

The Good Life, According to Gen Z

Meet the Zoomers who are quitting the rat race, skipping the \$8 lattes, and buying homes in towns you've never heard of.



ZOSHA LYONS MOVED FROM SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA TO PERRY, INDIANA, WITH A \$7,000 RELOCATION INCENTIVE FROM THE COMPANY MAKEMYMOVE. (ALL PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SWENSEN FOR *THE FREE PRESS*)

By [Maya Sulkin](#)

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Zosha Lyons is not an impulsive person. But just over a year ago, in April 2024, the 25-year-old made an offer on a house just 20 minutes after seeing it for the first time—even though it was 2,000 miles away from the city where she’d planned to spend her twenties.

In college, Zosha’s goal had always been to move to Los Angeles to become a screenwriter, with her high school sweetheart, Whitaker, in tow. Instead, the young couple were buying a three-acre plot in Perry County, Indiana—the place where they both grew up.

“This sounds bad,” she told me sheepishly, “but we thought we were better than this. We wanted to move away and prove ourselves.”

Zosha had worked hard to get her MFA in creative writing from the University of California, Riverside, about 50 miles outside of Los Angeles, and she spent her final year strategizing about how to move to the city and break into the film industry. But when she graduated in the summer of 2023, Hollywood was in the middle of the writers strike, and Lyons realized: No matter how hard she tried, it might be impossible to find a job that allowed her to support herself, let alone one that fulfilled her.



ZOSHA AND WHITAKER LYONS BOUGHT A THREE-ACRE PLOT IN PERRY, INDIANA, WHERE THEY BOTH GREW UP, IN 2023.

“We would have been poor,” Zosha said. “It would have been me probably taking production-assistant jobs and trying to work from the bottom.”

She and Whitaker started having the kind of conversations couples might once have saved for their late 20s. “We want four kids, and I want to be done having kids by the time we’re 30,” Lyons said. “I’m doing all this math in my head constantly.” Faced with the choice between their work and family, they realized: “What was important to us was not really our careers.”

Then Zosha came across an offer she couldn’t refuse.

It came via a program called [MakeMyMove](#), which gives incentive packages to people who move to towns—in Southern Indiana, say, or Eastern Kentucky—that are looking to increase their populations. In exchange for relocating to Perry County, Lyons would get a cascade of perks—coupons to local restaurants, a free night at a local winery, a free trip

to a local axe-throwing place, a free yearlong gym membership—as well as a \$7,000 relocation fee, distributed over the course of two years.

“All of a sudden we were like: *It would be nice to afford a house right away. And look at how cheap these houses are!*”—the three-acre plot they put an offer on was \$215,000—and although a part of her felt guilty about letting go of her ambition, she told me: “We just set our pride down and said, ‘This would be nice, this is what we want, and there’s no shame in that.’ ”

The couple bought the house and got married. Instead of writing movies, Zosha writes grant proposals for schools on a contract basis. She’s due to give birth to twins any day now.

“I got what I wanted from my 20s,” she told me, “and now I’m really happy to be settled.”

When I was speaking to her I thought: *Zosha Lyons might be the voice of my generation.*

Being twentysomething and ambitious in this country used to be all about briefcases brushing past each other on overcrowded subway cars or smoking a pack of cigarettes as you work through the night in a high-rise office building. And it invariably meant moving to a big city like New York or Chicago where you could harness your ambition.



"I CAN SIT IN MY KITCHEN AND MAKE BREAD, AND LIFE JUST FEELS SO MUCH SIMPLER," ZOSHA SAID. "WE HAVE CHICKENS . . . I GET TO STAY HOME WITH MY DOG ALL DAY."

