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COMMENTARY - AMERICA'S HEARTLAND - Why can't we be more like Grand Rapids?

By JOANN FITZPATRICK

It's such a big country, America. I don't know it well, haven't traveled from sea to shining sea, except by airplane from East to West several times. Last weekend I was in Michigan, not quite the heartland but close enough.

The combined effect of television programs, chain stores and restaurants and electronic gadgets is that we think we've been homogenized.

But it's not so, thank goodness.

I know that when I visited New Orleans, before and after Hurricane Katrina, this is a place very different from Boston or anywhere else in America.

Texas, too. But what of the vast Midwest? Is it really different from New England or California?

Darned right, it is. I was in Grand Rapids, Mich., for a wedding. What I knew about Grand Rapids before going there was that it was the hometown of President Gerald Ford and site of his presidential library and museum. And also the home of Amway, though I and other out-of-town guests had only a vague idea of what Amway sells.

The small talk that predominates at events like this was punctuated repeatedly by wedding guests proclaiming to one another, "What a nice town, what a surprise!" Many if not most of the guests flew in from both coasts and interesting places in between, such as Santa Fe. There was elitism to spare but at the same time a willingness to be charmed by a place that truly seems to represent good old-fashioned American values.

If there are surreptitious litter police, they keep themselves well hidden, but the streets of Grand Rapids are as gleaming as the refurbished buildings throughout the downtown. Community pride is everywhere. I couldn't help but compare what I saw to cities and towns back home.

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Don't get me wrong, I love Boston and New England, from the coastline to the old mill towns like the one where I grew up, Manchester, N.H. But there's no disputing that the quality of life in this area continues to deteriorate. We blame government for not investing more in parks and beaches, but who's dropping the garbage? It's not the government; it's us. The mounds of Dunkin' Donuts cups scarring off-ramps on our highways is disgusting. Local streets are no better and because we seem not to care, the habit just grows.

In Grand Rapids, Midwestern friendliness and helpfulness were everywhere. I left my camera in a cab and within minutes of calling the hotel, staff was on the case. They called back 15 minutes later, not having located it yet but to let me know I had not been forgotten. I nearly fainted from the shock of random kindness. (Yes, I got it back.) When was the last time someone actually cared that you lost an item in their store, or even that you were shopping there?

Downtown Grand Rapids, a city of about 200,000, is a laboratory of urban renewal. Formerly a manufacturing city - home of Kelvinator, for example - it faces a huge challenge in reshaping its economy. The state of Michigan is no help, since its automobile-reliant economy has been in the hopper for years, with more bad news sure to come.

So what is Grand Rapids turning to? Health care. And here is where it could be interesting to Massachusetts. Spectrum Health, Grand Rapids' biggest employer, is creating a cancer center and also expanding its medical research, including a new center for molecular medicine. Michigan State University is moving its medical school to the city. You may say, "So what?" But think about all those Boston-area college graduates, our biggest source of human capital, and the cost of living in Massachusetts, and then compare it to Grand Rapids. There you can buy a five-bedroom house in the historic district for \$400,000. Yup, \$400,000, and you could walk to work, breathe clean air and not worry about litter blowing in your face. And your children could attend a neighborhood school. The historic district, a microcosm of American architectural styles, was rehabilitated decades ago solely because of the efforts of public-spirited citizens.

I am not writing this to encourage young people to leave Massachusetts. I think it's important to recognize, though, that we don't necessarily have it all here. We have first-class hospitals and colleges with costs to match and housing prices that make building a future here ever more difficult. We also have a shortage of the kind of community spirit I saw in Grand Rapids.

There, the Amway Corp. and its founders put their names all over downtown, investing in public buildings they hope will rejuvenate the city.

Here, corporations hand out a few dollars to local charities, but there is less to donate as they are bought up by national companies more interested in naming rights on arenas than in philanthropy or rebuilding communities.

Look around your town: Can it be improved? Probably. I am tired of dirty streets and blaring car horns, bad manners and shoddy service. We're better than that, aren't we?

JoAnn Fitzpatrick, former editorial page editor, can be reached at joannftzptrck@yahoo.com.

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