

June 1, 2005

The Five-Bedroom, Six-Figure Rootless Life

By PETER T. KILBORN

ALPHARETTA, Ga. - Kathy Link is 41 with blond-streaked pigtails and, at 5-foot-9, straight as a spear. She is still in the red sun visor and tennis whites she wore leading her fitness class at the Forum Gym and winning at doubles afterward. Tucked by her seat is her color-coded itinerary.

Kaleigh, 8, is red. With school over this afternoon in late August, she has already been dropped off at her soccer practice blocks from home. Kristina, 11, is dark green, and Kelsey, 13, is yellow. Kristina must get to her soccer practice four miles to the north, and Kelsey to her practice 14 miles to the south.

Ms. Link (blue for work, light green for family and volunteering) surveys the clotted intersection at the mouth of her 636-house Medlock Bridge subdivision. After moving here four years ago and choking on traffic, she made a rule: "Wherever I'm going has to be within one mile of the house," she said. But she breaks the rule two or three times a day, driving 10 and 15 times the one-mile distance.

She squeezes the wheel of her white, eight-seat, leather-upholstered 2003 GMC Denali S.U.V. "Go, people," she pleads. Her knuckles go white. Twice she taps the horn. A timid driver in a gray van three cars ahead tiptoes into the Atlanta-bound avalanche along Highway 141. Ms. Link impatiently pulls abreast, saying, "I have to see who she is."

A rookie "relo," she decides, someone newly relocated to Alpharetta and to its traffic. She herself is a veteran relo, having moved three times in the past 10 years to help keep her husband's career on track. She admits she is beginning to feel the strain of her vagabond life. "It's like I'm on a hamster wheel," she says.

Ms. Link and her husband, Jim, 42, a financial services sales manager for the Wachovia Corporation of Charlotte, N.C., belong to a growing segment of the upper middle class, executive gypsies. The shock troops of companies that continually expand across the country and abroad, they move every few years, from St. Louis to Seattle to Singapore, one satellite suburb to another, hopscoching across islands far from the working class and the urban poor.

As a subgroup, relos are economically homogenous, with midcareer incomes starting at \$100,000 a year. Most are white. Some find the salaries and perks compensating; the developments that cater to them come with big houses, schools with top SAT scores, parks for youth sports and upscale shopping strips.

Others complain of stress and anomie. They have traded a home in one place for a job that could be anyplace. Relo children do not know a hometown; their parents do not know where their funerals will be. There is little in the way of small-town ties or big-city amenities - grandparents and cousins, longtime neighbors, vibrant boulevards, homegrown shops - that let roots sink in deep.

"It's as if they're being molded by their companies," said Tina Davis, a top Alpharetta relo agent for the Coldwell Banker real estate firm. "Most of the people will tell you how long they'll be here. It's usually two to four years."

The Links bought their first home 15 years ago in what was then the master planned community of Clear Lake City, Tex., now a part of Houston. In 1994, they moved to the old Baltimore suburb of Severna Park and three years later to Pittsford, N.Y., near Rochester. In another three years they bought a five-bedroom, four-bath home here, 25 miles north of Atlanta, where Mr. Link started work at an office of the First Union Corporation, which became part of Wachovia.

The Population Sprawls

Still inching along, Ms. Link passes strip malls. She goes by the gym, chiropractors, nail shops, colonnaded stucco banks, hair salons, 16-pump gas stations, self-storage lots, Waffle Houses, a tanning place and a salon that tattoos on lipstick and eyeliner so they will not fade in the pool.

She dodges the orange barrels of road-widening crews spreading asphalt in a futile effort to keep up with a north Fulton County population that has swelled to 273,000 from 170,000 in the 90's, a decade when the city of Atlanta barely grew, to 416,000 from 394,000. Sidewalks start and stop. No one dares ride a bicycle or walk a dog. She crosses over Georgia 400, the clogged artery that pumps hundreds of thousands of commuters into Alpharetta's glass and brushed-metal office parks and, an hour's drive south, into downtown Atlanta.

