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# Great Falls

— 2026 Edition • Volume 7 —

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There are a lot of factors to consider when choosing a new place to live. We have 16 questions you should ask yourself before making this life-changing decision. [livability.com/find-your-next-place](http://livability.com/find-your-next-place)



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# Rivers, Rails *and* Trails

Experience these must-visit local destinations on your first trip to the region

Great Falls has long been a destination for outdoor enthusiasts, history buffs and visitors in search of a good meal and a fun shopping experience in the heart of an authentic Montana town.

“If you want to experience authentic and genuine Montana, Great Falls is your place to go,” says Shannon Newth, content director for Visit Great Falls, Montana.

Here are a few ways to engage with the authentic spirit of Great Falls, whether through supporting a local business or learning more about the area’s natural history.

## AREA ATTRACTIONS

### ***Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center***

With 13 different museums to explore, Great Falls is

the museum capital of Montana. Overlooking the Missouri River, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center encompasses the entire 8,000-mile journey of explorers Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery.

“This is a really wonderful facility that is built into the landscape. Its design was intended to merge with the landscape,” Newth says.

### ***C.M. Russell Museum***

Another of Great Falls’ top museums pays homage to artist Charles Marion Russell and his wife, Nancy, who helped her husband market his paintings. Showcasing nearly 1,000 works by Russell, the museum also includes thousands of pieces of Western art that showcase the art

and culture of the region.

“The C.M. Russell Museum truly is a world-class facility,” Newth says. “So much of our artistic heritage is rooted in Charles Russell and the legacy he’s left here.”

### ***River’s Edge Trail***

This 53-mile trail system allows residents to explore the great outdoors right in Great Falls. Tracing the Missouri River, the trail is perfect for biking, running, walking or skating. On the Urban Loop, visitors can enjoy over 30 works of public art that make the view even more special.

### ***Giant Springs State Park***

True to its name, this state park is home to one of the largest freshwater springs in the U.S. Its trails link to the River’s Edge Trail system, making it a perfect area for hiking as

well as fishing, biking and learning more about the natural history of the area. Open all year, the springs become a wintry spectacle when snow and ice coat the area.

“Giant Springs is stunning year-round. I always tell people that it is actually a magical winter wonderland when it’s about 20 below out,” Newth says.

### ***Montana Museum of Railroad History***

Fun for all ages, this railroad-themed museum traces the locomotive history of Montana, which dates to the 1880s. Packed with model trains and a real steam locomotive used at the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in Great Falls, train enthusiasts and history lovers will have plenty to enjoy at this fun and educational museum.



Clockwise from left: Missouri River; Giant Springs State Park; C.M. Russell Museum; Gibson Park



**First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park**

This historic state park features an archaeological site, a museum and interpretive trails that trace some of the state's Indigenous history. The grassy high plains, in view of the Rocky Mountains and Missouri River, were once prolific hunting grounds inhabited by buffalo.

**SHOPS AND RESTAURANTS**

**Roadhouse Diner**

The Roadhouse Diner is both a local favorite and a destination for out-of-

town visitors. Justin Bieber famously dined here in 2025, giving the diner even more to boast about. The beef at this retro-style diner is locally sourced from McCafferty Ranch, and its burgers have won numerous state and national awards. From the classic "Old School" burger to a unique PB&J burger for adventurous diners, the Roadhouse Diner has a range of specialty burgers to enjoy within its log cabin-style interior.

**Mighty Mo Brewing Co.**

Thanks to its location in the Golden Triangle, Great

Falls produces high quality wheat and barley, nourished by fresh water in the region. Mighty Mo Brewing Co. uses these quality ingredients in its beers and house-made pizza and pretzel doughs.

**Bighorn Outdoor Specialists**

This locally owned outdoor store is a one-stop shop for outdoor enthusiasts looking to explore the natural beauty of the area. Stocked with local guidebooks, maps, outdoor weather gear, climbing and mountaineering supplies, and much more, Bighorn

Outdoor Specialists has served the area for over 45 years. The knowledgeable staff can help guide visitors toward their next big adventure.

**Dragonfly Dry Goods**

Great Falls is also home to the largest dry goods store in Montana. Stocked with everything from coffee, jewelry and clothing to Great Falls-themed souvenirs and other fun finds, Dragonfly Dry Goods has served the community for decades from the heart of downtown.

– Wesley Broome

PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF C.M. RUSSELL MUSEUM; MATT EHNES (2-3)

# ROOTED & RISING

*Great Falls is where families and small businesses find room to grow*

**G**reat Falls offers a rare environment where families and business owners alike can truly thrive. For local entrepreneurs Keely Baker and Lani Watson, it is the ideal place to call home.

## FINDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Both women credit the town's unique atmosphere for their success. Lani Watson, owner

of Rise Athletics, describes her all-star cheerleading program as more of a family than a business.

"Our program is built on values of teamwork, perseverance, discipline and confidence," she says. "We're intentional about empowering our athletes to overcome challenges both on and off the mat. 'Together We RISE' isn't just a slogan for us or just something we say, it's the foundation of everything we do."

