

# **A POSSIBLE PIEDMONT**

## **The Tech Twins**



The year is 2025.

It is one of those blue-sky, spring days that Cindy will always believe is unique to North Carolina, especially to the rolling hills of the Piedmont. As she speeds along on her bike and makes the short ride to her downtown office from her nearby townhouse, she waves at the laughing school children she has come to know. She breathes deeply of the crystalline air, still cool from winter's touch, but with an undercurrent of warmth. She thinks of the path that led her back to her home and the embrace of family.

Cindy and her twin brother, Ned, grew up in a tightly knit, walkable neighborhood, close to downtown and the schools they attended. Their Spanish born mother, Carolina, with her fiery Andalusian temperament, was fiercely determined that she and Ned would walk to school, whether in rain, snow or sunshine. And walk they did, to the library, the grocery store, and soccer fields. Their father, Norman, whom the family fondly calls "Stormin Norman" because of his military service, is a physical therapist who made sure that they spent hours outside each day learning about the natural environment enjoyed in the Triad. They also played every sport available to them. Those healthy habits became ingrained in the twins, almost like breathing.

Cindy went to college up north to experience a different part of the country, while Ned stayed closer to home and went to a local university. With their brains and athletic ability, they both received scholarships. For the first time, they weren't in the same school and were away from family. Cindy thought she would remain in New England where more people held high tech jobs like her own. She even persuaded Ned to get his own apartment in New York City near her tiny, crowded walk-up arguing that he could find more and better classes in his burgeoning interest in urban and regional planning, and he would better fit in where so many of her friends were from bi-lingual homes like theirs. But after a year up north, it grew more apparent to them what they didn't have – clear lakes full of fish; deep, green woods; small, vibrant towns; excellent neighborhood schools; loving parents who are successful and healthy; and a grandmother who made the best fruit pies in the state.

Before they decided to leave the city, Ned had an epiphany in one of his graduate courses when his professor spoke about where the best planning in the country was being done, and where over 350,000 jobs were projected to be added by 2040. He almost fell off of his chair when the professor called the Piedmont of North Carolina one

of the top ten areas in the country for smart planning and effective implementation strategies, due in large part to wide support from the region's elected officials.

Ned called Cindy and told her about what the professor said. "Sis, I am going to find a job back home. Why don't you think about it, too?" It took her just a few seconds to tell her brother that she had been thinking the same thing, and that she believed they would have plenty of opportunities to find meaningful work.

With four major rail stations, the Piedmont connects easily to the east coast. Ned and Cindy decided to surprise their parents, so they took the train home, with most of their worldly possessions jammed into suitcases and the rest shipped. They hopped on regional transit to their parents' home and rang the bell. Once Norman and Carolina recovered from the shock, they couldn't believe their good fortune. They didn't have to make room for the twins for long, because with all the housing and jobs available to them, it took only weeks for Ned and Cindy to be settled in their own places.

Cindy immediately found a position with a company that packaged water in innovative, biodegradable containers. Triad Water had the reputation of being the Perrier of the south, and Cindy knew that it was a result of policies begun years ago by visionary citizens to protect the Piedmont aquifer through more sustainable stormwater practices, as well as a powerful ethic in the Triad to buy locally. Cindy, with her computer science degree and bi-lingual abilities soon became head of the IT Department of Triad Water, where she worked in the same mill building in which her grandfather had worked years ago. Beautiful old brick and exposed beams spoke of the proud workmanship that was the hallmark of the region.

Ned found a great job in the Regional Economic Development Office, specifically in the area of eco-tourism. Because of the early training he received at his dad's knee, Ned is an avid outdoorsman and can be found just about every weekend hiking in a state park, throwing out a fishing line or paddling his kayak on one of the many clear lakes in the region. Because so many people do the same and enjoy the area's abundant and protected natural amenities, the Triad has gained a much-deserved reputation as a center for outdoor activities. Through his graduate work in planning, Ned understands that the easy access to parks, lakes, fishing, boating, and fields near small towns and dispersed throughout the Triad are due in large part to sensible growth policies established through inter-jurisdictional cooperation.

Ned is happy to market the area's rich, natural environment to the world especially since eco-tourism contributes so significantly to the region's economic growth. His boss also says that easy access to natural amenities so increases people's quality of life that it is a factor in corporate location decisions, like that of a Fortune 500 company who just

announced they would be moving their national headquarters to the Triad.

