

SOUTHEAST MISSOURIAN

Some reasons why people move to Cape Girardeau & Jackson, and why they love it



By Jon K. Rust - Friday, December 25, 2020



Jonny Tosarello stands near the projection booth at the Rock 'n' Roll Drive In which is housed in a shipping container on November 19, 2020. Aaron Eishenhower ~ B Magazine

Because of the coronavirus, the U.S. workplace has been undergoing the largest-scale remote work experiment in history, with nearly 5 in 10 workers doing their job from home. Untethered from living near their jobs, many of these workers, especially those living in urban areas, are moving. Among their top objectives: less expensive housing, lower population density and safe environments.

According to a study by UpMarket, published November 2020: “Anywhere from 14 to 23 million Americans are planning to move as a result of remote work. Combined with those who are moving regardless of remote work, near-term migration rates may be three to four times what they normally are.”

Among the report’s key findings: Major cities will see the biggest out-migration, followed by the suburban areas surrounding those cities. More than half (52.5%) are planning to move to a house that is significantly more affordable than their current home, and 54.7% of people are moving over two hours away or more from their current location, “which is beyond daily or even weekly commuting distances for most.” In summary: Over the past few decades, work opportunities became increasingly concentrated in a handful of superstar cities. That is no longer the case, and areas such as Cape Girardeau and Jackson, Missouri, are particularly poised to attract some of these remote workers.

The pandemic – and disruption of work tied to geography – is not the only reason major cities are seeing an exodus, explained John Boyd, founder of Boyd Co., which counsels corporations and developers where to locate. In an interview with TV station WJLA in Washington, D.C., he also pointed to problems in cities with “out of control crime, social unrest and lawlessness.” Fiscal crises before the pandemic, compounded by billions in lost revenue and increased demand for services, have only worsened the conditions, he said.

Elsewhere in this month’s B Magazine, writer Maria Swan Childress looks at several tech companies and their workers who have recently located to Cape Girardeau, largely because of the tech environment created by Codefi, a co-working hub bridging the digital divide between rural and metro areas. To these tech entrepreneurs – most of whom are workaholics – top on their list is fast Internet, followed by low overhead, then the availability of coders and a supportive network. All four of these aspects are provided here, boosted by Codefi. But for most people thinking about moving, the decision is much broader – with additional quality of life issues in the mix.

This story will introduce you to four individuals whose skills and avocations allow them to live or build a business anywhere they want, but they chose Cape Girardeau County for different and sometimes overlapping reasons. Among the common themes: great restaurants, good shopping, supportive communities, strong schools, safe environments, direct flights to Chicago, and diverse multi-cultural opportunities. Each person also represents a fascinating business story.



Jonny Tosarelo

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Jonny Tosarelo

For the past 25 years, Jonny Tosarelo has worked in the live entertainment industry, specializing in lighting and visual design, with artists such as Def Leppard, Paul McCartney, Metallica and Kid Rock. Since 2010, he has been the lighting, video and set designer for the legendary Southern rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd. Before the pandemic, he would spend anywhere from 180 to 250 days each year on the road.

A native of Chicago who also lived in Key West, Florida and Los Angeles, Tosarelo moved to Jackson in 2009 because of his wife Rebecca – whom he calls a blessing – and quickly fell in love with the area.

“I’m a Chicago native, and I was raised most of my life there,” Tosarelo told me in a phone interview. “But I would not turn back to go to Chicago or any major city, especially with the way the world’s turned in the last several years. Jackson and Cape are my perfect vision, the perfect place to live because you have all the amenities you really need.

“You’ve got a beautiful community, beautiful people, great religion, great schools. It’s a perfect place to raise a family,” Tosarelo said. “For my work, you’ve got the Cape Girardeau Regional Airport. How convenient is that? It’s like having your own private airport to fly to Chicago, then

go wherever else. It takes me as long to fly from Cape Girardeau to Chicago as it did for me to drive to the airport when I lived in Chicago. I basically have the same commute.”

Tosarello was also “comforted in a sense” by how personable the people were. “People around here will say hello to you walking down the street, a complete stranger, where in Chicago, you don’t say ‘hi’ to strangers. You just mind your own business and keep walking.”