Keely Baker, who opened Barre3 eight years ago while working as a full-time teacher, has cultivated a similar sense of belonging. Her studio serves as a hub for both physical wellness and camaraderie.

"The biggest thing we do for the community is to physically and mentally create positive impacts on people's lives," she says. "We have grandmas, moms and teens – everyone is at a different phase of life. When they come in our doors, they are truly at their happy place."

## SMALL TOWN, BIG SUPPORT

One of the aspects both women love most about Great Falls is the genuine small-town feel.

"Families and businesses support one another," Watson says. "I love that everyone looks out for each other."

Baker agrees, saying she finds the town's atmosphere comforting.

"It's not super small, but it feels that way because of the people," she says. "The community does a great job of supporting local businesses."

## A TRUE FAMILY AFFAIR

For both owners, business and family are inextricably linked.

Watson describes her husband, Justin, as Rise Athletics' steady force. Daughters Emma, Ava, Grace and daughter-in-law Cassie are all coaches, and they are active in other roles as well.

"Everyone grew up on the cheer mat," she says.

Barre3 is also a family affair for Baker, who has a 5-year-old son and 2-year-old twins (a boy and girl). Her husband outfitted the wellness studio with cabinetry thanks to his family's custom-cabinet business, and even though her children are still small, they love to go to the



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF KEELY BAKER



Keely Baker and family

studio and participate in Mommy & Me classes.

## PERKS OF GREAT FALLS

Both Watson and Baker could have opted to run their successful businesses in much larger cities, but they were intentional when choosing Great Falls as the right place to settle down and raise their families.

A self-described “small-town girl,” Watson wanted a place where she could put down roots and “everyone helps water them.”

She prefers the familiar faces of Great Falls over the traffic and crowds of a metropolis.

Returning to Great Falls after college to be closer to her family, Baker highlights the practical

benefits of living here, such as affordability and quality of life.

“In big cities, it can be really expensive to raise kids and run a business,” she says. “In Great Falls, I can afford for my kids to do what they want to do while maintaining a healthy lifestyle.”

Baker adds that she appreciates local resources like top-tier schools, local camps and swim lessons.

“Great Falls is just a really great place to raise a family,” she says.

Watson finds that same supportive spirit in the town’s culture.

“People take care of and rally for one another,” Watson says. “I love the friendly people that are like extended family. Downtown businesses feel like *Cheers*, where

you walk in and everyone knows your name.”

Whether through a shared workout or a dynamic cheer routine, Baker and Watson prove that in Great Falls, the strongest businesses are those built alongside friends, neighbors and family.

– Rebecca Treon

## LOCAL FAVORITES

*Check out these great recommendations:*

### Lani Watson

**Restaurants:** Maggie and Roadhouse Diner

**Happy Hour:** Mighty Mo Brewing Co.

**Park:** Gibson Park

**Community Event:** 4th of July Hootenanny

**Boutique:** Klover

**Grocery Store:** Albertsons and 2J’s Fresh Market

### Keely Baker

**Restaurants:** Enbär and 5th & Wine

**Happy Hour:** Jakers Bar & Grill

**Park:** Gibson Park

**Community Event:** Touch-A-Truck

**Boutique:** The Barre3 Boutique

**Grocery Store:** 2J’s Fresh Market



Rise Athletics

PHOTOS: MATT EHRES

# Take It From Us

What makes Great Falls, Montana, a great place to live, work and play? We asked the local experts – from city planners to small-business owners – why they’re proud to call the region home. ◦ *By Kate Loweth*



“What first attracted me to Great Falls was the cost of living. I have a great quality of life, and I’m able to enjoy everything Montana (and beyond) has to offer. The business community is collaborative and giving. They’ve stepped up time and time again by being willing to help with projects and bring new efforts forward for the betterment of the community. The community welcomes new residents with open arms, helping them get involved in areas that fulfill them personally and professionally. I’m proud Great Falls is my home.”

**Rebecca Engum, executive director, Visit Great Falls Montana**

“Great Falls offers the kind of life people are searching for – short commutes, real community and access to the outdoors – without putting your career on hold. There’s creativity here, growing businesses, and a downtown that feels alive and connected. You can build a career, raise a family and still have time for what matters. That’s what makes the Great Falls region such a powerful place to live and work.”

**Erica Ferrin, owner, Grae and Co.**



“Great Falls truly rallies behind local entrepreneurs and is excited to welcome new businesses. Our downtown continues to grow and thrive, bringing new energy each year. In hospitality, we’ve found strong entry-level applicants who succeed when given the right training and guidance. With its beautiful river setting and supportive, forward-thinking community, it’s easy to see why we now operate four businesses here. We truly love Great Falls.”

