

In Squirrel Hill, Scholars Find a Place to Call Home

By Christine Hucko

Hailing from the U.S. and from around the globe, specializing in everything from history to robotics, the academics of Squirrel Hill add to the colorful mosaic that is this community. With a host of universities located a stone's throw away from the houses and apartments of Squirrel Hill, it's no wonder that so many scholars choose to live in this neighborhood. But it's not just proximity that draws people from the academic community to this one.

Sebastian, who works at Carnegie Mellon's Robotics Institute, is originally from Lenggries, a small town in Bavaria. Since relocating to Pittsburgh, he has lived in Squirrel Hill, Shadyside and Bloomfield. When the time came for Sebastian and his wife, Hiroko, to plant their roots a little deeper, they moved back to Squirrel Hill, lured in by the neighborhood's quality of life.

Sebastian and Hiroko, who have two small children, delight in being able to "walk to most places where we want to go," Sebastian told me. They also love the variety of shops and restaurants on Murray, and enjoy living close to Schenley Park. Plus, for the international couple, Squirrel Hill's cultural diversity has major appeal: "There are a lot of different cultures that come together here, and since we are also not from here [the U.S.], it makes it more comfortable, I think," Sebastian said.

While Sebastian and Hiroko come from Germany and Japan, respectively, John is locally grown, hailing from across the Mon in Mt. Lebanon. John serves as both lecturer and advisor in the history department at the University of Pittsburgh, and he is thrilled about his easy commute to campus. "I like to joke with people that it's 'a walk in the park,'" he said about the quick trip to Oakland, a commute that stands in stark contrast to the one he made in New York for seven years: 135 miles in one direction.

"The green space is amazing," John added. "I think no other neighborhood in Pittsburgh has two such substantial parks on either side of it." And while other communities have sidewalks, technically making them "walkable," it's hard to beat the ease with which residents can walk to places in Squirrel Hill, John observed. Out of milk? No problem. It's a hop, skip and a jump to Giant Eagle. Bread? We've got Allegro for that. "It's good the bakery isn't even closer than it is," John quipped.

Speaking of shops, let's not forget all the coffee shops in the area. When I went on a coffee shop crawl one morning, looking for students to chat with about the

neighborhood, I met Kristy. I found her seated at a corner table at Crazy Mocha. Originally from New England, she moved here to study medicine at the University of Pittsburgh. When I asked her why she chose to live in Squirrel Hill, she said she wanted to live close to campus, but in a place that "felt a little more community-like than Oakland."

"The nice thing about Squirrel Hill is that you meet a lot of young professionals, you meet students, you meet older folks. My neighbors range from people my own age to people who are [around] 85," Kristy said. Plus, she thinks "there's a lot of convenience to living here," pointing to the bus routes and to the fact that pretty much everything is within walking distance – something that appealed to everyone I spoke with.

Jialiu, a computer science student at Carnegie Mellon, agrees that it's easy to get around if you live here. "This is a safe neighborhood," she said, "and the transportation is really, really convenient. There are a lot of buses passing by, and also there are many good restaurants, especially for Asian food," which is important to Jialiu, who comes from China.

While everyone agreed that there is a lot to like about Squirrel Hill, choosing one's favorite thing about the neighborhood proved to be a challenge. When I posed the question, I could see by the look in my interviewees' eyes that coming up with just one thing was like standing in a pastry shop full of delightful treats, having to choose just one. After giving it some thought, Sebastian said, "Murray." John, remembering that long commute he used to make in New York, said he just loves the proximity of his home to his workplace. Kristy, who's a runner, said she really likes Frick Park. And Jialiu? "Squirrels!" 🐿️