Restaurants also marked high on his list.

“The restaurants in this area are fantastic,” Tosarello said. “Anywhere you can go to Applebee’s, including Cape, and I’m not mocking Applebee’s, but it’s a franchise. When you go to a place like 36 Restaurant & Bar, Broussard’s, Gabriel’s or Sugar Chic Creamery, that’s a different quality. The food is phenomenal, and the food trucks in this area, by the way, are fantastic, too. I grew up in the restaurant business; my uncle owned Italian restaurants, and I understand how good these are.”

But what really sold Tosarello on Cape Girardeau and Jackson was the location, which aligned with his vision for life after working on the road.

“So when I was dating Rebecca, I was just blown away with how beautiful this woman is outside and inside. She’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever known in my life. In fact, I thought it was too good to be true, so to speak. And I’ll never forget the first time I visited here. I really never put into perspective where I was going, where Cape Girardeau was, even though at the time I’d driven past it a million times on a tour bus. I never stopped to think of where it was, didn’t really care.

“And so I get to Rebecca’s place, and this weatherman Bob Reeves is on the TV, and I look at the map and I’m like, are you kidding me? This is where we are? There’s St. Louis; there’s Memphis. There’s Chicago up above, Kansas City over there, and Evansville, Indiana. You’re in a wagon wheel right in the middle of the nation with 11 major cities within 500 miles, which is really a maximum of what you want to route in an overnight drive. And then I did some counting. There’s more than 2.2 million households within a 150-mile radius of the zip codes here.”

To Tosarello, it was the ideal location to build a live-entertainment venue, taking advantage of how bands crisscross the country.

“I have a passion to develop a live entertainment venue, a proper one that’s not a bar and it’s not a basketball arena,” he said. “People around here drive all the way to St. Louis or Memphis to see a concert, but here, you’re literally right between them on I-55. And you have an airport, so the access for touring productions to get here could not be easier. I’ve been in the live entertainment industry for a long time, and I can tell you that routing has a lot to do with where bands stop during a tour. So this makes it a perfect destination just because of its geographical location.”

Because the coronavirus put a hold on Lynyrd Skynyrd's farewell tour, Tosarello was able to start on his dream earlier than planned, working with friend and business partner Chuck Stratton to renovate an overgrown outdoor movie projection screen just outside Cape Girardeau into a hi-tech Rock 'N' Roll Drive-In with performance stage and cutting edge sound and lighting effects.

The Drive-In opened in October 2020, featuring family movies, with food provided by area food trucks. John Schneider, a country singer famous for playing Bo Duke in the 1980s TV show "Dukes of Hazzard," was the first live concert.

It was the first step of a big dream for Tosarello, but one that he's thrilled to have started.

"They always say, if you build it, they will come. I'm taking that a step further. If you build it right, they will come back. And that's the trick. I've added lights in the trees that are all DMX controlled. So if we're watching "Troll's World Tour" and the visual of the movie is all pinks and greens and purples, I can make all the trees pink, green and purple, and dance around to the music, change colors, turn on and off, and strobe and do all sorts of things. So I've made the drive-in experience and the live entertainment experience something special, which is about more than the venue. It's also about the experience for the patron and the production, for both."

Tosarello is banking on his understanding of production needs – and relationships with bands – in building future success.

"I've played tons of places with Kid Rock where he's like, 'We will never, ever play here again, I don't care how much money they just paid me.' It was terrible, because the venue wasn't set up properly to handle the production. I know what the productions need and want and how to provide it to them."

Phase 2 is adding mini golf, batting cages, a boardwalk style arcade, skee ball, pinball, "maybe a driving range" and other family fun activities. But the ultimate dream is an amphitheater that seats 3,500 to 5,000 people.

"A lot of these artists – whose bands normally ride in on a tour coach ahead of time for sound check – like to fly in on a private jet, black car to the stage, play the show and fly back home that night. So for someone like Hank Williams, Jr., you can be at the venue and on stage in less than 10 minutes from the airport. It's an ideal situation, an ideal place."

