

Geoff Calkins: Familiar tale with a happier ending

By Geoff Calkins

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They came to Memphis to start a new life.

I love a good story, don't you?

They were from Indianapolis. Memphis seemed like a sensible place to raise their two young kids.

"We were excited about the move," he said.

Then someone smashed her car window while she and the kids were feeding ducks at the park. Then someone else ran into his car at the parking lot at Home Depot and fled the scene.

And if you think this is starting to sound a lot like a column that ran in this space two weeks ago, you're absolutely right.

Except a funny thing happened on this couple's way out of town.

"We sat down and we talked about it," he said, "and we decided to stay."

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One hundred and fifty two people responded to the column I wrote about Amanda Sancamper and Shannon Hand, a couple that moved to Memphis with high hopes but left because of the crime.

One of the responses stood out. It was from a lawyer named Robert Kirsh.

Like Sancamper and Hand, Kirsh, 40, moved to Memphis with high hopes. He and his wife, Amy, arrived in January 2008.

Kirsh had been hired as general counsel of a private security firm. It was, he said, "a dream job."

Then Amy took the kids to a park in Germantown to feed the ducks. Someone smashed her car window and stole her purse.

Then Kirsh took the kids to a kids workshop at Home Depot in East Memphis. Someone crashed into his car and fled the scene.

"It was depressing," said Kirsh, but not as depressing as what happened next.

The private security firm decided it couldn't afford a general counsel. Kirsh was let go.

"Amy and I had a conversation," he said. "We talked about what we wanted to do. We hadn't been here very long. We could just go back to Indianapolis."

Of course they could. Nobody would blame them.

"But we decided we really like Memphis," he said. "We'd made a lot of friends."

For instance: Just six months after the Kirshes arrived, 15 women took Amy out for her birthday.

"That doesn't happen everywhere," Kirsh said. "This is a different kind of place."

Oh, and that hit and run in the parking lot of Home Depot?

"Someone blocked the guy's car when he was trying to escape," Kirsh said. "Someone else wrote down the license plate."

The police found the driver and returned with his insurance information in less than a week.

"A friend had told me not even to report it," Kirsh said. "But, honestly, the police were great."

Kirsh still didn't have a job, of course. But he had an attitude that might do us all some good.

"I asked myself, 'What's an unmet need in this community?'" he said. "How can I turn this into a positive?"

As it turns out, Kirsh's brothers are adoption lawyers in Indiana. His oldest brother is a past president of an organization called the American Academy of Adoption Lawyers.

"I looked at the membership," Kirsh said. "There were only four lawyers in Tennessee and none in the western half of the state."

So Kirsh would become an adoption lawyer. Talk about a Memphis need.

He'd connect women with unplanned pregnancies with couples who are unable to have their own children.

"It's the only type of law where everybody wins," he said.

It's also a metaphor.

"Turning something bad into something good," he said, "which is exactly what has happened to me."

Kirsh doesn't blame Sancamper and Hand for deciding to leave Memphis. We all choose our own paths.

But at a time when so many are embarked on a search for meaning in their lives -- when "The Purpose Driven Life" has become the best-selling hardback in American history -- there's something to be said for finding the meaning right where you live.

Memphis is a city where you can have an impact. Where 15 people will cheerfully throw you a birthday party or put you to work cleaning up a vacant lot.

"There's just something about it," said Kirsh. "As a family that didn't have any connection to Memphis, we're very happy here."

Kirsh still doesn't know how his story will turn out, mind you. His new practice is a work in progress.

But, then, so is the city where he has chosen to live.

"Nobody is saying that Memphis is perfect," said Kirsh -- which is one reason he doesn't plan to leave.

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