem: few jobs. Although Cade was employed as a carpenter with an island builder, Melissa needed a job that would allow her to stay home with their young son. Her education and experience in early childhood education led her to open a fully licensed daycare on the island. “I am really lucky that there is a market for this,” she says. But, despite having a full house of kids Monday through Friday, Melissa still needs a second job to help make ends meet. She works two days a week at Casco

Bay Lines in Portland. “Daycare providers don’t make a lot of money, and the small paycheck that I get from Bay Lines helps cover our budget,” she says. In addition, her business is subject to fluctuations in island population. “If people don’t have children, I don’t have a job.”

Even with both Melissa and her husband working full time, “Staying on Long Island is certainly a topic that comes up from time to time,” she says. “Land and housing are currently beyond our budget, and in the next few years we may decide that we are ready to buy. Unfortunately, we may have to go off-island to find something.”

Even with all of their jobs and a young son, Melissa and Cade still manage to volunteer. Melissa is a member of the school board and recreation committee, while Cade serves on the planning board and volunteers with the fire department. Both volunteer for the library. “Young people out here have a great opportunity to be involved. In another place, I never would have had the opportunity to be on the school board at my age,” Melissa says. “We continue to ask ourselves: can we find a place to live that gives us what we want and have found here?”

Vinalhaven “You live your job completely.”

Mike and Keely Felton found that taking up permanent residence on Vinalhaven took several years and a lot of commuting. Keely, who calls herself a “fourth-generation summer person,” had been coming to the island every summer since she was a child. She always knew she wanted to try winter living as well. “I was always sad to leave in the fall. I would hear people talking about their winter activities.”

The summer after she graduated from college, she met Mike on the island, just as he was finishing up his first year as an Island Institute Fellow. After spending a year in Philadelphia, Keely also signed on as an Island Fellow in order to fulfill her wish to spend a year on the island. “I am the first member of my generation to live here year-round,” she says proudly.



“If people don’t have children, I don’t have a job.”

Unlike Keely, Mike knew very little about Vinalhaven at the beginning of his residence. During his senior year in college, a professor who had been working with the island school offered to bring Mike out to see the K-12 school. Mike almost didn't go because he had to get up so early catch the ferry, but at the last minute decided to take the adventure. "It was the longest boat ride I'd ever been on," he says. He was drawn immediately to the islanders, especially the children. "I liked the kids and the school and the honesty of the people. On the way back, the superintendent was on the ferry and he asked me if I wanted to come out for a year." Mike took up the offer and served as an Island Fellow for two years, teaching social studies in the school and working to improve student aspirations. He admits the first winter was hard and he thought of leaving several times. "Then in April, I took the kids to Boston [as part of a college awareness trip] and it was such a success that I decided to stay."

When his fellowship ended Mike began working at the Island Institute as its Education Outreach Officer. Keely became an Island Fellow on North Haven, living with Mike on Vinalhaven and commuting daily across the Fox Islands Thoroughfare between the two islands. With Keely spending time on North Haven and Mike commuting to the Island Institute in Rockland and spending many nights on the mainland, the two found island life to be challenging. In 2004, Mike finally quit the commute when he took the position as school leader on the island, a principal-like position he calls his "dream job." Keely's fellowship evolved into a position as the program director at the Waterman's Community Center on North Haven. Both consider themselves lucky in their positions. "There aren't a lot of career jobs out here," Keely says.

But, as Melissa Brown experienced on Long Island, what an island lacks in jobs, it can make up in opportunity. "Because of the size of the place, I can really see the difference when I do something. I can start projects that no one else is doing," says Keely. Mike sees the same thing, "I know the kids as people, and can tap into the community of resources. There are things you can do in a small school that would be much more difficult in a large school. I can really see the difference that I make." Few communities would consider hiring a twenty-something to head up their school, and possibly even fewer people that age would be willing to take such a job. Mike says he wanted the job because "I love the interaction of education and community. It is a very intense job, though really good. You live your job completely."

Both love living on the island, but Mike admits the isolation and smallness can get to him. Despite that, "There's nowhere else I want to be, nothing else I want to be doing," Mike says. "The more I go away, the happier I am that I live here."