But that archetype has given way to a new breed of young pioneers. Gen Z, which includes all adults under the age of 29, are increasingly turning away from big cities and everything they represent: hard work, overstuffed social lives, and living far, far away from your family. In the last few years, [more and more young Americans](#) have migrated to rural areas—a trend that MakeMyMove is capitalizing on. Three years ago, about 9 percent of applications to the program were Gen Z; that figure is now 20 percent. This is partly because of the pandemic, which normalized working from home, something my generation famously [loves to do](#). It's also partly because living in big cities is becoming [prohibitively expensive](#), and Gen Z is [anxious about](#) money and trying [to save it](#). But it's also cultural. On Instagram, my generation [loves "cottagecore,"](#) an aesthetic that idealizes everything about living in the countryside, from gardening to baking fresh sourdough. Casey Lewis, who runs a popular newsletter about Gen Z trends, [After School](#), told me, "There was a trend a year ago on TikTok to 'romanticize' your small

town,” which filled feeds with videos of quaint churches, rural gas stations, and perfectly paved streets, set to serene music. Lewis isn’t surprised Gen Z is moving to the sticks; all the signs indicate that “they want a slower, charming, more traditional life.”

“The people in urban areas seem to really enjoy it if they’re getting support from their parents.”

—Drake Stancil, who moved from North Carolina to Floyd, Indiana, in 2022

In that sense, Zosha is living my generation’s dream. “I can sit in my kitchen and make bread, and life just feels so much simpler. We have chickens . . . I get to stay home with my dog all day. I get to see my mom several times a week, and spend time with my grandma.”

When I was a kid, I romanticized the idea of living in Manhattan: I believed Sally Albright when she said, in *When Harry Met Sally* . . . , that New York is a place you go if you want things to happen to you. Unlike Zosha, I followed the dream: I live in New York now. But when the barista flips her iPad around in hopes of a 25 percent tip for an \$8 latte, I find myself wondering: *Is this really the best way to live?*

While reporting this story, I spoke to 15 fellow Gen Zers who have rejected big-city life in favor of moving to small towns in America’s heartland. They told me they wanted to escape money worries or loneliness or crappy jobs. They were just trying to live better lives, and after talking to them I thought, *They might be making America better too.*



ON INSTAGRAM, GEN Z LOVES “COTTAGECORE,” AN AESTHETIC THAT IDEALIZES EVERYTHING ABOUT LIVING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE, FROM GARDENING TO BAKING FRESH SOURDOUGH.

When Drake Stancil, 27, graduated from Purdue University, he wanted to take his career as far as he possibly could. He’d majored in industrial management and finance and planned to work in investment banking, so it would have been natural for him to move to Manhattan. But in this rat-infested borough I call home, the [average rent](#) for a studio apartment—which spans a sprawling 440 square feet—is over \$3,000 per month, which is tough even with a decent starting salary.

“I don’t have any financial support from my parents,” Stancil said. “The people in urban areas seem to really enjoy it if they’re getting support from their parents.” (This is a truth recently acknowledged by a *New York* magazine story, which [argues that](#) “more than at any other time in New York’s history, parent money shapes our culture.”)

For Stancil, “my main concern when I was graduating was how to make as much money as possible.” He looked at getting a job in Chicago, Atlanta, and Denver before

calculating that, if he moved to any of these cities, he wouldn't be able to save enough to afford a house for decades. In the end, he got a job at a bank in Cleveland.

"I didn't want to go somewhere and then be struggling month to month," Stancil said. "I wanted a safer option."

A few years later, in 2022, he quit investment banking because he found the work "soul-sucking." The money was good, but Stancil was starting to realize that money isn't everything. "I was wasting my life for people that could care less," he said. By this point, a lot of his friends were climbing the ladder at big banks in New York—making "\$200,000 a year, working 12- to 14-hour days all the time"—but Stancil noticed that even though they seemed successful, they were living "in survival mode."

Stancil got a new job as a financial analyst in Asheville, North Carolina, and kept "scheming to save money." One day, as he was scrolling through Reddit looking for financial advice, he came across MakeMyMove. When he discovered he would make \$10,000 from moving to Floyd, Indiana—the town that offered one of the biggest incentive packages—he was sold. Three months later, he relocated with his wife, Sabra, 26.

These days, unlike his friends in New York, Stancil isn't losing sleep over work, and he very rarely works on the weekend. Like a lot of the Gen Zers I spoke to, he thinks our generation has become extremely cynical about making sacrifices for work. "We've learned that just because you work hard doesn't actually mean you might be super successful."

