

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Opinion

## **First Person | Long absence makes Ohio more dear**

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I left on a whim, a few months before my 40th birthday. A headhunter had called about a job opportunity in Milwaukee. I was perfectly comfortable in my 32nd-floor office in the Huntington Center, where I worked for a top Columbus law firm. Yet I worried that I was playing it safe.

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My life was all about Ohio -- and had been from elementary school through college and in each job I'd held. Every family member I knew possessed an Ohio address.

The time seemed right to venture out of the Buckeye State and experience something new.

I figured that I'd be gone a few years; 15 have passed.

I miss many things about Columbus: the energy on a Buckeye football game day, with the whole town cheering for Ohio State; the Columbus Symphony warming up on a hot July evening at Picnic With the Pops; the drive around I-270, with the thriving city continually transformed.

What I miss most, though, is being surrounded by Ohioans, people who know and love the state.

I wasn't prepared for the limited "Ohio" knowledge -- and lack of appreciation for the state -- beyond the borders.

Maybe the confusion stems from the fact that the three largest cities all start with "C."

Since my expatriation, conversations have often played out like so:

"You're from Cleveland, right?" a neighbor asks.

"Actually, Columbus," I reply.

"Oh, I'm sure it gets lost in the shadows of Cincinnati and Cleveland."

"Columbus is the largest city in the state," I counter.

"Really?" he says.

Beyond the city confusion, though, people often mistake Ohio, too.

"Will you be going back to Iowa for the holidays?" a co-worker asks.

I smile politely in clarifying that, actually, I will be returning to Ohio.

Embarrassed, she laughs and explains that she has never visited either state, then adds: "Enjoy your time in Cleveland."

When I mention my alma mater, confusion tends to give way to harassment.

"Oh, you went to 'Thee' Ohio State University," many say mockingly.

Having grown weary of defending OSU and constantly correcting others' geography, I started wondering whether Milwaukee has a group that reveres the Buckeyes and takes pride in Ohio's complexity and diversity as much as I still do.

One obvious solution was to join the Wisconsin chapter of the OSU Alumni Club. So I did.

I enjoy sharing with other members the fond memories of our days at Ohio State; yet, whenever I attend an event, I feel as if we're a bunch of expatriates gathered at a bar in another country.

Even though I miss Columbus, I've reluctantly accepted that I won't be returning anytime soon: A new marriage and children with roots in Milwaukee have compromised my plans.

I will always consider myself a Buckeye but have adopted Milwaukee as my second home.

One positive trade-off is that Milwaukee doesn't suffer the ambiguity that befalls Columbus.

People might have outdated perceptions of Milwaukee -- beer, bowling, sausage, "Laverne & Shirley" -- but they don't typically confuse the city with another.

Given my dual "stateship," I sometimes pause when fielding the question "Where are you from?"

*Do I say Columbus or Milwaukee?*

Recently, as I sat in the Phoenix airport waiting to return to Milwaukee, a man beside me asked, "Where's home for you?"

"Milwaukee," I said.

The answer seemed easier, as I wouldn't need to add a comma and the state for clarification.

"Ah, Minneapolis," he said with a sigh. "The Twin Cities -- it's pretty up there."

I smiled politely and offered, "Yes, Iowa can be beautiful in the fall."

*Julie Cole, 54, who lived in Worthington until 2001, will watch Ohio State's season opener at her home in Milwaukee.*