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Oklahoma sees 'brain gain' with migration mostly from California

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Randon Young says he has no plans to leave after moving from California as part of the Tulsa Remote program. He said he was excited to find a house within walking distance of the Gathering Place after spending hours each day in Los Angeles traffic.

Daniel Shular, Tulsa World

By Steve Metzger

Tulsa World Capitol Bureau Staff Writer

Steve Metzger

For generations of Americans, the phrase “Go West, young man!” captured the idea that a place to make dreams come true could always be found in the West.

These days, evidence shows that more people in Western states have concluded that it makes better sense to go to Oklahoma.

According to a **report** from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, Oklahoma has ranked 12th among states in recent years in terms of new residents who have moved from other states. And the state’s domestic population gain since about 2019 has been driven almost entirely by migration from other states in the Midwest or West.

Most new arrivals have come from California, but every state in the western half of the country, with the exception of Wyoming, has contributed to Oklahoma’s population growth, the bank reported in its latest edition of Oklahoma Economist.

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Randon Young favored Tulsa over other cities such as Dallas, Houston and Charlotte when he was looking to make a move from Los Angeles. The 36-year-old, who specializes in matching businesses in the tech space with talented professionals and with helping businesses innovate by using artificial intelligence, was attracted by incentives to move offered through the **Tulsa Remote** program, but he said there was a lot more to like about Tulsa and Oklahoma.

Young said he found a great three-bedroom home within walking distance of Tulsa's Gathering Place. He couldn't have afforded anything like it in Los Angeles. In LA, he said, he found himself stuck in traffic for two hours or more every day. By contrast, he described Tulsa as a "15-minute city" with very affordable amenities and attractions close by.

Even more important, Young, who did research for a couple of years before making his jump to Oklahoma in January 2023, discovered Tulsa to be an emerging tech hub with many talented professionals already in place or looking to move in and where many companies are looking to locate or grow in scale.

"You have talent migrating here, and in the head-hunting recruiting space you have to follow the talent," he said.

Additionally, Young liked the ideas of getting in on the start of a "boom" and of empowering Black businesses to thrive as part of the legacy of Tulsa's Black Wall Street.

"A lot of people may look at cities that have already boomed. If you have aspirations to be part of a city that's booming now, Tulsa is a good fit," he said.

Tulsa Remote Managing Director Justin Harlan said other people have cited Oklahoma's relatively low cost of living and an environment that's encouraging to entrepreneurs as reasons to move here. In Tulsa, he said, they can tap into resources and a strong network of support cultivated through Tulsa Remote.

Notably, about three-quarters of the 5-year-old program's participants have remained in Tulsa beyond their original commitment, and many, like Young, say they have no plans to leave.

According to its 2023 **economic impact report**, as of the end of last year 2,819 Tulsa Remote participants have collectively generated \$563.6 million in direct employment income and have been responsible for the presence of an estimated 3,554 full-time equivalent jobs in Tulsa County, including 2,252 held by participants and 1,302 created or supported by their spending.

It has been estimated that the program has realized a return of more than 13 times its investment in \$10,000 incentive grants offered to Tulsa Remote participants.

While many new Tulsans have arrived from Western states like California, the program has attracted people from at least 350 cities scattered across 45 states and eight countries.

"Many say the incentive caught their attention, but it's really the community they find here that makes them stay," Harlan said, "along with the support and resources."

The Kansas City Fed's report cited U.S. Census Bureau and Consumer Credit Panel data that showed Oklahoma had a net gain of residents from 29 states over the past year. Oklahoma gained the most residents, by far, from California and Texas. An estimated 3,960 more Californians and 2,600 more Texans moved to Oklahoma than moved from Oklahoma to those states. Arizona contributed the third-highest number of new Oklahomans, at 1,120.

Oklahoma did lose residents to some states. In 2022 and 2023 for example, a net 440 Oklahomans left the state for Arkansas, and 320 left for South Carolina.

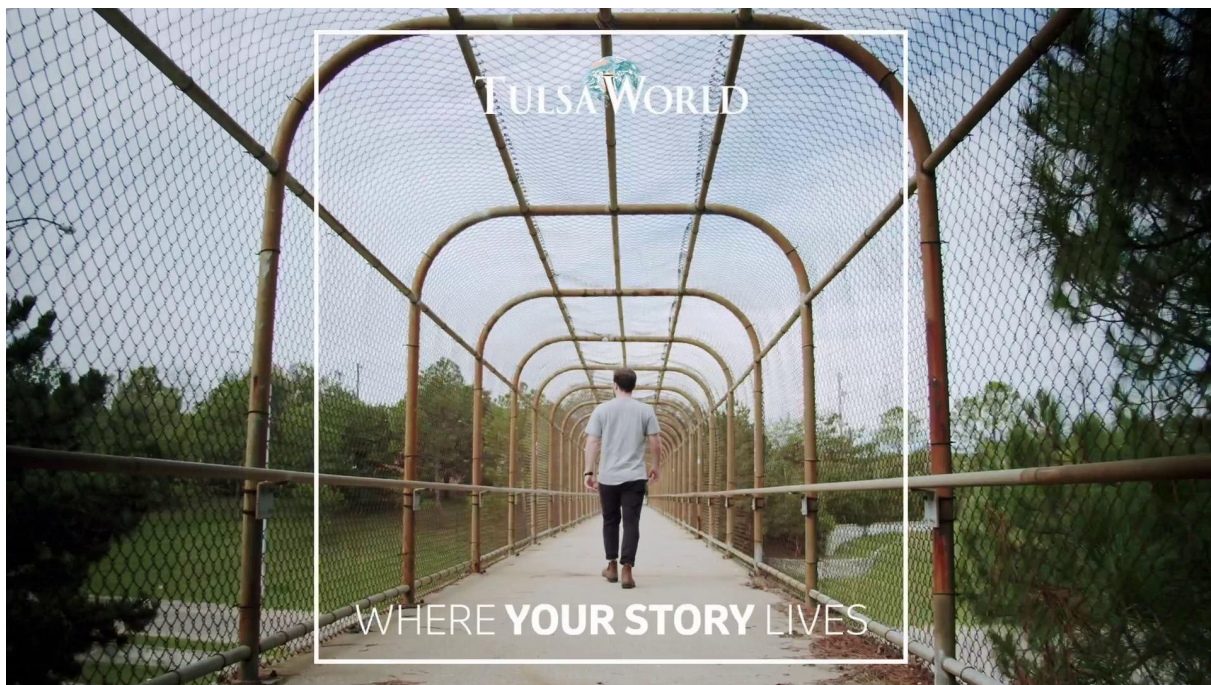
But Oklahoma fared favorably as compared to about three-quarters of the rest of the nation. The report's authors also noted that the increase in population helped reverse an earlier troubling trend described as a "brain drain" of more people with college degrees leaving Oklahoma than were moving in. The state has had "brain gain" since the pandemic, they said, but has not yet made up for previous losses.

In Tulsa, Young expressed optimism that current trends will continue.

"My phone rings every day from people wanting information about Tulsa," he said. "I tell them it's a great landing spot."

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steve.metzer@tulsaworld.com

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