**Tara Tronson, owner, 5th and Wine**

“When I was looking for the next step in my career, Great Falls wasn’t on my radar. Then, I applied for my current role, and I’m genuinely glad I did. From day one, my wife and I felt the momentum here, especially downtown. As a young professional with a family, there’s no better incubator for opportunity. I have one of the best seats in the house, watching real progress take shape. This feels like Great Falls’ moment.”

**Brock Cherry, planning and community development director, City of Great Falls**



PHOTOS: FROM TOP, COURTESY OF: REBECCA ENGUM; ERICA FERRIN; TARA TRONSON; BROCK CHERRY

# Boots to Beans

VETERAN-OWNED COFFEE  
SHOPS THRIVE IN GREAT FALLS



**G**reat Falls, Montana, blends rich American history and breathtaking landscapes with a deeply rooted sense of community. This spirit of service is best seen in former servicemembers turned entrepreneurs, who find a supportive home here to continue their mission – one cup of coffee and one connection at a time.

## Connection in Every Pour

Shortly after retiring from military careers that collectively spanned more than two decades, Thad (a former firefighter) and Heidi Reiste (a human resources manager) were presented with an unexpected opportunity to run a coffee shop. The establishment that would

become Electric City Coffee was a favorite of the Reistes for many years, so when given the chance to purchase it, they knew it was the right move.

“Following our retirement from the military, we believed that owning such a business would contribute to revitalizing downtown Great Falls,” Heidi Reiste says. “Our desire was to restore the traditional hometown coffee shop ambiance and serve as a gathering place for the community. As the business has expanded, we have accumulated numerous enjoyable and memorable experiences with our customers.”

And after 11 years of operating the shop, they say they owe their

success to their military experience and to the people in the community who have supported them along the way, including the large veteran population of Great Falls.

In addition to their regular customers, the Reistes say they received invaluable support from local government agencies that helped them turn their vision into a reality. Among them was the Small Business Development Center at the Great Falls Development Alliance, where budding entrepreneurs can access business planning and operating resources for free.

“The local development authority has provided mentorship, education and guidance for all our business



## Kimchi & Community

### ENTREPRENEURS DELIVER A FUSION OF FLAVORS

Rian Byung-Ho served in the Air Force for 20 years before beginning a career with the U.S. Postal Service in Great Falls in 2015. Long hours meant less time to spend with family, making a longtime dream to open a food business a subject that he and his wife, Carly, found themselves discussing more and more. With the encouragement and support of friends and the greater community, the couple launched Okii Eats in 2022.

“I started gifting kimchi to close friends during COVID, and a good friend encouraged me to sell it. This got us thinking more seriously about the possibilities of our unique culinary style of my Native American food and Rian’s Korean food fusions being successful,” Carly Byung-Ho says. “Everyone that we had the honor of cooking for enjoyed it, and I thought that this was a way to make an extra income for our family and to be able to spend more time together.”

They began in Saibeen’s Kitchen, sharing space with the owner and chef.

“From there, we were able to successfully step into the culinary world,” Carly Byung-Ho says. “Word got around as people tried our food, and our business started to pick up.”

That momentum hit high gear in May 2023, when the venture secured a food truck with the assistance of the Native American Development Corp. (NADC).

Carly adds that the NADC, Malmstrom Air Force Base, Montana Air National Guard, Great Falls College Montana State University – as well as friends, family and customers – have all been an essential part of their journey.

inquiries,” Heidi Reiste says.

The Reistes also point to the Small Business Administration’s Boots to Business program as a pivotal resource for new entrepreneurs.

### Impact in Every Cup

Heroes Rise Coffee Co. was already a thriving business in Northern Minnesota when Matt VanGrinsven, a paramedic with nearly 30 years of experience, decided to make the move to Great Falls. Fast forward about two years, and Great Falls is now home to two locations, including the official company headquarters, where dozens of premium coffee varieties are roasted daily.

Heroes Rise Coffee was inspired by VanGrinsven’s experience on the front lines and the generations of his family who served before him. It was created to serve great coffee with an even greater mission to support and give back to first responders, military and community heroes.

“Instead of leaving service, I saw coffee as a new way to continue serving, just on a broader and more proactive level,” VanGrinsven says.

Great Falls has proven to be the ideal place to grow Heroes Rise

Coffee Co., with strong community support backing VanGrinsven’s vision every step of the way.

“People here truly show up for small businesses and mission-driven work,” VanGrinsven says. “We’ve had strong support through partnerships, word of mouth, community events and customers who believe in what we stand for. That kind of support makes growth possible and makes the work even more rewarding.”

Today, Heroes Rise Coffee Co. has given back over \$350,000 worth of coffee to front-line workers across the nation. On a local scale, the company is directly supporting the heroes who serve the community of Great Falls, giving them what VanGrinsven describes as a chance to create connection, boost morale and mentally reset through each cup of coffee.

The company has also provided roughly 100 new jobs across its two locations and is inspiring the newest generation of young people looking for ways to make a positive impact.

– Candace Nagy



# BIG SKY > BIG CITY

D.A. Davidson is at home on the range in Great Falls

When Larry Martinez first went to Montana, he was just passing through.