She passes developments that from the air look like petri dishes of tadpoles, each head a cul-de-sac. In new subdivisions, signs in fancy script trumpet "price points," to show relos where to roost: Brookdale, \$300's; Wildwood, \$400's; Wolf Creek, \$300's to \$500's; Quail Hollow, \$500's; Inverness, \$600's to \$800's; White Columns, \$700's to \$1.5 million; Greystone, \$900's to \$4 million.

The Hispanic landscaping crews are out with old Ford pickups tugging eight-foot flatbed trailers. They trim the edges of spongy Bermuda

grass lawns and attack the grubs, fire ants and weeds. Toys and even garden hoses are tucked out of sight lest the subdivision homeowners' association issue warnings and fines. Garage doors, all motorized, must stay shut.

After dropping off Kelsey and Kristina, Ms. Link has to double back and pick up Kaleigh and take her to golf. She will wait for Kelsey to finish soccer before picking up Kristina and taking her to cheerleading practice. Another mother will have to retrieve Kristina so that Ms. Link can be home when Kaleigh's math tutor comes.

Jim (orange) cannot help. He is gone two to five days a week, to Boston, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Dallas and most often Charlotte. Monday and Tuesday, the itinerary says, "Jim in meetings, Charlotte." For Wednesday, it says, "Jim in meetings, Philadelphia."

A Different Segregation

Today's relos are the successors of itinerant white-collar pioneers of the 1960's, like the computer salesmen for whom I.B.M. meant I've Been Moved. They are employees of multinational industry: pharmaceutical salespeople, electronic engineers, information technology managers, accountants, data analysts, plant managers, regional vice presidents, biotechnologists, bankers, manufacturers' representatives and franchise chain managers.

They are part of a larger development that researchers are finding: an increasing economic segregation. A Brookings Institution analysis of census data last year reported that the percentage of people living in affluent or poor suburbs in 50 metropolitan areas increased from 1980 to 2000, and the percentage living in middle-income areas declined.

Just how many relos there are is hard to determine. The tide rolls with corporate fortunes and the global economy, and relos are not singled out in census statistics. But in a survey from March 2002 to March 2003, the Census Bureau said that about three million people moved to another county, state or country because employers had transferred or recruited them. .

With the spread of global industry's new satellite office parks, the relos churn through towns like Alpharetta; Naperville, Ill., west of Chicago; Plano, Tex., outside Dallas; Leawood, Kan., near Kansas City; Sammamish, Wash., outside Seattle; and Cary, N.C., which is outside Raleigh and, its resident nomads maintain, stands for Containment Area for Relocated Yankees.

Converging on these towns, relos have segregated themselves, less by the old barriers of race, religion and national origin than by age, family status, education and, especially, income. Families with incomes of \$100,000 head for subdivisions built entirely of \$300,000 houses; those earning \$200,000 trade up to subdivisions of \$500,000 houses. Isolated, segmented and stratified, these families are cut off from the single, the gay and the gray and, except for those tending them, anyone from lower classes.

Unlike their upper-middle-class kindred - the executives, doctors and lawyers who settle down in one place - relos forgo the old community props of their class: pedigree and family ties; seats on the vestry and the hospital board; and the rituals, like charity balls. Left with the class's emblematic cars, Lily Pulitzer skirts and Ralph Lauren shirts, their golf, tennis and soccer and, most conspicuously, their houses, they have staked out their place and inflated the American dream.

"What is the American dream?" said Karen Handel, chairwoman of the Fulton County Commission in Alpharetta. "It's to have a house of your own, the biggest house you can afford, on the biggest lot you can afford, with a great school for your kids, a nice park to spend Saturday afternoon with your kids in, and deep in amenities that get into the trade-offs with traffic."

More so than the classes below and above them - the immobilized poor of old cities and rural backwaters, the factory-bound working class and the old- and new-money rich - this is a fluid, unstable group. Those who lose jobs or decline promotions to let the children finish high school where they currently are sometimes relocate in place. They call the midnight movers to haul them to cheaper subdivisions, or seize the equity gains on their homes to move up.

The Link house stands on a cul-de-sac, up a slight rise with tall young oaks raining acorns over a small front yard and a curtain of cedar and pine bordering the back. It is three stories tall, with beige stucco walls and wide fieldstone panels flanking a varnished oak front door with leaded glass.

