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Pedro Morgado, in his home in Harlan County, moved to Kentucky from Florida and is able to work remotely for his job.

'I don't ever want to live in the city again'

Traditional coal counties in Eastern Kentucky have long lost population but remote work is drawing people looking for lower taxes, less crime, cheaper houses to move in

BY BILL ESTEP
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A mortgage manager from New York, a consultant for a company in Arkansas and an administrator for a law firm in Tennessee count themselves among Appalachian Kentucky's newest residents.

Drawn in by the region's low cost of living, they're leaving areas with higher taxes, steeper housing costs, concerns about crime and less elbow room — and they're bringing their jobs with them.

Counties in the eastern end of the state have lost residents for decades, but local officials and real estate agents say there has been an increase recently in people moving in from beyond the Bluegrass.

"We are seeing a serious influx of people from out of state buying property here," Bell County Judge-Executive Albey Brock said.

Take Pedro Morgado, for example.

Morgado moved last October from an apartment in Tampa, Fla., to a house on a steep, wooded hillside in Harlan County.

Ask why and he says "everything is crazy" in Tampa — the traffic, the prices, concern about crime — then points to the deep-green hill and the quiet wrapped around his new home.

"You can hear it. You can see it," he said. "I have that peace."

Morgado, who like some others took part in a program providing a cash incentive to move to Eastern Kentucky, is a consultant for a manufacturing company in Arkansas. He works by computer from his living room, in front of wide windows that look out on the secluded hill.

Phyllis Napier, who owns Forever Home Real Estate in Harlan, said that over the last two years, just over half of her sales have been to people coming in from outside the county, and most from outside the state.

Napier said she had sold homes to people who moved from as far away as California. Buyers from outside Kentucky are often surprised at how much less houses cost locally, she said.

Some clients have bought houses based on a video walk-through, before ever seeing the property in person, Napier said.

Retirees looking for a small-town atmosphere make up some of the new residents. But the rise of remote work since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is a key factor as well.

"Now they don't have to be in the city to go into the office," she said.

'WE JUST FELL IN LOVE'

Remote work helped enable her family's move from central New York to Johnson County, said Katie Mack, a mortgage service manager for Habitat for Humanity in Atlanta.

Mack, 33, moved with her husband Jason and their 14-year-old niece Shay, following their best friends, who had moved from New York last year.



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Tiffany Goff is photographed at her new home in Breathitt County, Ky., Wednesday, July 3, 2024. Goff recently moved from Ohio to Eastern Kentucky.



'We're a close community. We support each other.'
Watch a New Harlan resident explain why he moved to East Kentucky. bit.ly/46150u0

Mack said she had looked for jobs in Johnson County but hadn't found anything suitable. Most paid considerably less than she was making at a bank in New York.

"Having a remote job made things a whole heck of a lot easier," Mack said.

Mack said the fiber-optic internet service at her home at Hager Hill is faster than the internet available where she moved from, about 30 miles from Syracuse.

There are still gaps in broadband service in Eastern Kentucky, but the federal government, the state and providers have invested heavily to expand service in the region, with more work planned.

Taxes are another big difference. The annual property-tax bill on her family's house and two acres in New York was \$6,000, compared to \$1,300 on their larger home in Kentucky, Mack said.

Mack said the importance of family values and the more conservative politics in Eastern Kentucky were pluses as well.

And Eastern Kentucky is beautiful, she said, and the people have been nice.

"We just fell in love with the countryside," Mack said. "I have not met a single mean person down here. Everyone has been so amazing."

Mack said the parents of the friends they followed to Kentucky have also moved to

Johnson County, and her best friend from New York has bought a house and will move soon.

'SLOWER LIFESTYLE'

Breathitt County is getting several new residents with a move by Tiffany Goff, her brother and sister-in-law and one of their children, and her parents, who are retired.

They are moving from central Ohio, about 45 minutes north of Columbus, to 110 acres off KY 30 east of Jackson. Goff, 47, bought a new mobile home to put on the site but the others plan to build homes.

Goff works remotely as a Medicare appeals analyst and also does part-time remote work for an email service. Her sister-in-law also works remotely, and her brother is a furniture maker.

It wouldn't have been possible to make the move without her remote job, Goff said.

Goff said the people she had met in Breathitt County had been kind and welcoming, and the local cost of living — as well as the taxes — are considerably lower than the area she's leaving.

Her internet service is not great, so she will have to use an alternative such as a hot spot on her cell phone or perhaps Starlink, a satel-

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MIGRATION

lite internet service. And, she said, driving the curves of KY 30 is “a little terrifying in the dark.”