Mike Felton, who heads Vinalhaven's K-12 school, with student Sam Rosen

Swan's Island

"When are you going to have kids?"

Swan's Island native, Christal Applin never had to worry about breaking into her community—she was born into it. Christal has never lived off-island, with the exception of the four years she boarded on Mount Desert Island for high school. "I had planned to move off and go to college, but changed my mind," she says. "I didn't end up going to college, and I do have some regrets about it, but I think that if I had, my life would be totally different now."

Now a licensed real estate agent, Christal calls herself "very lucky to be one of the few women with a solid job that isn't physically intensive." But it wasn't always this way. Before moving full time into an island real estate firm, Christal worked a full array of jobs: at the town aquaculture project, as a town librarian, school librarian, lawn mower and clerk at a store in Southwest Harbor, all while she was assisting in the real estate office. "I used to wear many, many hats," she says, "and gradually I've been able to take them off."

Like many things in island life, the position at the real estate agency came about through luck, patience and knowing the right people. "It was only a two-person office, and one of the women wanted to retire. They wanted some fresh blood so they asked me." Christal now enjoys the freedom she has in her job: "With cell phones and the Internet, I can really work anywhere." But she doesn't take her good fortune for granted, "Jobwise, there is no incentive for young people to move out here. There are few jobs if you aren't a carpenter or fisherman."

Getting those jobs isn't always easy. Christal's husband, Josh, originally from Wiscasset, spent a summer after high school working as a sternman for a Swan's Island lobsterman. Attracted to the island and lobstering, he decided to move there permanently and begin fishing from Swan's. Christal



Christal Applin is a licensed real estate agent on Swan's Island.

explains, "It was during the decline of the urchin industry, and a lot of people were switching to lobstering. It was very competitive, and we had a lot of trouble." A friend in similar circumstances moved off the island because of the pressure, "but a lot of older folks on the island encouraged us to stay, to make a go of it. They kept telling us that young couples were too important." The two built a house on the island, and are now happily settled.

They aren't alone. "Of my class, I think the majority live on the island now," Christal says. Still, Christal notes, there can be a problem with community involvement among the younger generation. "There are very few younger people on committees. We need to encourage more of the younger people to be involved." She credits some of this reluctance to a fear of the pressures and conflicts that can come of taking a stand in a small community, but also something as simple as time. "I used to be on more boards; I used to have four meetings a week. I've dropped some because I just didn't have time to do them all well. I think people don't want to take on a board if they feel they don't have the time to devote to it."

The influx of younger people has brought kids to the island, where the school population has dropped in recent years. "When I was in school, there were 50–60 kids in the [K–8] school. This year I think there are 35. But the preschool has a good number now, so I think it is rebounding," she said. Babies are a special attraction in the community. "There was a new mother at the Thanksgiving dinner this year," Christal remembers, "and I don't think she held her baby through the whole dinner because she just kept getting passed around from person to person."

Islanders value children so much that Christal and Josh are feeling pressure. "We never planned on having children,

and we are always defending our decision. It seems like in a smaller community the sense of family is so great that the next logical step after marriage is to have kids, and if you fall out of that role, then you are an oddball. They say, 'You've been married nine years! When are you going to have kids?'"

Asked why she chose to stay on the island, Christal says, "My reasons for living on Swan's have changed. When I was a kid, I felt like it was all mine. The whole island was my playground. Later, I felt like I was living on an island where everyone was my parent. Now I love the security, knowing that if something happens, everyone is there to help." And as a real estate agent, Christal gets to relive her appreciation for the island over and over again. "Whenever I am showing someone the island, I get a real sense of pride to show them the island through my eyes," she says. "I don't plan on ever leaving. This is my home."

The benefits of island life for younger people are clear: strong communities that are good for kids; opportunities to create a unique life. Equally clear are the challenges. Without a concerted effort to develop employment opportunities and housing options, islands risk losing even the young people that love them.

Slightly murkier is figuring out what allows some young people to be successful in island living, while others find it stifling. It's partly temperament, plus the ability to be creative about lifestyle and to think as an entrepreneur. It's partly a function of the community, which must be willing to bend and be supportive of new families. Mostly, it is an equal combination of both of these ingredients, plus some perseverance, patience—and a little luck.

2006