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Grandparents packing up growing family trend

Elders move to the Carolinas, leaving longtime homes to live closer to their grandchildren**CELESTE SMITH**
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With little fanfare, waves of empty nesters are moving to the Carolinas to be near their grandchildren -- giving up good jobs, decades-old friendships and beautiful homes without regrets.

They're here by choice, following adult children and their families who relocated to the Charlotte region for work.

"Grandchildren are the desserts of life," said Carmen Rios, 52, who moved to Charlotte from Puerto Rico two years ago to be near grandchildren. "If you have the opportunity to be involved in the lives of your grandchildren, do it, and you'll never regret it."

It's a Carolinas trend with no firm statistics, but Realtors, economic watchers and experts on aging point to anecdotal examples as signs of a movement building in the last three years or so -- with no signs of ending soon.

Experts say the trend coincides with a national wave of 50-somethings reprioritizing their lives, and the 60-and-over set deciding where to spend their retirement -- and many are choosing the South. More than a million people age 55 or older have moved into a South Atlantic state during the last five years, according to a Census Bureau survey in March 2005.

Grandparents say it's all about going with their gut, and after years of vacations and visits to the Charlotte region, the distance from their adult children and grandchildren starts feeling ridiculous.

Rios and her husband, Raymond, lived in their home in Puerto Rico for 10 years when he suddenly announced, "Let's move." Carmen had just gotten a promotion at her Johnson & Johnson job as administrative assistant to a director.

But her heart was in Mecklenburg County, where her first grandchild, Jonathan, lived with their daughter and son-in-law in Huntersville. The Rioses arrived in 2004, settling into a northeast Charlotte home their daughter picked out. Soon, two more adult children followed with their kids in tow, and now the Rioses live near five of their six grandkids.

Tony Crumbley, Charlotte Chamber vice president for research, said the grandparents quietly finding their way here will trigger a "soft transition" throughout the region -- driving changes in lifestyle issues ranging from the types of communities developers build to the availability of health care.

"Without a doubt it's going to have an impact on this community," Crumbley said.

More choices, fewer stairs

Experts say the Carolinas will feel the impact as the first wave of baby boomers -- those born between 1946 and 1964 -- turns 60 this year and picks new places to live. "It's the beginning of the baby boomers retiring. That's part of the shift that we're seeing," said Ronda Deitch, associate state director for N.C. AARP, the advocacy group for people 50 and older.

"If their children are here, it's a perfect match."

Builders are already responding. Sun City, the area's first large development for older adults, is being built in Lancaster County, S.C., just south of Ballantyne, with 4,400 homes.

And in south Mecklenburg County, the Cunnane Group is building townhomes across the road from its community of single-family homes. Developers say they're hoping to appeal to empty nesters following their adult children.

Homebuilders are creating a range of choices, said Paul Wilms, director of government affairs with the N.C. Home Builders Association. These include single-level ranch homes, condos with luxurious touches like granite countertops and Jacuzzis, and live/play communities, where homes are above or near commercial establishments for shorter walks for shopping.

Elaine Eschert, a real estate broker at RE/MAX Executive Realty in south Charlotte's Ballantyne, said she's gotten more empty-nester clients following children in recent years. It's still a challenge to find exactly what they want, especially those asking for upscale ranch-style homes.

Letty Facklam, who moved with her husband from Asheville to south Charlotte about a year ago to help with grandson Jonathan, agrees it's tough finding appealing one-level homes. Her daughter and son-in-law actually found and bought the Facklams' ranch home so they wouldn't lose the gem, nestled on a landscaped lot with mature trees. The Facklams later bought the house from them.

"It goofed up their income taxes that year," said Facklam, 69, but she's grateful: "Stairs and I don't get along."

Family feels familiar

Once here, many grandparents say they easily find their family niche.

Since David Anderson works days with computers as a system administrator, his schedule frees him at night to watch his two grandchildren while his daughter works at a photo studio. He moved to the region from Pittsburgh in 1999 to be near two sets of grandchildren, and after divorcing, joined his daughter's family in a Concord home she's purchasing with his help.

"It's really great living with them and being able to help them out," said Anderson, who is 55.

Jennifer Sadoff feels appreciative every time she drops off her 2-year-old daughter, Lily, at her parents home in east Mecklenburg County. Jerelyn and John Toath moved from New Jersey in 2004 to be near the baby and help Sadoff, a lawyer at Muzak based in Fort Mill, S.C.

Sadoff hears her parents sing Lily to sleep with "Itsy Bitsy Spider," and watches her daughter and father pick radishes from the garden. "That's exactly what he did with me," said Sadoff, 35.

In their Florida-to-Mooresville phone calls, Suzanne Buckingham advises her daughter, expecting a boy June 15, to hold on, grandma's coming. Buckingham was scheduled to move last week to a house in Stallings; her husband will follow in about a year.

She's giving up a Florida house on a golf course, where she played in a league. What she's losing is "nothing that I can't replace there," Buckingham said. "I'm gaining a family."

Too much togetherness?

As grandparents relish their roles, they also should be prepared for the time when their place in the family might be de-emphasized, according to Lee Edwards Benning, author of "The Granny-Nanny: A Guide For Parents and Grandparents Who Share Child Care," published earlier this year.

"What happens when the kids go to school, and they're not needed as much?" said Benning, a Pennsylvania-based grandma who watches her three grandkids while their parents work.

"I try to keep up all my old friendships, because I know I'm going to need them."

Grandparents should seek out others for socializing and friendship, said Barbra Hoban, founder of the Highland Creek Empty Nesters.

The empty nesters group in her neighborhood, which stretches from north Mecklenburg into Cabarrus County, has grown from eight to 88 families since 1994.

"When people work, they have business contacts, they have social contacts, they have neighbor contacts," Hoban said. "Then they come ... with grandchildren, and they have only one button to push. There's something missing, some social contact with people of their own age."

Trudy Haseley and her husband are considering moving to Fort Mill from Rochester, N.Y., and already are researching ways to feel connected.

They dream of Saturday family dinners with grandson Nowlan, now 6 months. And they'd like to find a church to make friends.

"It's important for us to feel comfortable," said Haseley, an administrator at a teaching hospital. "We're giving up a lot."

The plan is to move in three years, when Haseley is 62.

"Unless," she said, "Nowlan calls our hearts down sooner." -- *Ted Mellnik contributed to this story.*

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