

local stats

Name: Alexis K.


Age: 35

Occupation: Executive Director,
Urban Museum

Favorite Neighborhood: "I can't answer this question publicly if I'm expected to keep my job."

Favorite Meridien memory: "New Year's Eve 2002. The city was celebrating its bicentennial and everyone was out in the streets, happy, and talking about how much they loved where they lived. It was a mass bonding moment unlike any other. I also have fond childhood memories of the annual summer-time Seven Nights Celebration in the park, watching the fireworks with my father."





I thought that the light drizzle on this crisp fall day might be a deterrent.

When I asked Alexis, director of Meridien's Urban Museum, to give me her personal tour of the city she's resided in since her teenage years, she accepted, but only if we did it by bicycle. I'm not a fitness freak and Meridien is known for its formidable hills, so when 6am rolled around, when I noted damp streets outside my apartment window and my cell phone started buzzing, I was hoping it was Alexis calling to tell me that we were switching to Plan B.

"Sorry, Charlie. We're not going to let a little misty air ruin our fun. Anyway, the forecast says it will clear up by late morning."

So much for Plan B.

We met at the Smith Street subway station, a mid-century, mildly brutalist concrete cube designed by architects in 1962 that is in the process of a full greening renovation.

"I love this building. It's a modern masterpiece—poetic instead of cold and offputting. The city could have torn it down and put up a more contemporary structure, but they recognized its historical importance and instead are just working to make it more environmentally friendly and energy efficient through our Off-Grid program."

We were here not to tour the subway station, though, but to pick up our transportation for the long ride ahead. And, no, weren't taking the tube. ("It's not going to be that hard a ride," Alexis emailed me earlier in the week, "Meridien's flatter than you think. Especially if you know

Bikes continued on page 3

the secret routes.”) Meridien has its own bike-sharing program—called HUB—that has become increasingly popular with the locals, especially now with hundreds of bike drop-off/pickup stations scattered across the city.

One swipe of your credit or debit card and you’re off to the races. Amazingly, the program has reduced traffic in the city center almost 50%, even in the chilly winter.

We grab our bikes and zoom across the street to the bike lane that skirts the northern edge of the park. Part of the bike-sharing program’s popularity is that Meridien has invested heavily in creating dedicated cycling paths to accompany the thousands of new bikes on the streets. We rush past the pastiche of architectural styles and eras that characterize Meridien’s eclectic urbanism, something Alexis has made a career of celebrating. “A real city is never homogenous,” she remarks.

One of Meridien’s urban success stories is the rejuvenation of the Old Town district. Just five years ago, the area’s cobblestone streets were strewn with trash and drug paraphernalia. The city’s homeless would congregate here, and the historical buildings, some dating back to the 18th century, were primarily abandoned. But with the election of Mayor Pierre H. in 2006, the government allocated funds for a renewal project that provided new businesses and nonprofits with startup funding to renovate and occupy these empty structures. Before long, artists were occupying the upper floors, and boutiques, galleries, and cafés began to spring up to fit their lifestyles. Combine this with more robust social service

programs that provided housing and drug counseling programs, and the area underwent a speedy, remarkable renaissance.

Cobblestones, gentrification and local produce

The bumpy roads result in a precarious ride that makes steering the bikes in a straight line virtually impossible. Luckily, auto traffic is mostly banned from Old Town, making it a favorite destination for those who disdain cars and much safer for our own clumsy veering. We stop in front of Frugal Grounds, an airy café/gallery/performance space hybrid that was one of Old Town’s first new businesses, to meet Scott G., Meridien’s supervisor of urban renewal. He, too, arrives on a HUB bicycle, stylishly dressed for the weather in a medium-length Nehru-style jacket and knit cap, the ensemble nicely complemented by a pair of stylish spectacles and a worn leather shoulder bag.

“There are some hard-core purists who dismiss this development as negative—gentrification to ease the fears of yuppies who wouldn’t come near here before,” Scott remarks, “but I find their argument difficult to support in light of all the good that has come to Old Town. We didn’t move the blight out and then hide it somewhere else. We helped the people who needed assistance and let them stay as long as they weren’t committing any violent crimes. They receive housing and there has been phenomenal success in getting many back into the workforce and making them part of the community again. How can this be bad?”





Look in the center of the park for the statue of Victorian-era poet Windham Christy sculpted by Meriden local hero, Augustus R., in 1942.



You can keep the bike-sharing cycles for as long as you want. Well, actually, after six weeks of straight use your credit card deposit will not be returned to you.



The old area of the city until recently was a haven for homeless people and addicts after the federal government suspended welfare aid in 1980. Since 2000, Meriden has opened 30 homeless shelters and a clinic specializing in substance abuse, promoting Old Meriden's recent development of live/work housing, boutique stores, and cafes.

Our next stop is Friar's Market—an open-air agora for Meridien's local farmers and produce growers to sell their fresh organic sustenance to residents weary of the old supermarket model. The long arcade is a kaleidoscope of nature's colors—fruits, vegetables, and meats meticulously arranged in bins by their growers and producers.

“The best part of the experience here is that I get to converse with the people who actually grew this stuff,” beams Alexis. “Nothing against the nice folks that work at the supermarket, but Friar's Market vendors have such an intimacy with what they sell here. It's their lifeblood, their means of survival.”

How could I argue? The green apple I bought and consumed on the spot was so scrumptious it almost made me want to grow my own tree de pomme on my building's roof.

We cut up Grayson Boulevard towards the “Green Light” district, Meridien's center of provincial haute couture and cuisine, where rustic cafes huddle alongside boutiques offering hemp clothing and hipster hubs that sell art, books, and the latest designer accessories. After a whirlwind browse through almost ten different retailers, we greet the setting sun by settling at Alexis's favorite evening hangout spot, Le Bon Mot.

“I'll always be pushing for Meridien to move forward—to promote thoughtful development by utilizing our best and brightest creative minds, whether they be artists,

architects, or chefs. But I'll be honest—” Alexis eases back into her chaise lounge and smiles, “there's nothing like the vibe of an old French bistro, even if we're not in France.”

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