



COMING HOME: THE BOOMERANG'S GUIDE TO RE-ESTABLISHING ROOTS IN FRESNO

BY
KENDRA
GILBERT

In 2004, Jake Soberal gave the commencement speech at Clovis High School's graduation ceremony.

"I can distinctly remember sitting up there, this arrogant 18-year-old thinking, you know, these folks really ought to enjoy this speech because they'll never see me here again," Soberal said.

After graduation, he left the Valley to attend Hofstra University on Long Island in New York.

Soberal's story is a familiar one among high school graduates across Fresno and the Valley. Raised and educated here, these young people don't see Fresno as a place with the same opportunities as cities in other parts of the state and country. Because of that, they leave, depriving the community of their knowledge and skills. College graduates are similarly inclined to leave. According to data collected as part of the 2007 U.S. Census, one in six single college graduates will leave Fresno.

But, sometimes they come back. Six years after leaving Fresno because he thought "there was just no opportunity big enough for me in this town," Soberal returned home with a different perspective about his hometown.

Jake Soberal is a boomerang: a person who returns to the place where he is from. And he wants any potential boomerangs out there to know that Fresno is full of opportunities.



Photo provided by Jake Soberal

Jake Soberal

COMING BACK

When Soberal returned to Fresno in 2010, he wanted to “plug into the community.” He found an outlet at Creative Fresno, a local non-profit aimed at facilitating positive change in Fresno through a series of ongoing community projects. As a board member, Soberal took the lead on the organization’s Boomerang Project.

“My involvement in this project is absolutely born out of my own experience,” said Soberal, an attorney at the Walter & Wilhelm Law Group in Fresno.

Although the Boomerang Project dates back to 2005, when Soberal was still in

school on the East Coast, it wasn’t until 2012 that it began to take a more active approach to recruiting boomerangs back to the Valley, Soberal said. With the creation of FresnoPolis.org, a website that serves as a go-to source of information and inspiration for anyone thinking of making the return trip home, Creative Fresno hopes to show potential boomerangs that there are opportunities for them in Fresno. The website also allows relatives or friends to nominate a potential boomerang.

Boomerangs are important to Fresno because “they’ve come out of this tradition, out of this place, so they understand it. And they have a deep care for this place because it’s home,” Soberal said. “And they’ve experienced

‘other’ in a way that was most often an attempt at self-improvement and exploration. They’ve gone off for education. They’ve gone off for experience. And then they come back bringing those new ideas.”

And, just as boomerangs are important to Fresno, groups like Creative Fresno are equally as important because they have recognized and reacted to this deficiency Fresno has for retaining talented professionals.

“Groups like Creative Fresno are important because they are organically organized to meet the needs of a niche of the community that can’t be met through government or non-profits already serving the community,” said Mike Dozier, executive director of the Office of Community and Economic Development at California State University, Fresno.

Industries such as healthcare, energy, public infrastructure, manufacturing and value-added agriculture are full of opportunities for qualified boomerangs returning to Fresno, Dozier said. Attorneys, like Soberal, are also in demand in the Valley.

Fresno also offers boomerangs a chance to be their own boss. For boomerangs who are not skilled attorneys or healthcare professionals, this is a route to success that is open to them in Fresno, if they take it. Entrepreneurship is “one of the things that the boomerangs can really take advantage of,” Dozier said.

Cortney Snapp, who grew up in north Fresno and returned from Maui in 2005, started Central Valley Historic Estates in 2012 after a friend had trouble finding a venue for her wedding. The company represents private estates around the Valley and

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rents them out for events. Shortly after starting the company, Snapp got her “dream job” as the community director at Make-a-Wish Central California. She is “thriving” at both.

Fresno was a good place for Snapp to stretch her entrepreneurial wings because of her roots in the community and the contacts she had here – contacts that included her dad, who is an entrepreneur as well.

“It was the perfect place to know people who have estates and were willing to be a part of my new venture,” Snapp said.

GETTING INVOLVED

Just as Soberal wanted to get involved when he moved back, potential boomerangs are likely curious about what social and community activities are available to them in Fresno, should they move back for a career, family or other reasons.

According to Soberal, getting involved in the community is easy.

“If you want to do something in Fresno, there is one step: ask,” he said.

Fresno’s Leading Young Professionals, FLYP, is a non-profit organization offering social networking, community outreach and professional development to young professionals. Their mission: to keep young professionals in Fresno and get them involved with each other and the community.

“It’s a place that brings people together to help give young



Lisa Burger at work with “Great Day” anchors Kim Stephens and Kopi Sotiropulos

professionals a reason to stay in town, to help them build their own networks, but also to grow the next generation of leaders in this community,” said Lisa Burger, KMPH executive producer and FLYP member.

