

# IN PURSUIT OF



# THE DREAM

People all over are discarding old definitions of **SUCCESS** and seeking a life lived closer to nature, with **more balance, more meaning.** An anthropologist explores the path that's led some of them to Michigan's scenic **North.**

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**C**hickens wander in and out of a tiny cinderblock house in the Indonesian jungle as a bearded graduate student known here as “Meester” scrawls notes in a journal. He’s Brian Hoey, an anthropologist from the University of Michigan who is here on a Fulbright scholarship to study how people adapt to change. He’s expecting a sad story from the man he’s sharing cookies with, a man clad in sandals and a colorful sarong who was forced from his Bali homeland by an erupting volcano.

But change has been good, the man says. Since he moved, he hasn’t gambled at all on cockfights, a ritual he didn’t feel good about but couldn’t seem to give up in his old village. He likes who he’s become.

A year later, Hoey is sitting with another subject, but this time in a raised-ranch home overlooking Lake Leelanau. There’s a plate of cookies here too, and oddly enough, a story with a similar theme: how a move, even one prompted by crisis, provides the freedom to change life for the better.

This time, Hoey’s subject is a former soft drink company executive who traded his gray pinstripes for a plaid flannel shirt and pickup truck with snowplow. In his old life, Alan was a union buster, one of the most hated men in his company. On a typical day, he might be ordered to fire a man because his wife fell ill with cancer and would cost the company too much. Alan had an ulcer and was on the verge of divorce when his wife gave him the ultimatum: Move North, or I’m moving without you.

Alan reluctantly gave up what he thought meant success: a fancy car, a house in a prestigious suburb. When he first moved to Northern Michigan, he even launched his own company and hired employees so he could keep a job title. He created a pace of life that was pretty much what he’d left behind. He wore out his car horn that first year, he says. “I kept thinking, Who are these people? Don’t they work? I was stressed like crazy the first year or two.”

But he was, in fact, moving gradually to a slower lane. Old friends clued him in when they started commenting on his more relaxed demeanor. He’s even proud now when he tells people his job is “landlord.” The best part about managing his own properties is being able to treat people how he chooses, he says, like the day he bought a big-screen TV for a handicapped tenant who didn’t have much else



SARAH MUNIRO

Anthropologist Brian Hoey



in his life but his tiny black and white. He told the man that another tenant had left the TV behind.

"I never went looking to rediscover myself," he says, "but I think I did." Yet even some people closest to him still don't get it. His own daughter, he believes, sees him as a failure for making the move at all.

When Hoey asked 130 people why they moved to a four-county area that includes Grand Traverse, they listed geographic characteristics that were remarkably similar: lakes surrounded by hills, forests, recreational opportunities, rural villages. But most also came looking to live life "right," Hoey concludes in the research he's compiled into a book manuscript titled: *Opting for Elsewhere: Relocation and the Remaking of Self in the Midwest's Middle Class*.

He picked the Grand Traverse region for his research because it was his personal refuge during the stressful years of graduate school. While on vacations, he'd run into people who'd found a way to live in the North full-time, others who simply wanted to.

For his doctoral dissertation, Hoey moved his own family North and started tacking up posters to solicit research subjects. He drew more than a few raised eyebrows. "You're studying why people are moving here?" people would ask. "Just look around!"

Specifically, Hoey's interest was not in why people initially moved to a beautiful, natural place (usually at a substantial pay cut); he wondered how they ultimately were changed by that place. And what he found, he says, is not unlike what you

When Steve and Linda Wade first started talking marriage, the conversation quickly turned to where they'd start their life together. Linda had traveled the world as a Peace Corps volunteer, and suggested they could start married life in a place other than Charleston, West Virginia, a place that seemed to be more Steve's town than hers. Steve saw the wisdom of starting a new life in a place other than what he called the

## NEW LIFE, NEW PLACE

"Taco Bell and beer world of his single days."