For now, Tosarello is focusing on the Rock 'N' Roll Drive-In, especially because of limitations caused by coronavirus, as well as wanting to "financially, take baby steps." That said, the drive-in is perfect for people wanting to get out and yet stay safe.

"We can do about 175 cars on a regular capacity, though in the future we can physically fit up to about 250 cars in the venue," Tosarello said. "And being that the screen is as large as it is – 80 feet wide and 58 feet tall – there's not really a bad viewing spot at all. You tune your radio to a

special radio station and we transmit the movie into your car. And we also have outdoor speakers with surround sound – though we ask people to social distance outside the cars.”

While the pandemic has disrupted everyone’s life, for Tosarello, it allowed him to invest himself in the future ahead of the original time plan.

“I thank God every day for what he’s blessed me with, for bringing me here. For giving me this beautiful family, this beautiful opportunity now with the drive-in, and to be home [during the pandemic] all while still remaining close with Lynyrd Skynyrd and their production, their band. We’re family. When they pick back up and start touring again, I will go out and finish that. We were on the last year of their farewell tour, and I promised them that I would finish that.”

And then, it’s back to building the dream in Southeast Missouri.



Dr. Bhavani Vaddey

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Dr. Bhavani Vaddey

Dr. Bhavani Vaddey grew up in Hyderabad, India, a city of more than 7 million people. An emergency room specialist – and family doctor – she immigrated to the United States under a special program that recruits foreign medical talent. For the first several years in the States, she was based on the East Coast, choosing to be near people she knew and where she trained in America. Meanwhile, her husband Venu Chirunomula, also a doctor, finished additional medical

degrees and his residency in Texas, before joining her in Maryland. A financial challenge at the hospital there caused them to review other opportunities, and because of their visa status at the time, it was important to attain full-time positions quickly. So with only Internet research, and sight unseen, they accepted positions at SoutheastHEALTH in Cape Girardeau.

“I was told by those on the East Coast it’s more in the country, rather than the very multicultural, fast-paced coasts,” Vaddey said. “So, we thought, we’d do the three-year contract required by the visa program, and then we’ll decide. We wouldn’t buy a house, because we didn’t know anybody or what it would be like. All we really knew besides the hospital contract was that there was a Starbucks, a Panera, Target, TJ Maxx, so with those, I was good. But we really didn’t know much else. That was in 2013.

“Then when we arrived, we realized it was the same town that we’d driven through and stopped for coffee [on a trip in 2011]. And, I think now, it was just destiny. We love this town. My husband deferred the final decision to me. He’s like, ‘If you are happy, I’m totally fine.’ He’s just a workaholic. But after the three years, and me five months pregnant with our son, we couldn’t think of being anywhere else.

“Back home,” Vaddey said, “I’m from one of the biggest metropolitan cities in India, Hyderabad, which is kind of like Chicago. So I was always in that fast paced atmosphere where you just run for everything. And here, it’s like the most peaceful and serene atmosphere. In 10 minutes, you can be almost anywhere.

“And I’m a very friendly person, so it didn’t take me long to make friends.”

Particularly appealing to Vaddey was the multi-cultural aspects of the town.

“For me, as a foreigner, one of the most important things is groceries, and how quickly I am able to access an Indian grocery store. Well, I have one in town, Pacific Rim Market. I don’t have to go to St. Louis; most of the stuff I get from Pacific Rim. The university is also important. It’s multicultural. One place I worked in the States, I was the only foreigner. So people would look at me and constantly ask, ‘Where are you from?’ They were nice people, but they had never seen anyone outside their community. Here, because of the university, people are used to seeing kids from so many countries and so many cultures. It’s not like I’m spotted as something different; I’m just like one in the group, so that was very important to me.

“And now that my son is in school, it’s the same thing. Kids are there from different cultures, who speak different languages at home. That was very, very important to me,” Vaddey said. “One of the biggest decision makers for me to settle down here was the schools – and if my son decides to go to college here, that is great, too, I have a state university here.”

With their initial contract fulfilled, and Vaddey wanting to make a permanent place for their son to grow up, the couple decided to build a house.