The house has a two-story family room hung with folk art, a room for guests that holds the girls' upright piano, a master suite upstairs with a bathroom with a wide white vanity on each side of the door and a Jacuzzi enclosed in pinkish marble tiles. Three blocks away are the tennis courts, the pool, two soccer fields and the two-story community clubhouse.

Alpharetta may be deep in Dixie, but its accent is not. Of the 30,000 people who live in the Links' census tract, 75 percent were born outside Georgia. Six percent are black, and 12 percent are Asian. Fewer than 3 percent are over 65; fewer than 2 percent are poor or unemployed.

Two-thirds of the adults have had four or more years of college and earn more than \$100,000 a year, twice the American family average. Their homes are worth an average of \$400,000, twice the national average, and they have nearly twice as many rooms as the average house. "Everybody here is in the top 10 percent of what they do," Steve Beecham, a home mortgage broker, said, "or they desire to be in the top 10 percent."

In politics, Republican candidates are shoo-ins. Few Alpharetta lawns sprouted campaign signs in November because the area's four

contenders for the state legislature and a new candidate for Congress were all Republicans and ran unopposed.

Just Passing Through

When the Links began house-hunting in early 2000, Mr. Link said, "school was No. 1." After settling on the best school districts, he said, "we looked within price points." At their \$300,000 limit, all they could afford in a good district near Atlanta was a three-bedroom, two-bath ranch-style house. "I wanted four bedrooms, two and a half baths and a basement," Ms. Link said, "and I had to have a yard."

The house the Links eventually bought in Medlock Bridge, built in 1987, has 3,900 square feet and 1,100 more in a basement with a wall of windows facing the backyard. There is a recreation room with a bar, and a fifth bedroom. "The basement is approximately the same size as my parents' entire house," Mr. Link said. The Links paid \$313,000 and took an 80 percent mortgage.

Pleased though they have been with the house, the Links never considered it permanent.

At the dishwasher one evening last September, Ms. Link said, "Jimmy has been saying, 'This travel is killing me.' I'm shocked we're still here. Every home we went to, I said, 'Could you sell this house?' I did not think we would be here four years. Early on, I told Jimmy, 'Wherever you choose to work, we will make a life.'

"Jimmy's the one making the money. I want him to be happy and successful. Every area you move into, you buy into the lifestyle. Alpharetta is very big on tennis and soccer. We chose to participate in that."

Ms. Link's favorite place was Pittsford, an affluent apple-pie town outside Rochester with a congenial mix of transient families and long-settled ones. "Up there each town has its own little village and one main street where you can walk and ride your bike and get someplace safely," she said. Kelsey and Kristina started school and soccer there. Ms. Link became a certified personal trainer and began volunteering. She joined the Junior League.

Creating the Illusion of History

The actual city of Alpharetta covers only 23 square miles in the northern half of Fulton County, but many subdivisions in adjoining unincorporated areas, like Medlock Bridge, carry Alpharetta ZIP codes. The city has no real core, although it has a small downtown with a Main Street, City Hall, some restaurants, a Methodist and a Baptist church, two beauty parlors, a variety store, a new gift shop called Everything Posh and a cemetery.

Just off Main Street, flanking an alley between two small parking lots, a pair of white wooden arches proclaim "Historic Downtown." But they lead only to the back walls of stores. Nearby is the Alpharetta Historical Society, housed in a 100-year-old Queen Anne house. The house is a relo. A truck brought it up from Roswell in 1993.

"Illusionism is something that people have enjoyed for centuries," Diana Wheeler, the director of community development, said. "We're creating new applications. It's a matter of how it's carried out. It's a quality issue. You convert the illusion into something that has value to you. Maybe solid columns held up roofs, and hollow columns create the illusion they do. People will go to great lengths to impress others."

Tim Bryan builds illusions, designing million-dollar houses of at least 4,500 square feet. Mr. Bryan said clients "want it to look like a house that's evolved over a century, to appear to have been lived in for 100 years or more, with the look of having been added onto." To achieve the look, a Bryan house may have a section of brick and next to it one of stone, then one of cedar shake.

With their price-pointed subdivisions, developers create pecking orders. "We're all busy looking down on each other," said Neal Martineau, 74, a retired advertising man who last summer was getting ready to move from just outside Alpharetta to West Virginia. "I'm better than you are and I'm going to show you." It's a kind of bullying. It's architectural bullying.