"It'd be like trying to live like an adult while still sleeping on Casper the Ghost sheets," he says. "You

move out of the little boy room at some point."

The newlyweds made lists of what they wanted in their "married life town," identified places from Chesapeake Bay to Bellingham, Washington, that had those characteristics, and then they went on adventurous "site visits" over long weekends. Traverse City rose to the top, and they moved after Linda, a physical therapist, got a job offer. Steve, now lay ministry coordinator at Grace Episcopal Church, was confident that he'd find meaningful work. They've since had a baby, now about a year old. "It's been a good opportunity to look at what was important to us," Steve says. "Taco Bell and beer weren't. Friendships were. We were able to leave without leaving those behind."

Rolf von Walthausen and Nancy Larson asked themselves the question: "Where do I feel most at home on this earth" and went where the answer led—the vicinity of Rolf's family cottage on Torch Lake. "I think home is where you are closer to the land and feel closer and more connection to other people and other living things, a place where you can actually count the stars," says Rolf, now the assistant to the Director of Music at Interlochen Center for the Arts. Rolf and his wife, Nancy, both had successful businesses and good friends when they decided in 1997 that they would leave Cincinnati. They shook on the decision during a car ride home from a great Memorial Day weekend at the cottage. "When we asked ourselves, Where is it we feel most spiritually connected and the most at peace?, it was always up here," Nancy says. "There was a sense of being connected to the land and water, a spiritual sense of calm and peacefulness."

## FINDING HOME

Neither found jobs before they moved to their home near Long Lake. Both initially launched their own businesses, and Nancy still runs a piano studio and is looking to finish her doctorate.

Everything has seemed to confirm the rightness of the decision, Nancy says. Her husband "never looked back," while she says she took a little time adjusting to a slower pace of life. But it's all relative. "Within six months," she says, "I realized I was happier than I'd ever been."