When he returned five years later, he stayed.

With bona fides worthy of Wall Street, Martinez chose to relocate to Great Falls in 1995. He decided to stay when he joined D.A. Davidson seven years later. Originally that firm's general counsel, he was named president in 2016

and is currently chairman and CEO.

"I believed Great Falls would be a terrific place to find the appropriate work-life balance," he says.

Fresh from earning a law degree at Stanford University, Martinez started his career in nearby San Francisco in 1987. When he accepted a job in Minneapolis in 1990, the trip east took him and his wife through Montana.

"We fantasized how great

it would be to find a way to live and work there," Martinez says.

## Wall Street Meets the Rockies

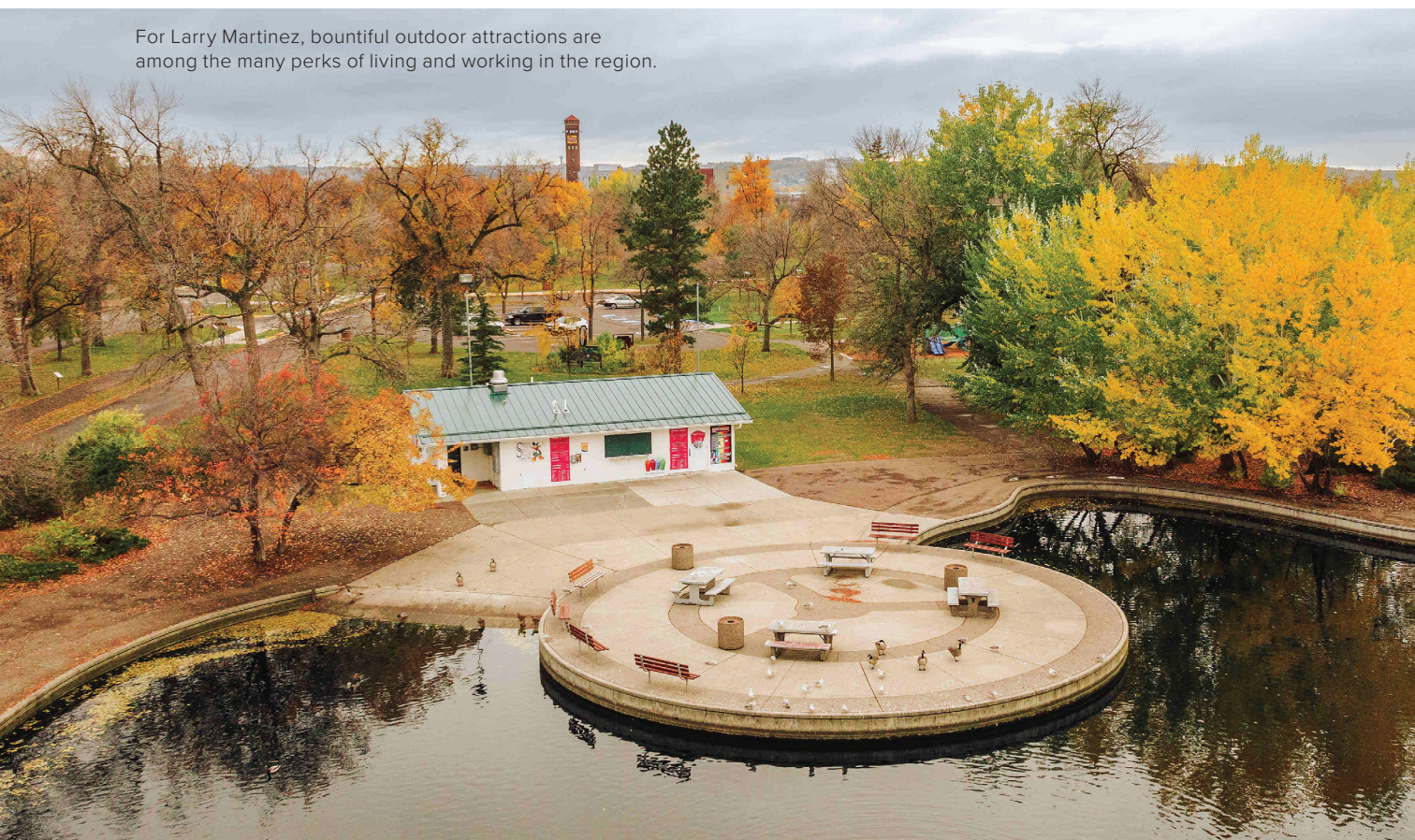
As it happened, his new firm had an office in Great Falls. He split time between there and Minneapolis for three years, before moving to Great Falls.

"We had two little boys," he says. "I thought the ease of living in Great Falls

would better enable me to be involved in their school and other activities, while doing the same type of sophisticated work I'd been doing."

