

Alumni Program works to lure talented natives back to the fold

By Tedra Meyer
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After growing up in the Tri-Cities and each moving away for about two decades, Jonathan and Kristin Hunt returned, married with five children.

While away, Jonathan, 40, had accrued over 10 years of finance and accounting experience in larger cities, working for companies such as ConocoPhillips and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. And though he was initially intrigued by a job posting on Monster.com for the chief financial officer position at Richland's IsoRay Inc., he said it was other things about the Tri-Cities that really brought him and his family back to his hometown in 2006.

"The job is the thing that made us consider moving back to the Tri-Cities, but it's not the reason we decided to move back," he said. "We still have family here, and we enjoy the area. We enjoy being out on the river. It's a good place to raise a family."

It is young professionals like Hunt that a local program is trying to reach—and recruit back to the region. About two years ago, the economic development office at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, in conjunction with the Tri-City Development Council, Tri-Cities Visitor & Convention Bureau and the Tri-City Regional Chamber of Commerce, started what it calls the "Alumni Program."

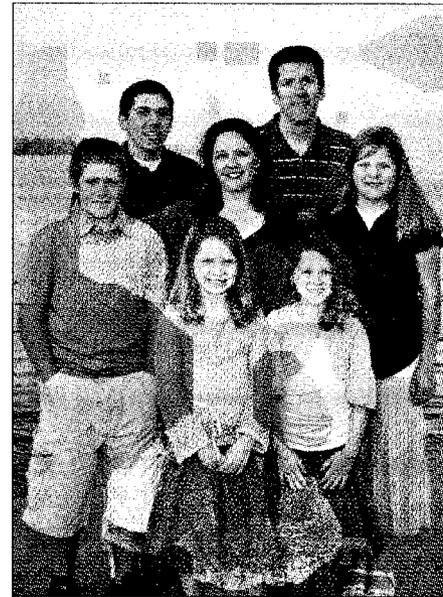
Modeled after similar programs around the country, including one in Spokane, it aims to bring back successful business

people, sports figures, scientists and entertainers, said program coordinator Robin Conger, who works in PNNL's economic development office. "The goal is to identify people who grew up here or lived here for at least a year and moved away, and then became successful in their own right," she said.

Still in its infancy, the program is mostly through word of mouth. It also sends out a quarterly newsletter called "Tri-City Alumni News," in hardcopy and e-mail versions, to a mailing list of about 250 people. The newsletter highlights local new businesses, executive-level job openings, philanthropic opportunities and development and scientific news. It also profiles a returning "alumnus" in each issue. The content is jointly generated by PNNL, TRIDEC, TCVCB and the Regional Chamber.

Conger said when she gets requests from people to be added to the mailing list, they often mention having the newsletter forwarded by someone not even on her list, which suggests it's being passed on multiple times. In the future, as Washington State University Tri-Cities students graduate and move, it will be easy to track alumni and grow the mailing list, said Conger, who currently spends about two hours a month on the program.

"It's a neat program that lets people know that it's not the same Tri-Cities that they grew up in," said Hunt, who learned of the program after moving back to the area. "But in other ways, it is



The Hunt family was drawn to the Tri-Cities' climate and outdoor activities, such as skiing on the Columbia River. Dallin, Brendan, Elizabeth, Kristin, Jonathan, Calla and Aubrey Hunt at Howard Amon Park in Richland.

still the same place—it still has a lot of good qualities that make it a great place to live."

If someone's been away from the Tri-Cities for a decade or two, she may not be aware of how much it's grown, or of the popularity of the burgeoning wine and related tourism industries, or the fact that it is a four-year university.

PNNL marketing communications manager Lisa Teske, a graduate of Walla Walla High School who attended her 20-year anniversary recently, said she

noticed a similar trend there. "I was shocked to see how many people had come back. From an economic development standpoint, if people just know what is going on, such as the growth in the wine industry, then suddenly it's on the map for them," she said.

"And it's not just about moving back to the Tri-Cities, but also actually investing in the Tri-Cities. It's broader than relocation," Conger said.

Another example of a high-profile alumnus who came back in one way or another is Peter Sikov, a real estate developer in the Seattle area, who bought a Pasco apartment complex in 2006 because he saw value in adding the Tri-Cities to his investment portfolio, Conger said. And Richland native and now-retired professional dancer Patricia Barker has performed local benefit concerts.

Those involved in the economic development of the Tri-Cities put getting and keeping more young professionals high on their priority lists; they say it is vital to the local economy, especially in a post-Hanford environment.

As Conger sees it, the Alumni Program is a "low-investment and potentially high-returns program" that is already succeeding at luring successful young ones back to the community. "If they're on the edge," she said, "it might be the final push."

For more information on the Alumni Program or to be added to the mailing list, contact Conger at robin.conger@pnl.gov.