But Goff likes how peaceful it is at her family’s new property.

“The draw is the slower lifestyle,” Goff said. “Less people — that’s what we were looking for. I don’t ever want to live in the city again.”

Jennifer Langford moved from Knoxville to a house she and her husband, Kyle Wilson, bought in Williamsburg.

Langford is the administrator for a large law firm in Knoxville. She goes for in-person work at times, but can do most of her job from home.

Langford said taxes and the cost of living are lower than in Knoxville, and that a house comparable to the one she and her husband found in Williamsburg would have cost nearly twice as much in Knoxville.

“Housing is no longer affordable in bigger cities,” she said.

POPULATION CONCERNS

Local officials hope the influx of people from out of state will help temper population loss.

The population in many Eastern Kentucky coal counties peaked in the late 1970s or early 1980s as a boom in coal production created jobs. People started leaving after the boom ended and the population has continued dropping since, sometimes sharply.

The total population in 10 leading coal counties in Eastern Kentucky dropped from 334,307 in 1980 to 245,329 in 2020, according to U.S. Census estimates — a decline of more than 26%, with losses greater than that in Bell, Harlan, Letcher, Pike and Leslie counties.

Some counties in the region lost more than 10% of their residents between 2010 and 2020, according to the Kentucky State Data Center.

Bell County lost 16 % of its population that decade, while Letcher and Knott counties each lost more than 12%. The loss in Pike County was 9.7%, according to the Census count.

One reason was a sharp downturn in coal jobs in the region caused by several factors, including competition from natural gas, environmental concerns and the rise of renewable energy.

Coal jobs plummeted by 30% in Eastern Kentucky in 2012 alone, and more bled away in the years after. There has been a slight recovery the last few years, but the number of jobs is still far below 2011.

The collapse of coal hurt retail and other sectors as well, sucking more than \$1 billion dollars out of the regional economy and forcing many people to move to find work, according to Shaping Our Appalachian Region, or SOAR, a nonprofit organization which works to improve the economy in Appalachian Kentucky.

In 12 of the counties most impacted by the coal industry, the number of workers age 25 to 54 went down 30% between 2000 and 2022, said Colby Hall, executive director of SOAR.

Another factor in the population decline is that the death rate in the region outpaces the birth rate.

In two development districts covering a total of 13 counties in the Pikeville and Hazard areas, for instance, the Kentucky State Data Center estimated there were nearly 5,000 more deaths than births between 2010 and 2020.

The losses — and a projection for further declines topping 25% in some counties over the next 25 years — have raised concerns about the future of the region.

“If you don’t have people, nothing else works,” Hall said. “If you’re gonna continue to lose people, everything’s gonna get harder and harder.”

‘A SMART INVESTMENT’

There is some promise of increasing jobs in the region in sectors that include health care, small business and tourism, but every person who moves out is one less customer for health care providers and local retailers.

SOAR’s blueprint for boosting the economy of the region includes efforts to keep current residents and attract new ones.

The organization started a program called EKY Remote to attract remote workers to the region. The program works with MakeMyMove, which facilitates moves by remote workers to places that pay incentives to relocate.

The incentive to move to Eastern Kentucky includes \$5,000, half when a person verifies buying property and the rest after a year.

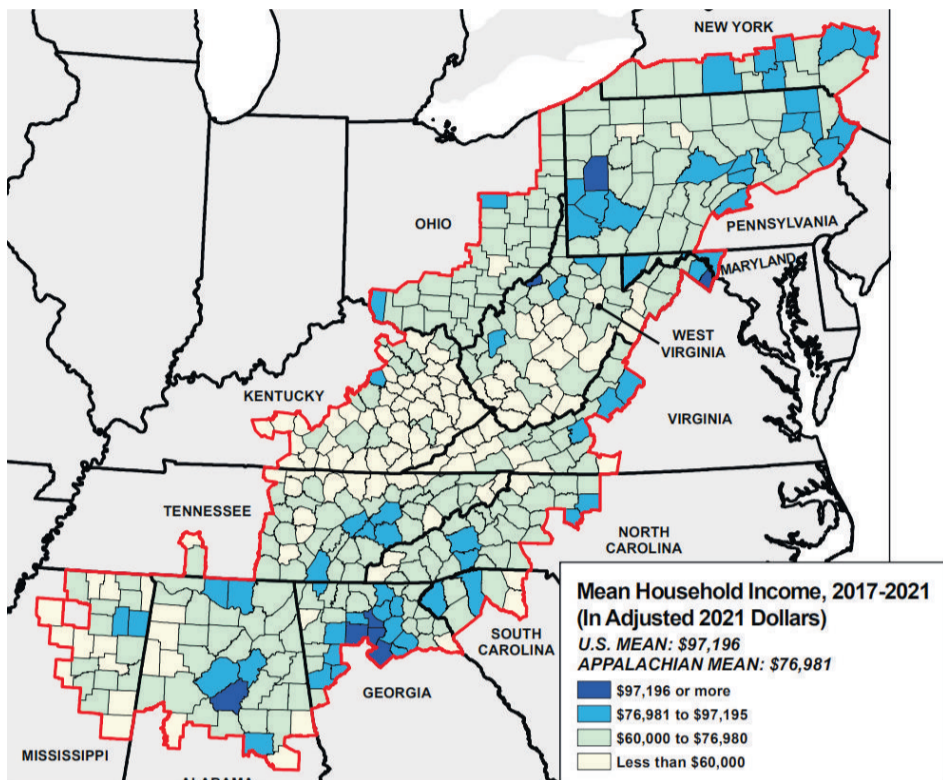
Hall said that as of mid-June, a total of eight households with 21 people had been approved to move to Eastern Kentucky as part of the program. They included Morgado, Mack, Goff and Langdon.