Launched in 1935, D.A. Davidson is employee-owned and privately held, with more than 1,600 employees in 30 states and Canada. But Great Falls remains the firm's largest single office, Martinez says, and technology gives staff there all the reach they

For Larry Martinez, bountiful outdoor attractions are among the many perks of living and working in the region.



need to serve individual, institutional and municipal clients worldwide.

Martinez says serving clients beyond Montana's borders is precisely what Chairman Emeritus Ian Davidson, son of the firm's founder and a former CEO, had in mind when he joined the firm in 1958.

"He liked the tagline 'Where Wall Street meets the Rockies,'" Martinez says. "The notion being that we can bring the expertise Wall Street offers and deliver it beyond Wall Street with

high levels of personal service and engagement."

Great Falls is an ideal place to conduct business, he says, crediting its standout workforce.

"It's easier to get to know employees in a town like Great Falls, where you bump into people outside of work – that's one of the things I love about living here," he says.

### Community Involvement

Martinez acknowledges that recruiting to Great

Falls can be challenging, but says the city is an "easy place to work" and an "appealing, practical home for our firm" with multiple strengths.

"The cost of living is affordable compared with national averages," he says. "Great Falls is also central to Montana's outdoor recreation offerings, which help deliver a lifestyle that larger areas cannot match. There are good schools, a solid health care system and a culture defined by hard-working, community-minded people."

Martinez says being in Great Falls affords D.A. Davidson employees opportunities for community involvement that might not be available in larger cities. Among the ways in which the firm pitches in is through support for the United Way of Cascade County, where D.A. Davidson is a founding member and for several years has been the nonprofit's largest single donor. "We plan a month

D.A. Davidson actively volunteers for causes that make the community a better place.

of employee activities to raise money in addition to employee pledges," he says. "The firm matches all the money raised through those activities and pledges."

And he says that, in recognition of the firm's 90th anniversary in 2025, D.A. Davidson organized 90 Days of Giving.

Volunteers put together meal kits for the Great Falls Community Food Bank, helped 'Stuff the Bus' for the Backpacks4Kids program, and provided cleanup at the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center, among other activities.

### Local Charm

For all the reasons that Great Falls works so well for D.A. Davidson, Martinez chose it for what he felt it offered in terms of his family's quality of life.

"The trail systems in and around Great Falls are a constant source of joy," he says. "There's beautiful, peaceful walks along the Missouri River, and backpacking in nearby Glacier National Park."

Proximity to the outdoors, restaurants, shops, the museum celebrating the art of Charles Russell and Great Falls Voyagers pro baseball games – all combine to validate his love of the region.

"Watching the community evolve while still holding onto small-town charm," he says, "has been one of the most rewarding parts of calling Great Falls home."

– Bob Gary



Larry Martinez



# Great Minds,

A NEW SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY IS OFTEN JUST MINUTES AWAY FROM THE NEAREST HIKING TRAIL



**G**reat Falls is a beautiful area with a tight-knit community and easy access to the great outdoors. While many move to the region because of those perks, it's also home to cutting-edge research across a variety of fields. Drawing in researchers and teachers to its local universities, Great Falls is known for cultivating talent.

## Making the Move

Dr. Eleazar Ortega, executive director of institutional effectiveness at Great Falls College Montana State University, moved to the area from Southern California after graduate school. She wanted to live out of state and applied to several jobs before choosing Great Falls as her destination. The transition brought

a bounty of advantages.

"What I have enjoyed the most is the stress-free lifestyle," Ortega says. "In Los Angeles, we all seemed to be in a rush, but that isn't the culture here."

Unlike Ortega, Dr. Kevin Miller, an assistant professor of exercise science at the University of Providence, came from an area similar to Great Falls in pace. He was looking for

a place that would be equally as beautiful and outdoor-oriented as his former home in Laramie, Wyoming.

"Although we were coming from somewhere with strong outdoor opportunities, I was surprised by just how much access there is here to a wide range of outdoor recreation within such a short distance," he says.

# Great Outdoors



From Left: River's Edge Trail; Dr. Tiffany Hensley-McBain; University of Providence

On the other hand, Dr. Tiffany Hensley-McBain, an associate professor at the Weissman Hood Institute and a dean of research at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine, grew up in Great Falls before moving away. She and her family returned to Great Falls from Washington in 2018.

“Getting to do innovative research in a town where

we can raise our kids and get around with ease was a dream,” she says.

### Leading the Way

While defined by its tranquil surroundings, Great Falls serves as a dynamic center for innovation. The region’s supportive infrastructure empowers professionals to push the boundaries of research while maintaining an enviable

work-life balance. “The most rewarding aspect of the move has been the combination of meaningful work and quality family life,” says Miller, who has a master’s degree in kinesiology and a doctorate in biomedical sciences.

Now on faculty at the University of Providence’s Exercise Science Program, Miller is in the midst of

several research projects, including one on nicotine withdrawal and its effect on athletic performance, and another related to understanding how an athlete’s access to resources can influence their knowledge and behavior surrounding hydration.

