

# What Happened When My Parents Retired Overseas

Kat Kiernan

At the age of 52, my parents had lived their entire lives in only two states: Massachusetts, where they were born, and Maine, where they'd moved in their 20s. At 22, a newly minted college graduate, I moved to Virginia. That was the third state that I would call home. My trajectory was not unusual: Child grows up, attends college out of state, graduates, and relocates for new opportunities. Although my childhood bedroom had been vacant for many years, I'd always known that it would be waiting for me.

And then it wasn't.

Within a few months of my big move south, my parents quit their jobs, sold their house, put their belongings in storage, and set out for South America. Claiming to be inspired by my recent post-graduation trip abroad, they wanted their own adventure.

When it came time for their expected return to the States, I received a startling call. "We've been talking," they said over the phone, "and we've decided not to come home. We've already rented an apartment in Medellín, Colombia, and we don't know when we'll come back."

In a new state with hardly any friends, I suddenly felt very alone. As a photographer, I wanted to travel the world and live in new places. But I also wanted to be able to return to familiar surroundings, with my parents ready to welcome me back to the family home. "They'll be back," I thought. "They'll miss their home, too." That was six years ago.

It raises an observation: If children have the freedom to pursue their own hopes and dreams away from the family home, then doesn't it follow that the parents of those children ought to be able to do the same?

I'll admit that I didn't see it that

way at first. But on visiting Medellín, I observed positive changes in both of them as a result of their new environment. It took time for me to realize why I was bothered by their move. I didn't take issue with Colombia itself—I knew that the country had become much safer in the 20 years since the drug cartels were in power. Instead, I felt abandoned, as though I had flipped my graduation tassel and my parents had declared, "We raised the kid; we're done with that project."

I was used to talking with my mom every other day. After she moved to Medellín, we Skyped once a week, at most. I felt that she was less interested in my life. But in reality, she was busy having one of her own.

Almost immediately after arriving in Medellín, my mom enrolled in the Spanish language program at a local university. She and my dad made friends with Colombians and expats alike. Their social calendar was fuller than I ever remembered it having been back in Maine.

During my most recent visit, we ran into someone they knew almost everywhere we

went. You've probably read her words in these pages—she's *International Living* Colombia Correspondent Nancy Kiernan.

With their time less focused on work and more occupied with friends and activities, what I had interpreted as a gulf between us turned out to be much-needed space. As in many families, my parents and I do not always see eye to eye.

When I had a big decision to make, they would rush in, arms waving, warning me of every possible thing that might go wrong, and offering what they viewed as wisdom and what I saw as meddling.

Because of the geographic and mental distance their move created, if I made a decision or mistake, I told them (or didn't

tell them) as I saw fit. This was what I'd always wanted, but I have to admit that it was an adjustment.

For those considering a move to another country, and who are concerned about leaving their adult children behind, it's important that all the people involved share the same expectations about visits. I first visited Medellín over Christmas. Christmas in Colombia has a very different feel from the classic New England yuletide that I was used to. I was thrown off by the palm trees and Christmas lights in all colors—white, red, and green accompanied by purple, blue, and orange. The visit was nice, but I felt strange as a guest in my parents' home.

It was another two years before I saw them again, for another Christmas at their home. By this point my boyfriend and I had moved again, this time to a tiny apartment in New York City, with no room for guests. But we found ways to make it work.

Three years after their move, we all decided not to let so much time pass between visits. We see much more of each other these days, and we've figured out how to make it convenient for everyone. The best months for me to travel to Colombia are February or March. That's when flights from New York are inexpensive—and when I am fed up with winter and looking forward to the outdoor cafes and the Jacuzzi on my parents' terrace. They, in turn, often visit me in September, when flights are reasonably priced and our winter snow is not yet an issue.

The bedroom waiting for me in Medellín is not the one I grew up in. But it has a comfortable bed, a desk for me to work at, and a lovely view of palm trees and exotic birds. Instead of river views, I look out at the Andes mountains. And instead of sweaters, I wear sandals.

What hasn't changed is the warm welcome I receive each time my parents meet me at the airport. ■

**"A bedroom waiting with views of the Andes."**