Although FLYP does not focus on bringing skilled Fresno natives back to town the way Creative Fresno does with the Boomerang Project, the organization is here to welcome boomerangs as they return home.

“When they come back, we want them to go to a FLYP mixer,” said Sarah Moffat, field representative for U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein and chair of FLYP’s board of directors. “As soon as someone comes in, we want to grab them and deeply implant their roots in this community.”

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Photo provided by Courtney Snapp

Courtney Snapp

FLYP uses a combination of social mixers, community service projects, lectures, and mentoring programs to connect young professionals with each other and get them invested in their community. And, while their name suggests an age cap, FLYP is open to people of all ages and the events can be attended by members and non-members alike.

Burger and Moffat recently graduated from FLYP’s Downtown Academy. The 10-month program gets local professionals and business owners involved in the discussion about revitalizing Fresno’s downtown through instruction and interaction. Members of 2012-13 class not only learned the ins and outs of Fresno’s downtown neighborhoods, but traveled to revitalized downtowns in Southern California to compare and contrast what makes a downtown successful.

“As a result of what we’ve learned, we believe. And, it could’ve gone either way,” Burger said. “But, we believe in the mission. We support anything that’s going to bring our downtown to life; anything that’s going to make Fresno a better place to live and to make the people who live here see it as a great place to live.”

Aside from the Boomerang Project – and, even that, sprung from the downtown-centric Creative Fresno -- most of the projects Soberal is involved with in Fresno are downtown-focused.

One of them is the “I Believe in Downtown Fresno” campaign, an initiative created by Fresno Citizens for a Strong Economy, a non-profit for which Soberal is a board member.

“The whole thing was kind of born

out of this conversation of young professionals in Fresno who want to see this place succeed in the same way they want to see themselves succeed,” Soberal said. That conversation turned into a discussion about figuring out the economy in Fresno and from there, “every road leads to downtown.”

MAKING IT YOUR OWN

In Fresno, you get back what you put in. But, perception has always been one of the city’s biggest problems and it keeps good people from coming back. That negative attitude about Fresno comes from inside the city limits as well as from the outside.

“There’s a lot of things we have to work on, but perception’s always one of those things that just really kind of baffled me,” Dozier said. “The pros of living here are a lot more than the negatives.”

Moffat points to Fresno’s growth and change as a prime opportunity for, not just young professionals, but everyone, to get involved and make Fresno great.

“You’re in a community where you’re watching the change, and you can be a part of it or you can sit back and watch,” Moffat said. “A lot of people sit back and watch. But, oh my gosh, if you even volunteer or do anything you can be a part of this entire movement that’s happening.”

And it’s not all about networking or building your resume. There is fun to be had throughout the city, from downtown to north Fresno.

“There is always something to do. Go to Art Hop, go down to Tower and

watch a band play at Sequoia,” Burger said. “People who say there’s nothing to do in Fresno aren’t looking for things to do in Fresno.”

For Snapp, coming back to Fresno was always an option. And since she’s been back, she’s never thought of leaving. One of the things she loves about living here is the solid friendships she’s formed. The nice thing about Fresno, Snapp said, is that “when you create friendships, you know they’re set. Fresno doesn’t have the turnaround like most cities.”

Ultimately, no matter how many times it is said that Fresno is full of opportunities for boomerangs, it comes down to the boomerang himself.

“I think they have to have the want to come back and then do something about it,” Snapp said.

As for Soberal, what was it that changed the arrogant 18-year-old Clovis High School graduate into a Fresno believer?

“Unquestionably, the biggest difference was me,” Soberal said. “I had changed and in so changing had realized that all of the things that I, maybe, at 18 resented about this community, were not as big as the things that I treasured.”

Kendra Gilbert is a freelance writer originally from Clovis. She recently returned to the Valley after eight years away living in Boston, Washington, D.C., and, most recently, Los Angeles. Since returning, she has developed an addiction to checking out old movies on DVD from the library. She has no intentions of quitting.



Photo by California Border Patrol

Sarah Moffat (second from left) on a California Border Tour

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

April 1

Application period for FLYP’s 2013-14 Downtown Academy class begins
flypinfo.com

April 17, 11:30am

FLYP’s Community Leader Luncheon with Fresno City Councilman Steve Brandau
Elbow Room
731 W. San Jose Ave., Fresno

April 17, 5:45 p.m.

FLYP’s April Mixer
The Daily Grill
7855 N. Palm Ave., Fresno

BOOMERANG RESOURCES

fresnopolis.org

creativefresno.com

flypinfo.com

fresnocse.org

fresnoartscouncil.org

fresnofilmworks.org

businessstreetonline.com

fresnofamous.com