That initial pilot program was limited to a few counties, but SOAR received \$1.5 million from the Kentucky legislature this year, along with \$240,000 in other funding, most of it from Kentucky Power, to expand the program to about 30 Eastern Kentucky counties.

MakeMyMove generates leads for the program and does financial and background checks on people who apply, Hall



Downtown Harlan, Ky., is photographed Thursday, June 13, 2024



The mean, or average, household income in Eastern Kentucky was well below the national figure in 2021, the last year with data available, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission.

“

WE JUST FELL IN LOVE WITH THE COUNTRYSIDE. I HAVE NOT MET A SINGLE MEAN PERSON DOWN HERE. EVERYONE HAS BEEN SO AMAZING.

Katie Mack, a mortgage service manager for Habitat for Humanity in Atlanta

said.

The goal of the expanded program is to bring in 100 households with a total of 250 residents over the next two years.

“As we open it up, we think it’s going to accelerate,” Hall said. “We see this as a smart investment.”

BUYING HOUSES SIGHT-UNSEEN

People moving in helps shore up the tax base and means more customers for area businesses and services and more kids in school, local officials said.

Shirley Blackburn of AAA Real Estate Services in Pikeville, who has been in real estate nearly 30 years, said she has seen a significant increase the last two or three years in people from other parts of the country buying houses and land. Her territory includes 13 Eastern Kentucky counties.

A number of people have moved to the region without taking part in an incentive program.

Several clients have bought houses without seeing them in person, including one that sold for \$700,000 to a buyer from California, Blackburn said.

“It’s amazing,” she said. Blackburn recently listed a house and land in Knott County for about \$250,000 that likely would have spent a good deal of time on the market earlier, but she quickly got calls from potential buyers in several other states, including Illinois, California, New York and Connecticut.

Someone from California bought it, she said.

Blackburn said people from other states with much higher housing costs have told her they can sell a house there, buy one of comparable or bigger size in Eastern Kentucky for far less, and have the rest of the money to live on.

Clients have cited a number of reasons for buying in Eastern Kentucky, including lower taxes and a lower cost of living; politics; a desire to have some land and more space; and that they like the area, Blackburn said.

People who have contacted MakeMyMove about relocating to Eastern Kentucky through SOAR’s EKYRemote program have cited factors that include affordability and proximity to outdoor amenities, said Evan Hock, the co-founder and chief operating officer.

The business compared the cost of

living in Pikeville with large cities in places where people are moving from and found Pikeville was more affordable overall, Hock said.

That was driven by the cost of housing — 78% lower in Pikeville than in San Francisco, 53% lower than in Miami and 29% lower than in Dallas, according to the analysis.

Hock said the people who have committed to move to Eastern Kentucky so far have an average household income of \$120,000.

That compares with an household income in Appalachian Kentucky of \$58,972 in 2021, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

In a study released last year, Invest Appalachia said an influx of new residents to Central Appalachia, which includes Eastern Kentucky, presents enormous opportunity for expanded investment and economic growth.

The focus of the study was the potential for Central Appalachia to be a destination for people moving away from areas facing greater problems as a result of climate change, such as wildfires, more intense hurricanes and rising sea levels.

The report said Central Appalachia is not immune to climate-related disasters. Devastating flooding in Eastern Kentucky in July 2022 caused more than 40 deaths, for instance.