“It was always my husband’s dream to build a house, which I don’t think we’ll ever do again,” Vaddey said. “And I’m proud to say we did that, because we just love Cape Girardeau and wanted to make our home special. It’s a very contemporary home, I would say very modern European, and I never needed to step out of this town to get anything or to hire anyone outside the area to build it. That experience, working with local builders and craftsmen, actually helped me realize just how big Cape is with the range of businesses here.”

Vaddey was also amazed at the quality of restaurants, too.

“I can go to so many places in just 10 minutes. To my son’s school or the grocery store. Five minutes from my home, I’ll be at Panera, which is my favorite coffee shop, Pho 8 or Starbucks. And we work out, I work out a lot: it’s 10 minutes away. And our downtown Cape is something to explore. There are so many things. It looks simple, but the range of shops and restaurants, you’ll be very surprised. I mean, I’ve brought friends from out of town to Top of the Marq, Trio, Gabriel’s and Celebrations.

“At Celebrations, my favorite restaurant,” she said, “the chef always surprises us with something new that’s not even on the menu, because he knows my husband is a vegetarian. And at least once a month, we try to go to St. Louis, which isn’t far away, to kind of have a dinner date and explore what’s there.”

Now that she and her family are settled, Vaddey has started to recruit others to the area.

“Other physicians, when they see that you’re settled, they feel more comfortable to come here. One of our primary care physicians who was my junior in residency came here and married a girl from Cape Girardeau, and a pulmonologist from the same town as us from back home came, too. So, you know, when you see someone from your hometown, you kind of feel a little more comfy, which might have helped his family feel more emotionally secure to settle down here.”

Cultural heritage is very important to Vaddey, and she enjoys hosting gatherings around the holidays.

“I will have about 10 to 15 families together to celebrate our festivals. For Diwali [an Indian celebration], we have held parties with between 150 and 200 people at the Osage Center or Jackson Civic Center. People from all the professions and the student community get together, and it’s like a big party with food, dance, music and everything. We couldn’t do anything this year, because of the pandemic, and it just ached, but you know, that’s everywhere.”

If Vaddey is missing anything in Cape Girardeau, it’s an authentic Indian restaurant. “I love to cook,” she said

Her next big project is opening an Indian food truck.

“Opening a restaurant takes away a lot of time, and you know, it’s kind of like having another kid,” Vaddey said. “You have to be there all the time. So this is my plan. Once my son is older, maybe the time he’s like 6 or 7, I really want to start with a food truck, maybe twice a week, and introduce authentic South Indian food to people around Cape. And if that’s a hit, maybe I’ll think about a restaurant. In the meantime, if somebody else wants to open an Indian food truck, and they’re good, I’m not opposed to that at all.”

In Cape Girardeau, the dreams – and support – are endless.



Yolanda Cawthon

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Yolanda Cawthon

Talking about dreams and restaurants, Yolanda Cawthon has big plans and she’s putting them into action. A military brat who grew up mainly in Chicago – and who has worked in real estate banking for more than 20 years in the city’s suburbs – Cawthon recently opened Rufus Red Hots in downtown Cape Girardeau. It’s the first of at least two restaurants in Cape – and the first of five Rufus Red Hots Cawthon has planned in the Midwest. She’s made her home base in Cape Girardeau for the past few months, working with bank clients remotely, while opening Rufus.

Why Cape?

“It’s the demographic,” she explained. “I’ve always found the people here in the Midwest to be very welcoming to a new business, whether it’s Cape Girardeau, Illinois, Michigan or the other places I have experience. They’re more warm and welcoming to entrepreneurs, and they really try to buy local as opposed to buying from franchises. We like the fact that this is a college town, too, and a lot of times when you’re introducing new products or new concepts, college towns are a good place to start.”

What is Rufus?

“Rufus Restaurants the brand is a concept of ghost kitchen, a soul food barbecue Chicago-style restaurant, as well as your little corner shop. The first one that we opened was the Red Hots. That is to demonstrate our Chicago red hots – basically a hot dog stand – which we plan to open up in little gas stations on the corner, and here, we basically had a turnkey location. So with it being a college town, and the demographics of 40,000 to 50,000 residents, opening the first one in Cape Girardeau was ideal.

“It’s also not so terribly expensive to try out a fresh new concept here,” Cawthon explained. “Compared to the rents and everything that you would find commercially in Chicago, this is a good spot.

