

A Tale of Two Cities

I was born ten days late, at the tail end of a chilly 1997 March in St. Louis, Missouri. As much as I wish I could claim the urban, progressive, well-known Gateway City as part of my identity, its main significance remains the fact that it is printed on my birth certificate (1). During the year following my birth my parents uprooted my older brother and me because our Louisiana father accepted a job in a city the farthest south that my Midwestern mother would begrudgingly agree to: Greensboro, North Carolina. It was there that I attended Montessori school for a few years (12, actually), made a few friends (also 12, on a good day), swam for the neighborhood team during endlessly humid summers, went to high school, made more friends, learned to drive, got my first crummy job, cursed my first crummy paycheck, graduated high school, and ultimately grew up.

Greensboro is undoubtedly my hometown, but I vehemently denied this fact during the entirety of my living there. I believed that I came from and was destined for better things than loosely historic Guilford Court House, “the third-largest city in North Carolina,” and the headquarters of the Atlantic Coast Conference. I pitied my friends that were born-and-raised Greensborians, knowing that some of them would follow in their parents’ and grandparents’ footsteps by never making it out and settling for Gate City (2). At the end of high school I wanted to leave North Carolina altogether, especially given the disastrous HB2 passage and the ensuing nationwide state-shaming. But attending first-pick city colleges proved too expensive, so I “settled for” the nationally-acclaimed public university only an hour away from my front door. Unenthused about being stuck in my adopted home-state for another four years, I deferred my enrollment and took a gap year to travel and work.

My first, and ultimately only, destination: St. Louis. I moved in with godparents I had not seen in ten years, snagged an internship with a sustainable non-profit and a job at a local pizza place, and anxiously began the re-discovery of my true home city and, by extension, myself. It was a massive disappointment. Having left at the ripe age of one, I could not recognize landmarks I thought I would know, like the botanical garden that my mother took us to every weekend, and our old house. I was a tourist in my own hometown. Dejected, I returned to Greensboro just as the gusty Missouri winter became intolerable to my Southern skin, and worked there as a full-time waitress for the rest of my year off.

It took me a full semester in Chapel Hill and a lot of self-reflection to realize the error in my thinking. In lectures and conversations I learned more about our state’s history and potential, and became eager to stay and work in NC to help alleviate its status as the laughingstock of the Union. Other students that I met during my first few freshman months came from every corner of the state, which led me to foster a sense of pride for Greensboro specifically. Now I proudly tell people that I hail from Gate City, and my obsession with the seemingly superior city of St. Louis has become a distant, embarrassing memory.

Notes

- (1) St. Louis earned this nickname, of course, for its immediately recognizable, 630-foot steel Arch along the Mississippi River, “the gateway to the West.”
- (2) Greensboro earned this nickname for being the transportation hub of the Piedmont-Triad.