But because of factors that include mild warm-season temperatures, ecological diversity, an elevation high enough to protect against extreme heat, good water resources and proximity to other places at greater risk, Central Appalachia is well-positioned to see people move in result of climate-related migration, the report said.

There also are risks in that, however, including the potential that as people with relatively high incomes buy up properties, it could worsen socioeconomic disparities and drive up home prices and property taxes, creating challenges for some people.

The report recommended more public investment in affordable housing, and increased research and planning to prepare for the influx of people and the impact that could cause.

“We need to have a bigger, broader public discussion about this,” said Baylen Campbell, director of community engagement for Invest Appalachia, who prepared the report with Andrew Crosson, CEO of the organization, and Nicholas Shanahan of the North Carolina Institute for Climate Studies.

Local officials said they had not seen any negative impacts from people moving in from out of state.

“It’s been a benefit to us,” said Harlan County Judge-Executive Dan Mosley.

There was a gap in affordable homes in Kentucky, not just in the eastern part of the state, long before the uptick in people moving from out of state.

SEE MIGRATION, 5A

‘Can’t leave my mountains.’ Will there be jobs in E. Ky. for these grads after college?

BY BILL ESTEP
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HARLAN

When the seniors who got their diplomas at Harlan County High School this year started first grade in the late summer of 2012, the coal industry that had fed Eastern Kentucky families for generations — sometimes better than others — was in free fall.

Coal employment in the mountainous county averaged 2,310 workers throughout 2011.

But by Christmas break of 2012, state records indicate that number had plummeted to 1,367, a loss of almost 1,000 good paychecks, with more layoffs to come.

As the Class of 2024 worked its way toward graduation, substance abuse frayed many families and the level of poverty remained stubbornly high.

The Appalachian Regional Commission estimated the poverty rate this fiscal year at 33.6%, far higher than the national level of 12.6%, and higher than when they started school, when the ARC estimated the rate was 30.1%.

Those hardships touched some members of the Class of 2024.

Macy Saylor, 19, went to live with her grandparents after the death of her mother, who had struggled with mental-health and drug problems, and after her father’s abuse of alcohol, methamphetamine and opioid drugs spiraled out of control.

He spent some time in jail. Saylor thinks he is sober now, but she doesn’t see him much.

Those experiences have fired her determination to do better, for herself and her home. She plans to go to Union College in Barbourville to study biology and someday work in the medical field.

“I’m not gonna follow in their footsteps,” Saylor said of her parents. “I want to help other people.”

Hard times in the county may have knocked down some members of the Class of 2024, but not most of them. Many have big plans in engineering, medicine, education and other fields. One wants to be Kentucky’s poet laureate.

There have been questions about the future of Eastern Kentucky, in part because of the demise of the once-dominant coal industry and a declining population. A good number of students who leave for college outside the region don’t come back.

So, do members of the Class of 2024 plan to come home? The Herald-Leader talked with more than a dozen of them shortly before graduation about their place and their plans.

‘CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITY’

It’s clear the students hold a deep pride in their place, in the beauty of the mountains, the sense of community, the willingness of people to help

SEE GRADS, 5A



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Recent Harlan County High School graduate Jacob Shoemaker, whose grandfather was a coal miner, said he’s not sure he’ll be able to come home, but would like to.

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GRADS

each other.

"You'll never meet people that are nicer than the people around here," said Lesleigh Brown, who said she plans to major in biology at Alice Lloyd College in Knott County and then go to the optometry school at the University of Pikeville.

"I guarantee you 98% of the people here would help you," said Mason Beach, who plans to study exercise science at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tenn., and then go to physical therapy school. "They're dealing with their own problems and they're still willing to help you."

"There are so many people who are passionate about making Harlan County better," said Avery Thomas, who plans to study English at Berea College and teach high school.

The fact that many people know each other — and have a shared blue-collar history over generations of family working in the coal mines — helps meld a sense of community.

"That close-knit community has kind of persisted," said Jacob Shoemaker, who plans to major in electrical engineering and minor in computer science at the University of Kentucky.

The students know some of their classmates have been touched by drug abuse or don't have much money, but said they don't look down on each other over financial status.

"There's no clear divisions," said Kaydince Williamson, who plans to major in secondary education.

Despite the unflattering statistics, most people in the county work hard and are not poor or on drugs, the students said.

If one-third of the people are considered economically poor, that means two-thirds are not.

Despite that, the idea of poverty still defines the county for many people elsewhere.

But it shouldn't, the students said.

"It's a layered area. There's multitudes. There's good, there's bad," said Adrianna Hockenberry, who wrote and directed a play performed at the school last spring and plans to attend Morehead State University to major in theater. "I think a lot of people overlook like just how much talent and knowledge can come out of areas like Harlan."