“Among our next projects is a food truck, which we can use to scout out possible future locations, anywhere from here to St. Louis down to Memphis, southern Illinois, over to Indiana, maybe Ohio. We’re looking to stay in the Midwest,” she said.

Although a banking executive who also ran a home-healthcare consulting business on the side with two sisters who are nurses, Cawthon is no stranger to restaurants or Southeast Missouri. She grew up connected to both.

“My grandmother had 11 children, and she migrated from Mississippi to Charleston, Missouri, [40 minutes south of Cape] back in the 1940s. My mother was maybe four years old, and most of the family stayed there – or moved back at some point. But my Mom moved to Chicago during the steel boom. In her lifetime, she had a total of four restaurants. One was a biker bar. That’s where she sold her barbecue. The other two were breakfast restaurants, and then she had a sports restaurant. That one didn’t have a liquor license, and it was a good place where teenagers and kids could come hang out and play video games.

“So she had those and a little snack shop, where she started selling hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, just little things, and that grew into her wanting to have a larger menu, a bigger venue, and she just so happened to pass away before we could launch this concept, which is named after her second husband, my stepdad.”

To Cawthon, family is a big part of who she is.

“Rufus was a great guy, one of those fun people, the guy who just says, ‘Let’s do it, let’s go ahead and go bungee jumping’ or whatever it was. Unfortunately, he passed away on May 18, a year after my mom, with complications of COVID-19. So we celebrated him by naming the restaurant brand after him, which is also a little bit more marketable than my mom’s name, Dorothy.”

Would Cawthon change anything about Cape?

“Of course, since Mom was from here, we’ve always come here for holidays, for summers, for visits.” The only thing missing in the area, she said, was a place to get great hot dogs – with the Chicago “snap” -- and soul food.

“I like Cape just the way it is. Well, it definitely needs a place for great Chicago hot dogs. So adding Rufus is a plus, but it was already a great place before we got here. I liked coming to Cape when we used to visit, you know, that is the place to go when you’re living in Charleston. It’s your little city where you come to go shopping or find more variety of foods to eat.

“Cape is just a big little town. Land wise, it’s pretty big. Driving from one side to the other, it’s not a short way. And I like that it has these rolling hills. People are nice. It’s community driven. People buy local. They support each other. It’s family-oriented.

“It’s also just 45 minutes from Chicago by jet,” Cawthon said. “I have a little apartment here, but at least every other weekend I can be over to the airport and be home in Downers Grove after a 45-minute flight. That’s quicker than a train ride downtown in Chicago.”

Cawthon has already done a lot of traveling in her life. She and her two daughters often visit family in Tunis, Tunisia. She also has cousins in Norway, Germany and Italy, with the majority of her family in the States. One cousin recently moved back to Okinawa, Japan. And one sister lives in Texas. Another sister, Heather, is being trained to manage the Cape restaurant, and they’re currently splitting the shifts between them at Rufus: Heather in the daytime, Yolanda mainly at night.

It’s the start of a family and new business enterprise Cawthon expects to grow, beginning in Cape.



George "Skip" Wrape, on right, and partner Jared Busch smile while inspecting the warehouse next to their headquarters and lab in Cape Girardeau. Aaron Eisenhower ~ B Magazine

George "Skip" Wrape

Skip Wrape is different from the previous three individuals, because he grew up in Cape Girardeau before moving away for more than 25 years. Born in St. Louis, Skip's family moved to Cape when he was in seventh grade after his father bought Central Packing Co., a meat packing company in the southern part of town that at its heyday employed more than 120 people. Central Packing – and his father – introduced Skip to animal sciences, where he worked for a few years after graduating from college in Denver, Colorado. Unfortunately, through a convergence of Chicago union pressure and untimely floods, Central Packing closed down, costing his dad everything. Skip left to work for a company in Eastbourne, England that exported beef parts.

