

A complicated love affair with Dayton – Then and Now

February 2, 2011 by [Kristen Wicker](#)

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Dear Dayton,

OK — I admit it. You win.

Not that I didn't put up a valiant battle. I've fought with you most of my 40 years. Oh, the hours I spent dreaming about the day I would leave you! The images of myself — happy, carefree — in a place bursting with hipness and cool! My life would be evocative and weighty once I left you in my dust.

Humph.

So this fall, when the time *finally* came for this long-awaited breakup — the kid graduated from high school, my career at a crossroads — what gives? I made a decision. A bona fide choice. I will stay with you. I realize I've come to genuinely love the way you smell and how comfortable you make me feel. Besides, the thought of packing boxes makes me twitch, and the idea of leaving my friends makes me hollow and still.

My epiphany came in a rather mundane moment: I was walking from a boxing class at [Drake's Downtown Gym](#) through [RiverScape MetroPark](#). It was an early fall day, and the plants were still blooming in the park. The sun was setting over the Great Miami River, and one of my favorite songs was playing on my iPod. I was on my way to meet good friends — fun, interesting, dynamic people — for a \$2 glass at [The Wine Gallery](#).

I realize, Dayton, it is not you who isn't cool enough. It isn't you who is lacking.

Dayton: 1. Kristen: 0.

XOXOXO

Your gal

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Hometown Crush

A complicated love affair with Dayton

By Kristen Wicker

Tuesday nights are one reason I've come to love Dayton.

They go like this: I pick up my 10-year-old son, Kier, from the bustling [Five Oaks](#) house of my neighbor and after-school babysitter, a stay-at-home dad with five kids. There are always some quick jokes and, if I'm lucky, a chocolate chip cookie. Kier and I swing by [Flying Pizza](#) downtown and grab a couple slices of cheese before hitting [Hauer Music](#) on Patterson for Kier's clarinet lesson. Sometimes, we swing by the downtown library to grab some books and CDs.

For me, those evenings embody all that is worthy about this often-ridiculed city: Cool and interesting neighbors, big-city urban kicks in a friendly, small-town package.

Don't get me wrong: My relationship with the Miami Valley hasn't always been so great. The day I moved to Arizona in 1990, I rolled down the window of my red Chevette, stuck out my arm and flipped this town the bird as I drove south — fast — on I-75. Moving back here in '94, I felt trapped in a dank, hopeless swamp. I sent my friends in the vast and sunny West a mixed tape I'd labeled, "FROM THE ARMPIT OF THE UNIVERSE!!!"

Even today, Dayton is a town I love to hate. The city is, after all, an easy target: The summers can be too muggy and the winters biting cold. Hip and unusual enterprises — art hops in the [Santa Clara Arts District](#), the Serendipity theater ensemble performing original plays in a grubby warehouse — are often short-lived in the Gem City. Other cultural innovations — loft apartments, urban farmers' markets — prosper in bigger cities for eons before breaking into this corner of the Midwest.

So it was with an immense amount of reluctance that I finally admitted it is possible to find, of all things, happiness in this town. It was a realization that came about slowly, like a rising tide — during a walk along the Great Miami River, eating burgers at a neighborhood block party, dancing at the Reggae and Cityfolk festivals, watching my son finish a painting at K12 Gallery for Young People, hanging out with friends and a pitcher of brew at Tank's.

One moment, I remember in particular. It was a late summer evening, and I packed my son and four of my neighbors' kids into my car for a trip to RiverScape. The Dayton Jazz Orchestra played in the background as I read a book and the kids ran through the fountain, putting on what they called a "cute show" for the grown-ups. Then came the sunset: A flaming, widespread affair in an intense band of oranges. "This," I thought, "isn't so bad."

There are, of course, less esoteric and more practical reasons to dig this town. My family lives nearby, along with a crew of friends, some of whom I've known since high school. Despite what anyone thinks about Dayton Public Schools, my son and I have been downright delighted with Franklin Montessori and Stivers School for the Arts. Plus, I can actually afford, on a pretty limited income, an expansive house with original wood floors and crown molding, antique lighting fixtures, and four stained-glass windows. If you want to live amongst people who are not like you, diverse Dayton easily fits the bill. And from Dragons games to independent films at The Neon, from homegrown rock bands taking the stage at Canal Street Tavern to Broadway shows at Victoria Theatre, it's a rare occasion when I cannot find anything to do.

Indeed, my life is full here — but still relatively quiet. I think, sometimes, of moving to a bigger, more "exciting" city, but I wonder if I would be able to pry open any more cracks of time to fit in all that additional bustle.

I think of a recent trip I made with my mom and sister to New York City. I'd never really been to the Big Apple and, just as I'd been warned, something was going on at all times and in every direction. We spent the bulk of our time waiting in line or worming our way through crowds. There was no such thing as cheap.

Take my sister's haircut at a fancy, celebrity-infused salon at the Park Plaza Hotel. It cost \$130. However, while the hotshot stylist was snipping her hair, he looked at me: "Your sister has a good haircut," he said.

"Thank you," I replied, puffing myself up. "\$30. Dayton, Ohio."

I liked New York, but I surprised myself by breathing a sigh of relief when our plane hit ground in good ol' Vandalia. I don't think I could live in the gigantic NYC. I'll live here, in this little city — although I can only do it begrudgingly, if only for old time's sake.

I have just unearthed this article from a stack of old newspapers stashed in my attic. Truth is, I doubt this is the last time I will write two love letters to my hometown with eerily similar thoughts — even the same flash of clarity down by the river. Dayton is a city that needs to be constantly reassured of your love.

True, the Santa Clara is now a drug-addled hot mess. Serendipity theater ensemble? I barely remember ye. But like shark's teeth, when one thing falls another equally creative, inspiring endeavor rises to take its place. Dayton, with its grungy patina of self-loathing, is the One. True. DIY. Town. And I have been One. Lucky. Girl. to call this city home base during a life full of adventures that have taken me across the country and, indeed, the globe.

Which brings me to right here, right now. It is my intention in this column to tell the stories of those adventures — some taking place in Dayton, others in faraway places — but all of them written in my cluttered little office here in this, my home town, by me, a Dayton native. I look forward to sharing them with you and to hearing your stories in turn.