



Los Angeles Times/Mark Boster

Jarah Euston, 26, who returned to Fresno after living in New York City, now lives in a former Red Cross building which has been converted into four artists' live-work spaces. She has launched the "Fresno Famous" Web site - reporting "live from the middle of nowhere" and "dedicated to making Fresno less boring with every issue."

Fresno feels a brain drain as best and brightest move on

By Maria L. La Ganga
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FRESNO - From his cluttered office at the local university, George Raney is a mix of pride and chagrin as he talks about his four grown children. Smart kids, one and all, they did everything a parent could ask: Earned good grades, graduated from college, found careers that make them happy.

They also broke their father's heart. The crime? Putting Fresno in the rearview mirror at the earliest possible moment and never looking back.

Carolyn, a 36-year-old teacher, lives in San Clemente with her lawyer husband and two sons. Louisa, a 34-year-old graphic artist, can't imagine being anywhere but La Jolla. Kevin, 31, is in the mortgage business in Huntington Beach. And Leanne, a 26-year-old actress, is clawing her way to fame and fortune in Chicago, waiting tables to pay the rent.

But Raney, a linguistics professor at California State University, Fresno, has worries beyond his own parental predicament, for his children are not the only ones who've left the struggling southern San Joaquin Valley. The region suffers from a brain drain unlike any other in California. The loss of its best and brightest is felt from Fresno south to the Tehachapi Mountains.

When the area's most educated residents



leave, "it takes away from the culture and intellectual life of the valley," said Raney, 67. It also hamstring the economy, strains the social fabric and puts a damper on the quality of life here in California's agricultural heartland.

Although the Fresno metropolitan area is

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Reza Assemi has spearheaded a revival in downtown Fresno. The 30-year-old artist with a contractor's license has converted a warehouse and a former Red Cross headquarters into artist studios and living quarters. His next project aims to create 34 lofts, 33,000 feet of commercial space and 10 row houses.



The city of Fresno, with nearly 458,000 residents, shows some signs of rejuvenation. A U.S. Census Bureau analysis found that the city had lost one-sixth of its young, single college graduates between 1995 and 2000. Public and private efforts are now being made to encourage innovation, develop the city's poorer southern half, and liven up the downtown area.

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Drain: Only Rust Belt cities, college towns lose more grads

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growing as newcomers take advantage of comparatively low housing prices, the region lost one-sixth of its young, single college graduates between 1995 and 2000, according to a U.S. Census Bureau analysis released last year.

Nationally, the only places that lost more of their young graduates were either dying Rust Belt cities or college towns, whose job it is to export the educated. In comparison, the greater Los Angeles area saw that same demographic grow by almost 10 percent, while it jumped nearly 20 percent in the San Francisco Bay Area.

But it's not just young people who are leaving. A 2004 report by the Public Policy Institute of California shows that the loss of educated residents in the southern San Joaquin Valley cuts across all ages.

Of the adults leaving the five-county area for other parts of California, 24 percent had college degrees, according to the study, but only 15 percent of those entering the region from elsewhere in the state had the same education level. In addition, much of region's growth comes from immigration; many of those new residents have low education levels, which intensifies the brain drain's effect.

The situation here is not as dire as in places like Iowa or North Dakota, but there is increasing concern about the problems that an unskilled work force only intensifies: low wages, unemployment, poverty and difficulty attracting

new business.

So Fresno has been doing some serious civic soul-searching, and doesn't like what it sees. Many local officials are starting to believe that the city's usual selling points have become its liabilities.

"If you're doing economic development in a place like Fresno, it's a tough call," said demographer Hans Johnson of the Public Policy Institute. Because the region has sold itself to businesses as a low-cost place to operate, "a brain drain is an almost natural consequence. . . . You have a population that's relatively less skilled. Wages are lower. Land costs are lower. Those are your competitive advantages."

The result of Fresno's recent introspection has been a plethora of efforts, both public and private, to reverse the brain drain by encouraging local innovation, spurring development in the city's poorer southern half, livening up the downtown and giving the area's erstwhile residents a reason to return home.

This city of nearly 458,000 is starting to show some signs of rejuvenation, although much of the evidence is still anecdotal.

A 30-year-old artist and builder has returned to develop live-work space, studios and loft housing in the lackluster city center. A new networking group called Fresno's Leading Young Professionals attracted 400 members in nine months; many of them are what local officials refer to as "boomerangs" — returnees giving Fresno a second chance.

Taking a page out of Richard Florida's book "The Rise of the

Creative Class," Mayor Alan Autry has convened a Creative Economy Council to help find ways to attract so-called "knowledge workers" — the kind of artistic, tech-savvy people every city wants — to a place better known for crop reports than creativity.

And last year the region launched an initiative to create 30,000 new jobs that pay almost \$30,000 a year. Though such a salary would barely keep a family afloat along the California coast, it would be a big improvement for many here. The Fresno area's unemployment rate was still high compared with the statewide rate of 4.8 percent in September, but officials believe that the effort has helped cut unemployment to 7.3 percent from 12.8 percent in January 2004, when the push began.

Timothy M. Stearns, director of the Lyles Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Cal State, Fresno, remembers when the city made the cover of Life magazine in the 1960s as a celebrated center of urban experimentation.

"Somehow we lost that," he said. "I can't tell you why. I was gone. I left at 18 and turned my back. All of a sudden we were a place where people had to help us out — 'Wait till Sony moves here or Boeing moves here.' But they're not. Why would they?"

A third-generation Fresnan, Stearns is the only one of four children in his family to return to the city, where his parents still live in the house they built in 1946. He came back home a decade ago "to see if we could build entrepre-

neurship back into the mindset."

He believes that the only answer to Fresno's dilemma is homegrown innovation.

Young men and women like Reza Assemi and Jarah Euston, however, give local officials cause for some optimism. They fit the common mold of the Fresno boomerang: Spent formative years here. Left town at the first possible moment. No plans to come back. Came back anyway. Hope to help make Fresno a city where they'd actually like to stay.

Assemi is a 30-year-old artist with a contractor's license, a penchant for painting in oils on human skulls and a good relationship with the Fresno planning department.

He bought a warehouse and turned it into a complex of 25 artist studios; all are currently rented out, and there's a waiting list he capped at 20. He bought the former Red Cross headquarters and transformed it into four artists' live-work spaces. His biggest project recently went to the City Council for approval: 34 lofts, 33,000 feet of commercial space and 10 row houses.

Jarah Euston, 26, who lives in the former Red Cross building, refers to Assemi, her landlord, as the "poster boy for the new Fresno." In truth, Euston could be on that poster herself.

She launched the "Fresno Famous" Web site, which reports "live from the middle of nowhere" and is "dedicated to making Fresno less boring with every issue." The site is now 18 months old and is Euston's full-time job. She plans to start an expanded version later this month.