Eventually, he joined a company outside Dallas where he became involved in the pharmaceutical side of the industry. His experience there sparked the idea to found his own company, which he did in 1986 in Tyler, Texas. The company, Animal Technologies, focused on selling tissues and organs to biological firms. Thirty-four years later, the company is still going strong – his father joined him at one point – and Wrape is a long-time success. He credits his team, including a group of talented women managers, for allowing him to travel and explore other opportunities. Divorced for five years, he married a woman from Costa Rica and move to Colorado, where he had developed other business interests.

“I had friends there, too, and I like the mountains,” he said. “We were living in Summit County for 10 years. Colette and I, we had two daughters. And you know, it’s nice. I was happy. I had a ski resort 2 miles away and a lake half a mile away. But, you know, the schools weren’t so good, and living in a resort is a little different. Everything just kept tapping me on the back. It’s time; you’ve got to go back to Cape Girardeau. It’s time to go back to Cape. So basically that’s what I told my wife, and she asks, ‘Skip, are you really sure? I don’t know about the homes.’”

“And I told her, this is a perfect place for a family, you’ve got to trust me on this. So we went back, and you know, after 15 years, my wife, you couldn’t get her out with a shotgun. She just loved it. We loved the schools, and this is the real kicker: Everywhere has its pluses and minuses. If you want to check off things, there’s checkoffs for anywhere you want to live. But Cape Girardeau really does have the most of what’s most important. I mean, if you want security and you want to know who your kids are out running around with, who the teachers and the principals are, and you want to know the officials in the city government who work with your business, and that the services in town are quality, you want to have a relationship with good bankers, and good places to shop, good insurance, that’s all here. But, I think, really the most important thing is simply your kids’ peer group, and getting to know their parents. There’s a lot of satisfaction in that.”

Back in Cape, Wrape founded another company, River City Biologicals, Inc., which is located on Southern Expressway off South Sprigg Street where his father’s meatpacking plant used to be. River City Biologicals is a premier supplier to the cell culture industry, providing fetal bovine serum to pharmaceutical companies and research organizations to create end products such as vaccines. It also has labs now in Costa Rica and Brazil.

Its headquarters in Cape is a non-assuming building that employs around 12 people locally, but it does more than \$20 million of business each year. According to Wrape and his business partner, Jared Busch, it is also one of the largest UPS customers in Southeast Missouri, and it features the largest private freezer between St. Louis and Memphis, which is vital to its lab production.

Customers for River City Biologicals can be found around the world – and include some of the world’s largest drug companies -- though most are in the United States. The firm has also diversified into other products, including cow gallstones, which is a lucrative business in China, and it holds a patent on another product – a miracle skin lotion – currently under development in California. Locally, it also sells dry ice, which is how some people might recognize the company from the road.

“It’s really turned out very, very well being in the center of the country and being in Cape Girardeau.” Wrape said. “Every morning UPS brings us coolers, and we start processing. Coolers come in from Portland, Oregon; South Carolina; Wisconsin; Kansas, all over the United States. And, between our various labs, we ship product to Boston; Sacramento, California; Kansas City; Atlanta; St. Louis; the triangle area of North Carolina; Europe; China, pretty much everywhere.”

Wrape no longer travels like he once did, which used to be two weeks a month. His partner Busch is in charge of procurement, and they hired as sales leader a former foreign exchange student from Brazil whom Wrape met when he was president of the Rotary Club in Colorado.

“I kind of befriended him when he was an exchange student,” Wrape said, “then caught up with him in Brazil. He is really sharp, and we brought him up here and trained him. He’s excellent, and you know, he speaks three languages and now has a doctorate in business. He’s so much better than me. He’s the one that travels around to the different places.”

Wrape isn’t fully done with traveling, but now it’s mainly for pleasure.

“I like sailing,” he said, “and I got certified to be a catamaran captain, so I can go down to the British Virgin Islands, Belize, Puerto Rica. Last year, before the pandemic, it was going to be Greece. But getting on a catamaran boat and sailing around in clear water is one of the things I like most.”

And, then, after sailing, it’s back home to Cape Girardeau, where dreams and families are made.

For anyone looking to relocate from an urban area – whether tech entrepreneur, business dreamer or someone just looking for a great place to raise a family – Cape Girardeau County provides opportunities to establish a thriving and cherished new home. Tosarello, Vaddey, Cawthon and Wrape are just a few of many with inspiring stories to share.