

OPINION

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This isn't heaven; it's Michigan

Candid and friendly,
Midwest imbued with
a sense of democracy

Ice creams cones for less than a buck?

A year ago I gazed upon a giant junior cone from MSU's Dairy Store with the same awe Shoeless Joe Jackson felt as he looked around a baseball diamond in the middle of a corn field in "Field of Dreams."

"Is this heaven?" he asks Kevin Costner's character. "No," Costner smiles back, "it's Iowa."

As I licked ice cream and unpacked boxes after a recent move, I knew the cost of these cones was a good omen. We weren't in heaven. But we had to come to the Midwest.

Friends back East pitied us, though.

Surely we would miss the unique Ivy Leagues and prestigious historical sites along America's march towards democracy.

Where else but Boston can you stroll the picturesque 2.5 mile Freedom Trail past Park Street Church, site of the



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Voices

first anti-slavery speech? Explore Paul Revere's house and the Old North Church where the lanterns were hung? Or tour the first public school site near the Old Corner Bookstore?

However, after living in New England, I discover in Michigan an attitude of openness as vast as the landscape. Greater social mobility and a more egalitarian educational system are more than historical markers in Michigan. The Freedom Trail didn't end at the Bunker Hill Monument in Boston. It took a sharp left — and came out West.

Here is a culture open to newcomers like me. The "Yankee Reserve" I'd grown accustomed to makes the

friendliness of the Midwest, at times, astonishing. Boys on bikes yell "Hello!" as they breeze by. Postal workers not only smile — they serve candy. I walk around the block and find librarians whose personalities and expertise would make Ben Franklin beam.

As I wind through surrounding neighborhoods I observe a wider variety of homes and economic brackets all mixed together. Demarcations are not as sharp here, the streets seem to suggest. Out west, who cares if you inherit lineage to the Society of Cincinnati or membership at the Yale Club? Social status is not restricted to those whose ancestors settled and survived Plymouth Plantation, Deerfield, or New York's Wall Street.

Moreover, access to quality education is not a right exclusive to the rich. Expensive, exclusive prep schools dominate less. Controversies over vouchers and charter schools aside, all children in the Midwest have a better chance of obtaining a solid public education — if we keep in mind the ideals of democracy.

I know the Midwest isn't perfect. Many people in our community can't

find affordable housing, child care or a wage they can live on.

Still, where there is openness there is hope.

I find the Midwest alive with a fresh and sweeping candor, enriched by a mixture of people with different nationalities, heritages and histories. As Midwesterners, we tend to blur the lines that separate people. While we work to ensure equal education and employment opportunity to all, we shelter and protect the values of a democracy set forth hundreds of years ago in Boston, Philadelphia and Providence.

These are precious legacies to preserve — and assurances for the road ahead. As we repair present inequities, we continue to protect our part of the Freedom Trail — along with its great ice cream.

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