"I'm faking it here," Mr. Martineau said. "I have property that does not have enough meadow to feed a horse, but I call it a horse farm."

"The car may be the most visible sign of status," he said. "My Mercedes is indicative of who I am. I am also a bit of a fraud. I probably shouldn't have a Mercedes, but I'm happy to wear a Mercedes. It's a way I have of making myself feel important, to have someone look at the best car on the road and know I'm in it."

One result of Alpharetta's subdivision-dotted terrain is the isolation of families from people unlike themselves. Zoning and planning are partly responsible, and so is the traffic. Except for the commute to work, the orbit of Medlock Bridge residents consists of the schools, the community pool, the tennis courts, the clubhouse, the shops along Medlock Bridge Road and the St. Ives Country Club right across from the subdivision.

Atlanta seems so far away. "We haven't been to any cultural events or sporting events as a family because it's an all-night event," Mr. Link said. People shop on the Internet. Rather than go to the car wash, they can call Tony Lancaster, who comes around in his van and brings the water, too. "Anything a shop can do, I can do mobile," Mr. Lancaster said.

Their seclusion helps keep the neighborhood safe, which is important to the Links. "We'll get a little rash of golf clubs stolen," Mr. Link said. "Mailboxes have been hit or bent. We'll see where cars have gotten keyed. But that's about it."

"The good thing about it is that it is a very comfortable neighborhood to live in," Mr. Link said. "These are very homogenous types of groups. You play tennis with them, you have them over to dinner. You go to the same parties."

"But we're never challenged to learn much about other economic groups," he said. "When you talk about tennis, guess what? Everybody you play against looks and acts and generally feels like you. It doesn't give you much of a perspective. At work, diversity is one of the biggest things we work on."

Alpharetta employers say that the \$250,000 starting point for a detached, single-family house freezes out their secretaries and technicians, janitors and truck drivers, cashiers and data clerks. The prices exclude the city's own teachers and firemen. Of Alpharetta's 365 full-time city employees last fall, 112, or less than a third, lived in the city. Of 74 police officers, just the chief and two sergeants lived here.

House cleaners, like Linda Bates, live 30 or 40 miles away. Ms. Bates works for Unlimited Cleaning Services, a company that supplies housekeepers with a checklist of the clients' requirements. A client may never speak to the cleaner or get the same one twice, and that is all right with Ms. Bates.

"If I have to be at a house at 8:30, I will leave my house at 7," she said. "We just clean the house and go, like the air-conditioning man. I never bother personal things. I never answer the telephone. I don't like being there when they get there."

Adjusting to Differences

Kathy Link came from Highland Park, an old planned community of what are now multimillion-dollar homes four miles north of downtown Dallas. Jim Link grew up in a Houston subdivision, Bellaire, in a house where his parents have lived for 34 years. They went to Texas A&M University in College Station, met at a student pub where Mr. Link tended bar and married three years later, in 1988. She found work as an editor for an aerospace company. Mr. Link went into the insurance and mutual fund business, and from there he made the switch to banking.

Hardy, trim and darker toned than his wife, in disposition still the affable bartender, Mr. Link mans the beer cooler at holiday parties at the Medlock Bridge clubhouse. Ms. Link is more reserved. Her tennis doubles partner's high-five is a slap. Hers is a tap. Often as she leaves the court one mother or another stops her and, taller than most, she settles an arm over the woman's shoulder as they walk. She pretends to have the time.

The Links agree on most things. In November, they voted for President Bush. They splurge on their children's sports and tutoring and piano lessons and deny them computers and televisions in their rooms and cellphones.

But her family was better off than his, and every now and then their views diverge on money. When he sees the occasional \$140 charge for having her hair highlighted, she said, "he cringes."

"Kathy's goal for college for the kids," he said, "is like her mother's was for her, that they not have to work." He worked, and it is fine with him if his children do.

Ms. Link is happy in the \$45,000 Denali that they financed. He is happy with the 2000 green Ford Taurus he bought used from CarMax for \$10,000 in cash.