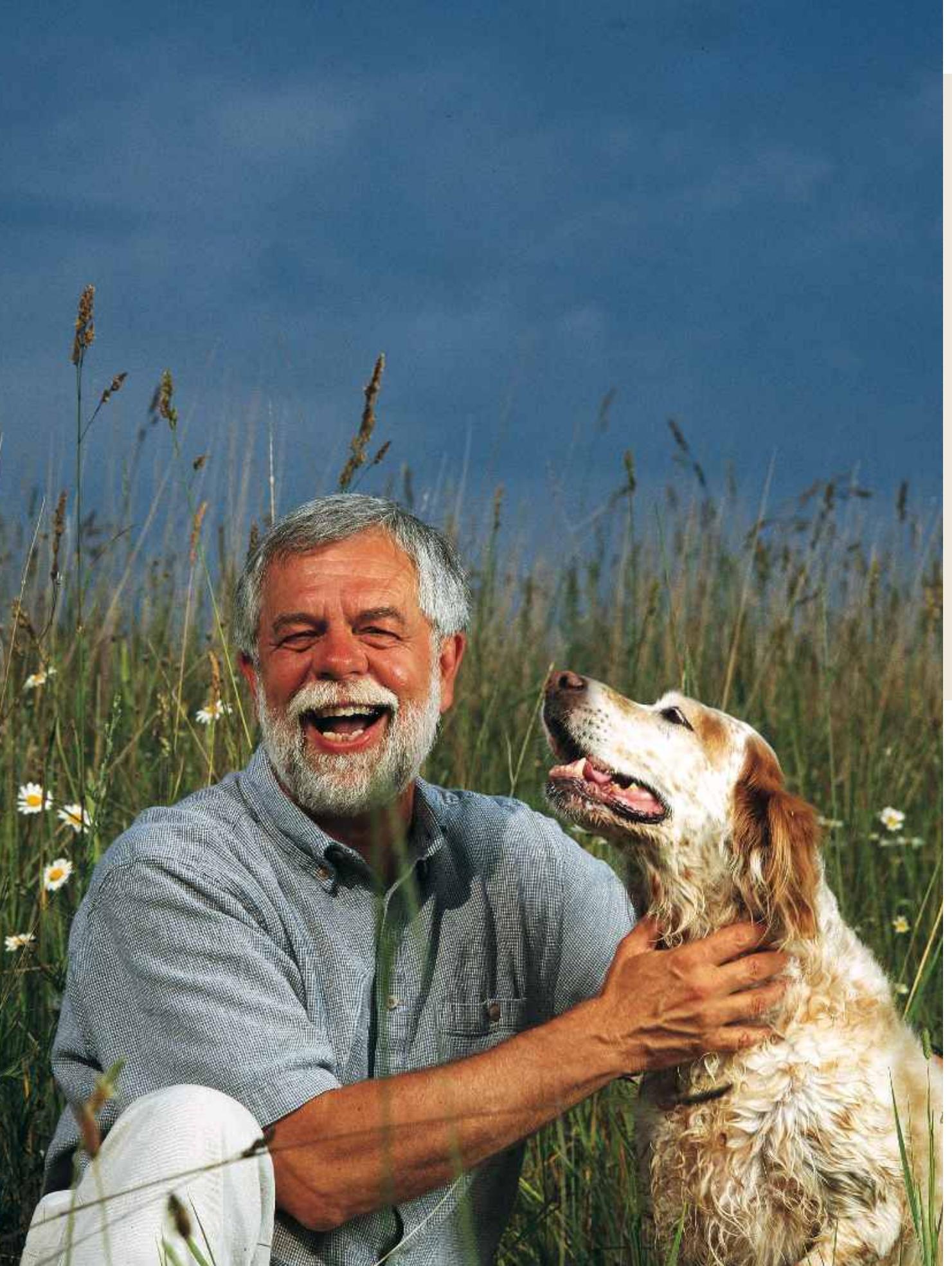
see in travel stories like John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*. The protagonist heads to a beautiful place, interacts with people and intimate natural places, and experiences a journey of growth and discovery—along with some unexpected bumps in the road.

The research subjects Hoey calls "lifestyle migrants" are following a "lifestyle first, career second" trend that started with the back-to-the-land movement of the '60s. But while both groups were seeking more meaning through a simpler life, Hoey believes this new group faces some unique challenges. For the most part, they didn't opt out of mainstream culture altogether—they want the farmland *and* the lattes. And they grapple with ongoing tension between the "corporate ladder" view of success and the lives they now strive to live.

Susan, a former high-tech executive in her mid-30s and among Hoey's subjects most passionately in love with the region, faced almost daily self-doubt about identity after chucking an impressive salary with stock options for a simpler life in Leelanau County.

"I guess the dream I had was living up here in a little cabin or little farmhouse where I was outside all the time with kids and a dog and all that kind of stuff," she says. "But implied in that vision was the fact I was going to be surrounded by people who understood me and accepted me." It was unexpectedly difficult, she says, to be surrounded by people who seemed to have no appreciation for her previous career successes—builders and farmers who didn't know or care about corporate





Bob Pisor moved North, burned out from a long career in the news business and settled into a tiny stone outbuilding on property he'd bought for retirement. He tucked his feet into a cardboard box for warmth, and plugged ahead writing a novel—a chance to explore an issue in real depth.

Alas, the book didn't sell. A stab at political consulting didn't work out. Ditto an executive position with a friend in Arizona. But the state did have something for him: He was drawn to a new artisan bread shop in Scottsdale, and he volunteered there to learn the business. He returned to Northern Michigan to start

Stone House Bread. Today the walls of Pisor's cozy bakery and restaurant in Leland are filled with articles singing his praises from *The New York Times* and *Bon Appétit*. And

he still can snowshoe out his front door and go hunting with his springer spaniel, Belle.