Hensley-McBain runs a research lab that studies how immune responses

can cause damage and disease when “overreacting.” Her research focuses on how this may relate to Alzheimer’s disease.

From the partnership between the Weissman Hood Institute and Touro College to the individuals volunteering through HERO (Help Expand Research Opportunities), she says the region is a powerhouse for collaborative science where diverse minds meet to solve challenges.

Ortega works in institutional effectiveness, ensuring compliance with institutional accreditation standards and supporting strategic planning. Recently, she completed

work with the Data Institute, conducting research on the retention rates of part-time students. She says that many are surprised by how detailed the statistical analysis process can be, but it can prove invaluable in understanding how to better support students.

“Great Falls is a wonderful place to embrace an education in science or medicine,” Hensley-McBain says. “We have a world-class research institute, a health system that is embracing cutting-edge approaches



Kevin Miller



Eleazar Ortega

to health care, the first nonprofit medical school in the state, and undergraduate universities that provide excellent support for science and technical career paths.”

In Great Falls, professionals find the unique opportunity to pioneer scientific breakthroughs while enjoying a peaceful, purposeful life.

– Chloe N. Clark

PHOTOS, FROM LEFT: TED BRUMMOND/UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING PHOTO SERVICE; RION SANDERS/GREAT FALLS COLLEGE MSU

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# A New Chapter

BOOKSTORE OWNER MOVES FROM NEW YORK CITY FOR A FRESH START

Millie Whalen spent three decades as a criminal defense attorney in New York City before making a life-changing decision, one that brought her to Great Falls and into ownership of one of the city's most cherished spaces: Cassiopeia Books.

Whalen made the leap in early 2020, finalizing a deal in February of that year, just weeks before the pandemic shut down everything.

When she finally arrived that summer, she stepped into a new business, a new community and a new life. "I love Great Falls," Whalen says. "It has a small-town feel, and it's very walkable. There's a lot that's really going on in the community."

## Finding a New Path

Whalen wasn't a stranger to Great Falls before she moved here. She had made frequent visits to see friends, and, during those trips, one stop became a ritual – a beloved used bookstore, originally called the Paperback Jungle and later renamed Cassiopeia Books, where she'd pick up books for the flight home. When the opportunity arose to buy it, she saw a chance for a fresh start.

"I was getting older, and I thought if I was going to make a change, now is the time to do it," she says.

Unable to sell her Brooklyn apartment during the city's lockdown in 2020, Whalen had to delay her move while the bookstore's previous owner waited patiently to finalize the sale. When she arrived that July, she was juggling two careers at once, rising at 5 a.m. to prep for remote court appearances before opening the store each day.

"I should have known that it was going to be rocky," she says.

The bookstore also lost its original



lease, forcing Whalen to find a new space. But the move turned out to be a blessing. "Everybody comes in and it's like, 'Oh, wow, this is so much better.' It's a dream," she says.

## Making It Her Own

Rather than reinvent the bookstore, Whalen focused on maintaining what made it special. Cassiopeia Books operates on a hybrid model of new and used inventory, with locals contributing books. "It makes it a real reflection of what the community likes to read," she says.

That community connection has also fueled some of her richest experiences. She's had talks about books she never would have discovered in NYC, including the deep well of Montana literature.

"I just get to have really interesting conversations about all sorts of different kinds of books," Whalen says. "Montana authors are so important, in my opinion, to the American literary scene."

## Embracing the Lifestyle

The contrast between Brooklyn and Great Falls is striking, but for Whalen, it's been overwhelmingly

positive. She points to the region's natural beauty, including the prairies, the Missouri River and the nearby mountains, as a major draw. She also highlights a surprisingly rich cultural calendar of symphony performances, Broadway touring shows and community theater.

"People used to say, 'Oh, nothing happens,' but actually, there's usually two or three events competing," she says.

When it comes to local favorites, Whalen doesn't hesitate on lunch. Fire, a downtown spot serving wood-fired pizza, is her go-to. She also raves about Great Falls' distinct, independently owned coffee shops, each with its own vibe. And for something truly unexpected, she points visitors to the Sip n Dip Tiki Lounge, a bar at the O'Haire Motor Inn famous for its mermaid tank.

For anyone passing through on the way to Glacier or Yellowstone, Whalen has simple advice: Drop by, explore and come visit her at Cassiopeia Books. "Stop off and pay us a visit," she says. "It's a nice little community."

– Kathleen Hokit

# TAKING OFF

*Local growth propels a family to fulfill their dreams*

**F**or Ashley Friesen, broker-owner of Threshold Real Estate, there's no place like home. She grew up about 20 minutes west of Great Falls. After time spent with her husband, Adam, in his home state of Texas, the family returned in 2010 – and never looked back.

Today, Friesen leads a team of agents in one of Montana's most affordable midsize cities, while Adam focuses on his construction business and renovating the couple's portfolio of rental homes.

Their daughter Kira, 17, is training for her student pilot license at Great Falls' Cloud Catcher Aviation and will be heading to college this fall,

while son Kail, 12, stays active with sports activities.