They are clear of the troubles with credit card debt that built up after Kelsey and Kristina were born. Mr. Link earns something over \$200,000, with bonuses based on the strength of the economy and his sales staff's success. Ms. Link earns around \$4,000 from personal training and fitness instruction and plans to build on that as the children get older.

They have about \$100,000 equity in the house and about \$10,000 in college funds they started for the girls last year.

"We do all the basic stuff out of salary," Mr. Link said. "Bonuses are free for everything else, like extra saving, big vacations and major repairs on the house." Bonuses last year bought the family their first ski trip, a week after Christmas in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

For all their moving, the Links try to carry on an upper-middle-class tradition of volunteering and knitting community ties. Barely settled in Medlock Bridge, Mr. Link ran for the board of the homeowners association and won. The board then made him president and, in effect, the mayor. He paid the \$15,000 initiation fee for the family to join the St. Ives Country Club.

Ms. Link joined a neighborhood group to play bunko, a social dice game favored by Alpharetta women, many of whom think of it as an excuse to get together and have a few glasses of wine. She began editing the subdivision's newsletter and set up an e-mail chain that reaches 350 Medlock Bridge homes. She spends two hours on Tuesday mornings at a Bible study meeting.

And she has bored into the schools. She became a vice president of the elementary school PTA and took on its newsletter. She is a room parent for Kaleigh's third-grade class and organizes science projects there. At her kitchen computer command post, she tracks the girls' reports and test scores on school Web pages. Kelsey's October report showed a 97 average, but then she got a 78 on a Spanish test. In a week, she had a tutor.

"The women are like the rulers," Kelsey said on a drive with her father during a weekend soccer tournament in Columbus, Ga. "They have the big cars. The dads have the little cars and just go to work." She said her mother thought that her father was too relaxed on the road.

Mr. Link said, "Kathy becomes impatient with me when I'm going 70 in a 65 zone."

"No, Daddy," Kelsey said. "It's when you're going 60."

Lately, Ms. Link's frenzied schedule has been grinding her down. Early last summer she gave up bunko. In August she dropped her PTA jobs and the community newsletter. In October, she was asked to lead a fund-raising drive for Kristina's cheerleading squad and said no. "I had never done that," she said.

But something else always seems to come up. She resumed editing the community newsletter because her successor gave it up. In November she learned of a school redistricting plan and shook her e-mail chain to mobilize opposition.

All her activity began creating tension at home. On the sidelines of one of Kristina's soccer games in October, Mr. Link said: "The single biggest thing to change is, Kathy has to be more judicious about how she volunteers. She would never give up Bible study. But she's now playing in three or four tennis leagues."

She agreed. "I volunteer way too much," she said.

"It doesn't mean you shouldn't be involved," he told her, "but it doesn't mean you have to be the leader."

Unexpected Challenges

The Links are the first to say they have not really found a way to make their Alpharetta life work. They found good schools, safe streets, neighbors they like and a big house and a yard. But they did not count on the grueling traffic, on how far away everything seems, on how much is asked of volunteers to sustain the community, or on the stresses of a breadwinner's travels. They have no deep connections here, no old friends, no parents to sit for their children.

Ms. Link thinks about Highland Park, with her Presbyterian church and easy access to Dallas. She thinks about Rochester. "In Rochester," she said, "everything fell into place." In Alpharetta what weighs on her is just the daily grind.

"We haven't found a church," she said. "We went church shopping. I would find places my children liked and I didn't or that I liked and they didn't. We found one, but it's a half-hour drive away. We don't have that kind of time."

"It's all here," she said, "but it's an hour drive away. Here it's like, 'Get the heck out of my way.' It's like go, go, go. We're just going, going, going. I call it drowning. It's when you can't see the top of the water."

"In Rochester," she said, "you could go to festivals and street fairs, and museums and farms and pick your own apples and not have a death grip on your child."

"In Rochester I had two best friends," she added. "I don't have a girl best friend here in Alpharetta. There's no one person I can call up to confide in. I called up one girl, and I scared her."

Exploring a Change

In the summer of 2003, Jim Link and Wachovia considered some organizational changes that might have led to a move for the family, but nothing came of them. Last summer the discussions resumed, and in September he was promoted. Starting Nov. 1, he became national sales manager for a broader range of the bank's money management services than he had been selling.