Be poised for opportunity, he tells others who want to follow his path, "But most of all be passionate." Part of his own success stems from a promise he made to himself when he began the TV news business. If he ever started whining, he'd get out—a policy that's continued to influence his course. But he knows many people who tried to launch a business in the North, gave up when it didn't immediately work out, and headed home.

The reward for sticking it out comes when you least expect—like on a recent day when a woman ran up to him in Traverse City, yelling, "Bob, I love your bread!" he says. "Now there's a way to be measured! Not because you're a celebrity and have a microphone in front of your face."

America. "It was frustrating like, Don't you know who I am? What I've done?!"

Even so, she understood that she left the corporate world for a reason, the same reason that drew her here. She wanted to connect to something that felt more "real" than computers and greed, so she even tried a job as a massage therapist for the human touch and regularly walked local beaches and picked fruit in neighbors' orchards.

"Here you feel like your life is bigger than the footprint of your house and your work, that it's a lot bigger than that," she says. "Your life kind of expands into the outdoors." Success, she'd come to believe, meant "being able to live life on your own terms." But she was still trying to define those terms.

Much like Susan's life story, the study findings don't lend themselves to tidy conclusions. What Hoey gathered—and told—were the growth and discovery tales of people, like a defense contractor turned pie maker, a newscaster turned breadmaker and some artists, writers, musicians and social workers who found rewarding jobs in their fields. About 70 percent had vacationed in the area as children. Some found more balance in their lives here. Others struggled to make a living. Some found themselves re-creating the harried life they'd left behind and did a midcourse correction.

Yet commonalities did emerge: Almost all of the subjects believed that the landscape itself somehow cushioned the risk of a move. "There was a collective understanding that the natural environment—the land, water, air and sky—was somehow imbued with a nurturing sense that is very particular to here," Hoey says.

Many ended up working more, not less, to support themselves, and they used recreational opportunities far less than they'd expected to, Hoey says. "Yet this is sort of the weird thing: They could work more and still feel life was more balanced." In one case, parents found more time with their children by hiring them to work the counter at the family pie shop. Other subjects found life to be less fragmented here for the simple reason that all the pieces of a rewarding daily existence—the work and school and parks and restaurants—could be found within the same small town.

Hoey found that the migrants he met here and in Indonesia used similar language to describe the ultimate impact of their moves. Even though the Indonesian villagers wouldn't have relocated if not for the volcano, many "lifestyle migrants" faced similarly shattering experiences that led them North. In virtually all cases, people used the move as a chance to reevaluate what was important in life and what they wanted to change.

"It's put in a language that's different, and the cultural references are different," Hoey says, but at the root of it is the same desire: to find a home in the world that allows them to be what they want to be. ■

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## IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

### Want to know more?

Hoey's study is a small part of a long-term, \$20 million initiative by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation that aims to turn the anthropologist's eye for the exotic onto subjects as familiar as family leave, overscheduled children and the demise of the family farm. The goal is to influence public policy as it relates to middle-class families through work done in centers like the University of Michigan's new Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life. To read about other related projects, go to: [www.ceel.psc.isr.umich.edu/](http://www.ceel.psc.isr.umich.edu/). To order a copy of Hoey's thesis or to participate in his ongoing studies of lifestyle migrants and owners of a "second home," see [www.umich.edu/~bhoey](http://www.umich.edu/~bhoey) or e-mail Brian at: [bhoey@umich.edu](mailto:bhoey@umich.edu).



### Charting your own Up North dream?

It's not easy to make the transition to an Up North lifestyle, but local author Andy LaPointe says his book makes it easier. In his view, the goal is to have the flexibility to enjoy nature and the amenities of modern life. LaPointe's *Up North Dream: The Guide for Moving to Northern Michigan* helps you figure out how to live on less, then find multiple, nontraditional ways to make a living. To order, call 877-746-7477 or visit [www.upnorthdream.com](http://www.upnorthdream.com).