



Letter To The Editor: Why Alton? Why Now?

by John Harvey Chiles
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ALTON - This is the 47th move of my lifetime. I have lived in four different states and the Philippines. My work has taken me all over the world including Canada, China, South Korea, Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Sweden.



I purchased a home here in September of 2021 and have announced to everyone that I have found my FOREVER HOME in Alton, Illinois. I am now officially an Alton Ambassador. I like the more formal term “doyen” meaning dean or elder member of a community. I also find it funny that the local pot shop uses the term when hiring new employers to become doyens of dope. Ah, language is another great joy of my life along with music and reading.

People ask me repeatedly “why did you move to Alton?” I have whittled my response to six simple words: People, potential, and the Mighty Mississippi. In that order.

I find the people of Alton to be extremely friendly. The potential of Alton, Illinois, is like electricity flowing from a cut wire. Sparkes, flares, fires, and smoke.

Yes, I know what Alton used to be. Clearly, the population has dropped by 50 percent. Obviously, there is work to be done. But the history and the potential of this small city combined to create a fantastic future, full of opportunity and new enterprise. It is like watching the ball drop on New Year’s Year with all the energy and hope each New Year brings.

Some people look at me as if I have lost my mind. I hear “we will never be what we used to be” is the oft-used phrase. And I agree. But why would you want to go back when the future is so much brighter. In my brief time here, I have met so many terrific

people. Some long-time residents but many newbies, like me, see and feel the potential. The pending eruption of success along the banks of the Mississippi.

I am the first to admit that I am not normal. Most normal people do not move 47 times before the age of 65. Most normal people have not had more jobs than a temp service and more degrees than a thermometer. No normal people buy a former Ursuline Convent and infirmary on 27 acres of land that has been sitting vacant for nearly eight years.

My not-for-profit foundation, Other Peoples Kids, did precisely that 90 days ago. The look on my son Roberts' face when I told him still makes me laugh out loud. His friends' dads are playing golf, counting their money, or settling in with their second, third, or fourth wives.

I am newly single after 20 years of marriage. When people ask me if I am dating anyone, I tell them "Yes". The lady's name is Ursuline. When they ask me her age, I tell them that a gentleman never discusses the age of a Lady. It is impolite. When they ask me if she is retired or still working, I respond that she has been retired for 8 years but she became bored and is getting back into shape to return to work next year. "What did she do in the past?" they ask. "Teacher" I respond. All ages and grade levels.

Knowing I have been a teacher all of my life, they seem relieved that I have found a kindred spirit in my "old age" as they politely lower their voices as if about to enter a mortuary or funeral parlor. I tell them politely and in no uncertain terms that both Ursuline and I are old but we are not dead!

We are much like Alton. Old, fascinating history with many stories. But our future I so much brighter than our past. Which is why I bought a house and a former convent here. We are old but we are not dead. And our future, together as a community on the rivers of the Mighty Mississippi is brimming with energy and a bright future.