The twins see each other weekly and public transportation options make it easy due in large part to a consistent half-cent sales tax that funds the system's growth and maintenance. For work, Ned benefits from a seamless transportation system in which he rides his bike two blocks to a bus station for a 15-minute ride, followed by a short walk to work. To see Cindy, he sometimes drives his electric car, especially since he can plug it into a terminal on the street in front of her home. Occasionally, to meet Ned at their grandmother Mary's farm, she'll use the car-sharing program (since she has no need for a car of her own) that has vehicles parked just a few blocks away.

Cindy and Ned are proud of how Mary partnered with the local extension office to convert the farm to growing drought resistant hops. Combining her harvest with the same pure water that Cindy's company bottles, Mary now brews a sought after and unique beer. Her efforts are part of a growing microbrewery industry, and boutique beers are now a staple of the Triad economy, due to the groundwork laid over 20 years ago by farmers and citizens who wanted to create a sustainable and productive industry for their children and grandchildren. Mary is convinced that the story of her farm is worth sharing, so she now opens some of her fields to school groups and encourages them to be used as outdoor classrooms, especially for children living in urban areas, so they can better understand the symbiotic relationship between cities, towns and farms. Further, she hopes that when they grow into adults, they will share their parents' values for keeping food dollars local and preserving local farmland.

Ned is getting the itch to personally build on the economic vitality of the region by starting up an Internet business to sell his grandmother's own boutique beer, and maybe her now famous apple pies. There are so many farmer's markets in the region, his only real worry is that he won't be able to meet the demand he knows is there for locally sourced products. His grandmother is anxious to retire, and hopes that he can take over the management of the farm so that she can move to and enjoy a more leisurely life at the beautiful, church-sponsored continuing care community, where Norman provides the physical therapy. Mary's longtime friend, Elena, is the chef of the facility, making her famous meat pies for the residents to enjoy. Today, it is hard to imagine that this hard-working, successful, foreign-born woman once faced overwhelming challenges, and suffered from prejudice and segregation when she first moved to the Triad.

At Ned's office, there is an incubator for small businesses and he has spoken with them about what he should do to get started. He has taken numerous online courses highly recommended by the incubator, and feels just about ready to begin. Through his

courses, he has learned that Mary's location would also make a perfect bed and breakfast, rounding out the business opportunities offered in taking over the farm.

Currently, Ned lives in a small, single-family house in a diverse neighborhood near his old hometown. He can walk to cafes and stores and has a rich social life. He enjoys the front yard and, like his grandmother, has a vegetable garden. His Plott Hound, Elroy, is his faithful companion on his hikes and is the main reason that Ned needs a house. He also enjoys the location abutting the statewide trail, where he can walk with Elroy along hundreds of miles for cycling, walking and hiking. An added bonus is that the trail contributes to his home's value.

Cindy thinks more and more often about the days when she and Ned walked to school with their mom because she hopes that, in the near future, there will be children of her own to walk to school. She and her baseball-playing boyfriend, Nolan, are engaged. They met in college, and he was drawn to the Triad by Cindy, of course, but also by the many summer baseball leagues that play in town-to-town competition, and the region's great minor league stadium, where Nolan is the team's assistant manager.

Their mother, Carolina, still does vigorous walking and bike riding, but has been sidelined by a fall. She has to go to physical therapy, but it's now just a short ride from their neighborhood. Norman has opened a practice in their town and no longer has to commute to the medical center in the city. The local population is large enough to support his practice. Cindy and Ned are amazed that their region has grown in all the right ways so that the smaller towns can offer many of the services that people formerly had to drive two hours to access.

Cindy hops off of her bike when she arrives at her beautiful office. As she prepares to start her day, she realizes that she loves that they ship water all over the world from her old home region, made possible by the regional airport. Federal funding addressed the land uses surrounding her company's buildings. The owners did a complete and thoughtful renovation of the space, updating it for high tech use, while honoring its architectural past. And local leaders are happy that the buildings are back on the tax rolls, producing income for community improvements.

That's it, she thinks. Past and present, honored and protected in the Triad, while building an inclusive future. She walks by her colleagues and grins. Home is where the heart is, indeed.