"I love Montana," Friesen says. "I love the mountains and I love being out in nature. And Great Falls – it's a nice-sized city, with a lot of momentum, but it still feels very small town."

## BUILDING THRESHOLD

Friesen came to real estate via a love for interior design. She enrolled in the Art Institute's design program while living in Texas and finished after returning to Great Falls. Finding the local market for designers limited, real estate became her passion. She earned her real estate license 13 years ago,

then achieved her broker's license and launched Threshold in 2021. Friesen now has three licensed agents working with her, and a fourth is expected soon.

"I wanted to start my own business and create something that was mine," she says. "The opportunities in Great Falls allowed me to do that. The design side and the real estate side have really tied in nicely. Helping sellers and buyers reimagine a space, helping them find the best way to sell it – all of that came together."

## HOME SWEET HOME

Great Falls offers something increasingly rare in Montana: affordability. During the COVID years, remote workers discovered what locals already knew, and listings that once lingered unsold began moving.

Friesen watched mixed-use development West Bank Landing rise from vacant land, saw a downtown dining scene take root and built her business on that momentum.

"When I first got into real estate, if you had a listing over \$700,000, it would sit for years," she says. "Now you're seeing those houses go quickly."

Growth, though, hasn't come at the cost of livability. Great Falls is located within an easy drive to Bozeman, Billings, Missoula, Kalispell and Helena – close enough that weekend trips are easy, yet far enough from





Ashley Friesen and family

resort-town prices that businesses and families can put down roots.

Friesen praises Great Falls' strong public schools, active youth sports leagues and thriving downtown. Local favorites like 5th & Wine and Enbär are key examples of residents supporting local businesses.

"Once you set roots here, people are very supportive and they want to help you continue to grow," she says. "You get a sense of people wanting the community to stay alive."

### A FUTURE IN FLIGHT

Malmstrom Air Force Base is an anchor of the economy in Great Falls, and its presence has shaped the city's relationship with aviation for decades. Kira has grown up with that culture. Family friends are in the aviation industries and helped inspire Kira to select aviation as a career path. She's now logging hours with Cloud Catcher Aviation and expects to earn her student pilot license by early summer. In college, she plans to pursue a degree in

aeronautics, taking advantage of airline cadet programs to give wings to her dream.

"Kira wants to travel the world," Friesen says. "And we figured out that being a pilot was a way she could do that and earn a living at the same time. Her flight school is only 15 minutes away. It's so nice that it's right here, and that option is just another thing that's a perk of living in Great Falls."

– Cynthia Barnes



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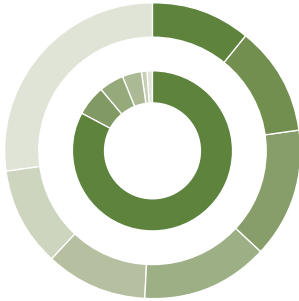
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# Community Profile

## DEMOGRAPHICS



### POPULATION BY AGE

0-9	11%
10-19	12%
20-29	14%
30-39	14%
40-49	11%
50-59	11%
60+	27%

### ETHNICITY & RACE

White	83%
Two or more races	6%
Hispanic	5%
Native	4%
Black	1%
Asian	1%

## POPULATION

60,412

Great Falls

13%

Population with veteran status

## AGE

39

Average age

## LOCATION ADVANTAGES

- ✓ Affordability
- ✓ Arts and entertainment
- ✓ Diverse economy
- ✓ High-quality education
- ✓ Natural beauty
- ✓ Outdoor recreation
- ✓ Strong health care

## HOUSING MARKET

\$334,700

Average home value  
(Zillow, March 2026)

## HOMEOWNERS / RENTERS



Owners ..... 68%  
Renters ..... 32%

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



94%  
High school grad  
or higher



28%  
Bachelor's degree  
or higher

## HIGHER EDUCATION OPTIONS

- » Great Falls College Montana State University
- » Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine
- » University of Providence

Sources: Census Reporter, U.S. Census, Great Falls Development Alliance, City of Great Falls, Great Falls International Airport, Zillow

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# INVESTING *in* PEOPLE

Culture and compensation strengthen the medical workforce

**T**oday's dynamic employment landscape provides an opportunity for organizations to distinguish themselves through high-level recruitment and retention. While the health care industry has faced unique hurdles in recent years,

Benefis Health System and Great Falls Clinic Hospital (GFCH) have risen to the occasion by prioritizing their people.

For example, Great Falls Clinic Hospital offers current and potential employees a package of benefits and

compensation designed not just to attract but also retain valued employees. Beyond robust health care options, the hospital introduced new IVF, surrogacy and adoption coverage in 2026.

"We are also offering tuition

reimbursement, which is the most requested benefit. We have competitive retention bonuses, and we keep up with market data on salary rates,” says Sarah Bearden, human resources manager at Great Falls Clinic Hospital.

### Living Up to Promises

Benefis Health System focuses on a solid career-long partnership with its staff.