Why did Zoomers give up on ambition? I know you've heard this before, but it's kind of because of our parents, a.k.a. Generation X. I spoke to Tom McGrath, the author of last year's [*Triumph of the Yuppies*](#)—a book about the young professionals who dominated New York City in the '80, working obscene hours to earn obscene amounts of money, which was spent on obscene things.

“All of a sudden we were like: *It would be nice to afford a house right away. And look at how cheap these houses are!*” —Zosha Lyons, who moved from Southern California to Perry, Indiana, in 2023.

McGrath told me that, back then, there was “this very superficial idea of what a successful life looks like,” which was, roughly: “I can afford to go to really cool restaurants and eat great food. I’m going to work out so that I’m in the best shape possible, and then I’m going to surround myself with the best stuff, designer brands, and cool gadgets.”

The economy, of course, was booming, with the ’80s bull market seemingly unstoppable. So unlike Stancil’s New York banker friends, ’80s-era yuppies never had to think twice about eating out or buying fancy clothes, let alone making rent; the deal was, they worked hard and in exchange they never had to worry about money.

Then came Gen Y, otherwise known as the millennials. They *also* bought into the idea that spending a decade or two grinding away in the big city was a good path to the good life. Then the economy crashed and inflation hit, and layoffs were massive, and wages were falling in real terms. For a while, millennials responded by just working harder. In Anne Helen Petersen’s definitive 2019 essay and subsequent book, [*Can’t Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*](#), she writes: “In a marked shift from the generations before, millennials needed to optimize ourselves to be the very best workers possible.”

But eventually it became obvious that, no matter how hard you worked, the yuppie lifestyle couldn’t last. As Adam Lehrer, an editor at *Tablet* magazine, [tweeted this week](#)—after reading millennial icon Lena Dunham’s *New Yorker* essay, “[Why I Broke Up](#)

[with New York](#)”—“romanticizing New York is a boomer/Gen X thing.” For today’s young people, he wrote, “Renting an apartment for 2200 a month all while working terrible soul suck jobs, navigating a filthy and crime ridden city. . .does not feel worth it.” Having watched millennials get duped, Gen Z has other ambitions.



“WHEN I WAS SPEAKING TO HER I THOUGHT: ZOSHA LYONS MIGHT BE THE VOICE OF MY GENERATION,” WRITES MAYA SULKIN.

We’ve become renowned for what boomers might see as an aversion to hard work. We are the generation famous for [quiet quitting](#)—where you do just enough work to not get fired, but no more. If millennials were the generation of “presenteeism” (being in the office even if you’re sick or your work is done, just to look dedicated) we are [better known for “resenteeism”](#) (making it obvious you hate your job but don’t quit because you can’t afford to). A couple of years ago, a video went [viral on TikTok](#) of a recent college graduate becoming emotional about her first job and its grueling hours: 9 to 5. As she wipes her tears and apologizes for seeming to be “dramatic,” she says she has no time

to date or work out or make dinner, and has a several-hour commute because she can't afford to live "in the city."

When I watched it, I thought it was kind of pathetic, but now I wonder if this girl is another voice of my generation. A lot of young adults are, to quote Stancil, "in survival mode." Rachel Janfaza, a writer and consultant who researches Gen Z, told me she often asks young people what their vision of success looks like, and "they're not trying to become multimillionaires or billionaires."

"They're literally just trying to make enough money to put food on their table."



MakeMyMove is open to any town that wants to attract newcomers, and can offer incentives. One of the places marked as "popular" on the site—if you count somewhere with a population of 73,916 as a city—is Noblesville, Indiana. In the last two years, it has welcomed 28 single people and 128 married people, 27 of whom have purchased homes and 62 who rent.

When I spoke to Mayor Chris Jensen, he told me: "This whole program is aimed at capturing a change in culture." In his view, most young people aren't relocating for the money. "Our incentive package has really minimal cash to it," he admitted. (The [relocation grant](#) for Noblesville is \$5,000.) Instead, he said, "A majority of our package is focused on integrating you into our community." New residents get golf passes, memberships to the chamber of commerce, concert tickets, park passes, and memberships to local clubs. Mayor Jensen also has coffee with all of the new residents.