"It rounds me out," he said, folding laundry in the family room and watching a Georgia Tech football game on television.

Whether to leave Alpharetta was left hanging, he said.

But they decided that the moving should stop for a while - nine years, at least, from the time Kelsey starts high school until Kaleigh finishes. With his BlackBerry, laptop and access to the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, Mr. Link could do his new job from here. Wachovia leaves the choice up to him but tells him that moving to Charlotte should help his career.

"I told my boss, 'If you're willing to fund a full relocation package, I'm willing to do it,' " he said.

Back home from the family ski trip to Steamboat as the year ended, the Links seemed to be leaning toward one more move.

"I will remake myself to be a better mother and a better wife," Ms. Link said. "I've paid my dues."

Mr. Link said: "We would try to be closer and more plugged in to the city. Kathy would continue volunteering, because that's how she gets involved. We would require that the kids be involved in something."

They were not telling friends, or the girls. Once word got around, they feared, teachers and coaches would start writing the girls off. Kelsey had figured it out. As they packed for Steamboat, Ms. Link said, "she asked, 'Are we moving?' Jimmy couldn't lie. He said, 'It looks like it,' " and told her to keep mum.

They worry about Kristina. The shyest of the three girls, she was slow to take to Alpharetta. Then she bloomed. In her special-education reading class, she got 100's all fall and in January moved to a regular class. She won her soccer team's Golden Boot award for scoring the most goals.

The Links called in Tina Davis, the real estate agent. Afternoons when the girls were in school, Ms. Link searched the Internet for homes and schools in Charlotte and found that it, too, was a sea of new subdivisions. The average commuting time is 24 minutes, the same as Atlanta.

Then she found Myers Park, a prosperous, close-in community of 8,700 where most of the houses are more than 60 years old and 10 minutes from downtown. She found the Myers Park Presbyterian Church.

"It's like the one I went to in Highland Park," she said.

Mr. Link got home on Feb. 9 after three days in Phoenix. He found a long e-mail message from Wachovia. "We got our paperwork," the relocation package, he said.

They told the girls after school. Kelsey took it easily, sad only that she would not be going to Northview High School with her friends. Kaleigh beamed, then frowned about losing friends and teachers.

Kristina was in the kitchen with Ms. Link when Mr. Link came in.

"Your dad's got something to tell you," Ms. Link said.

"We're moving to Charlotte," he said.

Kristina paused. She would be leaving Rebecca, a friend of five years

"I hate you," she said. "When?"

"In June," he said.

"What about soccer?"

She would keep playing here through May, they told her, and then get onto a team in Charlotte. She brightened a little.

That night Mr. and Ms. Link went to dinner at Sia's, their favorite restaurant, just across Medlock Bridge Road.

"I'm happy," she said. "It's finally over. For four years, it's been when, when, when."

She told Jim: "I'm wired to settle in wherever we move and make a life for you and the family. But I still want a one-mile radius. I'm not going to do another Alpharetta."

By Kristina's 12th birthday on April 16, pale green buds had broken out in the oaks in front of the Links' house. A landscaping crew was setting pink and white petunias into the new pine straw mulch around the shrubs. Inside, floors had been sanded and the master bath retiled in beige limestone. "Finished basement," the red headline on Tina Davis's sign out front said.

Mr. Link left early that day to take Kelsey to a soccer game 30 miles away. Ms. Link and Kristina watched Kaleigh's Green Gators near home.

"Go, Kaleigh!" Ms. Link shouted. "Get in the middle, Kaleigh. Go!"

On the sidelines, a father turned to her.

"Kathy, what's this I hear you're leaving?"

"We are," she said.

"Work stuff?"

"Wachovia," she said. "Charlotte."

"We're going to miss you," he said.

"It's kind of bittersweet," she said. "We want to be there nine years, but you never know."

In May, the Links sold their house in Alpharetta for \$420,000 and bought a Cape Cod in Charlotte for \$627,500. It is half the size of the one in Alpharetta, but it is in leafy old Myers Park. The Myers Park Country Club, the Presbyterian church and top-rated public schools are less than a mile away.

On a visit last week, the girls got library cards. They tried out for a soccer club and all three made the cut. They will move in July.