“We are unique from a couple of different perspectives,” says Casey Buckingham, system senior vice president and chief human resources officer. “First, we have a no-layoff policy. We also have made ongoing promises to our employees for more than 30 years. For example, we have given annual increases every year without missing one. That’s an attractive aspect for employees.”

Buckingham notes the tenure of senior leadership also plays a role. The CEO has served Benefis for 23 years, while Buckingham has been with the organization for 18 years.

“We have a great history of living up to our promises,” Buckingham says.

Location is often a selling point for new hires. Buckingham cites traffic as a positive: “I work across town from the hospital, and it takes me 8 minutes to get here, 11 on a bad-traffic day,” she says. “And economically, Great Falls is still an affordable place to live. There’s great value for your dollar here.”

### The Road Home

More Great Falls natives are returning home to launch health care careers. For example, Bradley Weast, GFCH chief operating officer and a graduate of Great Falls High, retired after 28 years in the Air Force and joined the hospital in 2022.

It’s a trend Buckingham is happy to see continue.

“We particularly like hiring Montanans because they know the area, the four seasons, and appreciate them,” Buckingham says.



Great Falls Clinic Hospital works hard to retain its valued employees.

“And they obviously want to be embedded in the community, so it’s a win-win when we can make that match happen.”

Dr. Kevin Kundis, a podiatrist with Benefis, moved to Great Falls in 2020 after a momentous road trip

with his brother to their hometown.

“I was raised here since I was one, and I always thought there might be a chance I would return because I just loved it here growing up,” says Kundis, who moved away for college. “I did a boys’ trip with my brother,

and in a goofy, sentimental moment, I realized that I wanted to move back.”

Kundis and his wife, a social-media marketing executive, are now raising two kids, ages 9 and 6, and have found the move a great success.

“I had an amazing time growing up here,” he says. “It’s a wonderful place to raise a family, and it’s been great

giving my kids the amazing opportunities I had as a child.”

Dr. Mitch Rohrback, an orthopedic surgeon with Benefis who was also raised in Great Falls, realized home was where his heart was as he considered raising his children. He and his wife returned in 2025, and their careers have flourished.

“There are not too many degrees of separation between my patients and me in Great Falls,” he says. “My mom taught middle school here for 35 years, so somebody always knows somebody that I know. It makes for closer professional relationships, and that has been really rewarding.”

— Laura Hill



*“There are not too many degrees of separation between my patients and me in Great Falls. My mom taught middle school here for 35 years, so somebody always knows somebody that I know.”*

— Dr. Mitch Rohrback, Benefis

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MITCH ROHRBACK

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# Economic Profile

## MAJOR EMPLOYERS

- » ADF
- » Albertsons
- » Alluvion Health
- » Benefis Health System
- » Centene Corporation
- » City of Great Falls
- » Easterseals-Goodwill
- » Great Falls Clinic
- » Great Falls Public Schools
- » Loenbro
- » Malmstrom Air Force Base
- » University of Providence
- » Walmart

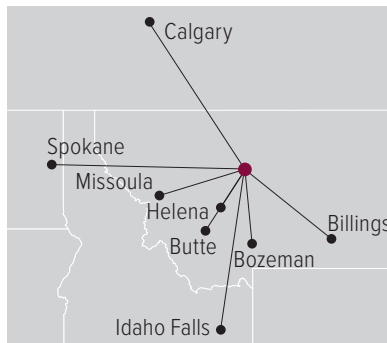
## TRANSPORTATION ASSETS

- ✓ Interstate 15
- ✓ Rail shipping via BNSF
- ✓ Barge shipping via the Missouri River
- ✓ Great Falls International Airport

## DISTANCE TO MAJOR CITIES

*In miles from Great Falls*

Helena .....	<b>89</b>
Butte .....	<b>156</b>
Missoula .....	<b>177</b>
Bozeman .....	<b>178</b>
Billings .....	<b>224</b>
Calgary, Canada .....	<b>318</b>
Idaho Falls, ID .....	<b>359</b>
Spokane, WA .....	<b>374</b>



## TRANSPORTATION



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## INCOME

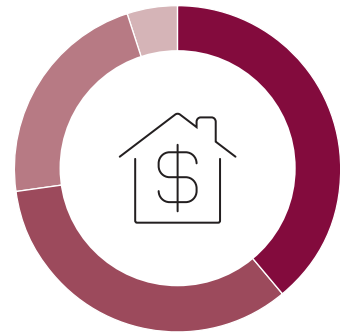
**\$35,968**

Per-capita income

**\$63,934**

Median household income

## HOUSEHOLD INCOME



■ Under \$50,000 .....	<b>39%</b>
■ \$50,000-\$100,000 .....	<b>34%</b>
■ \$100,000-\$200,000 .....	<b>22%</b>
■ Over \$200,000 .....	<b>5%</b>

Sources: Census Reporter, U.S. Census, Great Falls Development Alliance, City of Great Falls, Great Falls International Airport, Zillow

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