While talking to him, I thought of a recent [Atlantic cover story](#), by Derek Thompson, about how antisocial America has become. Thompson writes about how few of us feel we have a *village*—a group of people you see regularly but aren't super close to. This is particularly true for Zoomers, the [loneliest generation](#), who are [bad at small talk](#) and addicted to our phones. And it's particularly true in big cities.



“I GOT WHAT I WANTED FROM MY 20S,” ZOSHA TOLD *THE FREE PRESS*, “AND NOW I’M REALLY HAPPY TO BE SETTLED.”

When I first moved to LA after college, I lived alone and didn’t even know *how* to meet people. Do I go up to random people at bars? Coffee shops? I went to dinner with my mom’s college roommate’s niece and my brother’s high school prom date’s brother, but it never amounted to real friendship—it was just an activity on my calendar. Now, in New York, I’ve lived in an apartment with my boyfriend for eight months, and we’ve never seen, let alone interacted with, the other tenant on our floor.

So I immediately sympathized with Tejas Dinesh, when the 25-year-old told me he had spent two years living in Chicago with his girlfriend and both of them had found it impossible to develop deep friendships. He told me he tried double dates, bar meetups, occasional dinners. “Nothing ever really clicked.”

“There are so many people there, it feels almost like people are more disposable,” said Dinesh.

One day last spring he came across a TikTok video that was advertising a program incentivizing remote workers to make the move to Tulsa, Oklahoma, called [Tulsa Remote](#). Dinesh applied, got in, and after visiting Tulsa with his girlfriend, decided to take the leap. Since moving, Dinesh has had a full social calendar. He volunteers at local events and brunches with 80-year-olds he met randomly, which he told me he “would have never done in Chicago.”

But what Dinesh really values is the organic, spontaneous interactions that come with living in a community where you see the same people again and again, and start to learn their names. He recalls a moment when, a month after he relocated, he went to a bakery for only the second time and the woman behind the counter remembered him, and asked if he had any ideas for her menu. After living anonymously in a city in which he didn't feel invested, Dinesh said moments like this made him realize: “You can live in a city where people are kind, and where you are able to build something that lasts.”

Young adults new in town may appreciate it when the guy in the gas station remembers their name, but can they cope with his politics? Despite all the headlines about Gen Z stumping for Trump, we're still a socially liberal cohort, and the Midwest trends conservative. America is so polarized these days that a lot of people are [literally relocating](#) to areas where their neighbors will vote the same way as them, so what happens to the young people who do the opposite?



AFTER ATTEMPTING TO BREAK INTO THE FILM INDUSTRY, ZOSHA LYONS MOVED TO PERRY, INDIANA, TO BE CLOSER TO HER FAMILY.

Zosha Lyons, the proud owner of three acres in Perry County, Indiana, where 63 percent of voters backed Trump last year, describes herself as “extremely liberal.” She told me she never really associated with anyone who didn’t share her political views when she lived in California; her impression of Republicans was based on things she saw on television. “I would look at the news and see people who were more conservative, voting for things that I think are just ridiculous or really inhuman,” Zosha said, adding that politics seems so “cut and dry to me in a big city because everyone around me feels the way I do.”

In Perry County, she said, a lot of her neighbors “have what I would think are pretty extreme views.” But now that she lives among them, Zosha said, “I can see them as people now, and not just the extremists represented by some statistic on TV.” She has a better understanding of “the reasons they’re voting or voicing certain opinions,” and, as I

was about to hang up the phone, she told me she could see herself running for local office one day.

Maybe, just maybe, the Gen-Z pioneers will help to make America a less polarized place. Maybe they'll reshape society's values a little, reminding the rest of the nation that money isn't everything, and work isn't either—not when you have space and nature and people you love. You can lambast my generation for our lack of ambition, but the truth is we *are* ambitious, but for *different* things than our parents were. We are pursuing happiness, too, and in a way, that's fundamentally American.