"Our people can do all these great things," said Michael Scott Merrill, who will report to the U.S. Navy soon to study nuclear propulsion technology, with a dream of becoming a pilot.

Those unflattering statistics also don't account for the spirit and resilience of the people, the students said.

"I've been inspired by so many people here," said Jacey Collins, who plans to pursue a degree in education online from the University of the Cumberlands in Williamsburg.

"I guess I would just want people to know there's good things here, there's good people," said Caleb Johnson, who plans to major in environmental science or business in college.

The students have had to deal with stereotypes at times.

Shoemaker said other students seemed surprised about his ability in robotics when he attended the Governor's Scholars Program, a competitive summer residential program for rising seniors aimed at enhancing the next generation of civic and economic leaders in Kentucky.

"People were surprised that I knew how to code stuff, how to build stuff, how to do the math for it," he said.



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Recent Harlan County High School graduates Lesleigh Brown, from left, Jenna Wilson and William Cassim are photographed at the school in Harlan, Ky., on Wednesday, May 8, 2024.



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"Our people can do all these great things," said Michael Scott Merrill, who will report to the U.S. Navy soon to study nuclear propulsion technology.

Johnson, who played on the Harlan County High team that was runner-up in the 2024 Kentucky Boy's Sweet 16 basketball tournament, said once when they were playing in another Appalachian county, a fan for the other team shouted that he would give Johnson \$2 for making a shot, saying he knew that would be a lot of money for someone from Harlan County.

"We're not all as poor as people think," he said.

Students said people outside the area had remarked on their accent, and William Cassim said someone made a remark about wearing shoes to his sister, who is in a medical residency program at UK.

He said the negative image some people hold stokes a determination to prove them wrong.

The attitude is "I'm gonna show these people," said Cassim, who plans to study mechanical engineering and business at UK. "It's a pride thing. I think we are uniquely qualified to be successful and change the world."

Others share that determination. "We want to prove that we are just as good, if not better, than the rest of the world," Beach said.

'FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES'

So do they plan to come home after college? The thinking is mixed.

"I would love for my kids to grow up here," said Jenna Wilson,



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Evening approaches at the Creech Overlook along the Little Shepherd Trail in Harlan County, Ky.



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"I've been inspired by so many people here," said Jacey Collins, who plans to pursue a degree in education online from the University of the Cumberlands in Williamsburg.

who plans to attend Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond.

One key reason is simply that it's home. They want to be near family and to have their children grow up with the same experiences they had.

"I just really couldn't see myself anyplace else," Johnson said.

Merrill said if he doesn't get back to Harlan County after his time in the military, he'll end up somewhere nearby in Appalachia.

"I can't leave my mountains," said Merrill, whose father retired from the coal industry.

Others are undecided about coming back, or think they don't want to.

Thomas said she loves Harlan County, but said the lack of racial and other diversity can feel a bit stifling.

"I want bigger, more diverse communities," she said.

Williamson said she wants her children to grow up somewhere with more diversity and greater access to amenities such as museums and plays.

"I want them to be in an environment where there's a lot of different people and they have a lot of different experiences . . .," she said.

Emma Penny, who wants to attend Southeast Community and Technical College in Harlan County to study medical assisting, and

perhaps ultimately go to medical school, said she worries "that I would not be giving my future kids the opportunities that other kids have" if she stays in Harlan County.

Even if she doesn't, though, she wants to stay in Kentucky and be close to family.

Employment projections indicate there will likely be fewer jobs at home in Harlan County in a few years.

There were 6,470 jobs in the county in 2022. That will go down to 5,893 in 2027, according to a projection by the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky, part of UK's Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment.

That projection is subject to change by intervening events, and local leaders and business people are trying to change it.

County Judge-Executive Dan Mosley said the county developed an industrial site to try to attract jobs and is working on other projects to improve the economy and the quality of life, including expanding high-speed internet and building a wellness and recreation center in an abandoned retail space at the mall in Harlan.

"Our goal has been to make our county a place where people want to live," he said.

Mosley said there also is a strong entrepreneurial spirit in the county, with people opening dozens of new businesses in recent years.

Several of the graduating seniors said they hope there will be more jobs in the county someday, but aren't sure there will be good opportunities for them in the county after college.

Taelor Haywood said he is leaning toward not moving home after he attends the University of the Cumberlands to prepare for a career in physical therapy.

"It's more for my future opportunities," said Haywood.

"I would love to say here, but there's no economic opportunity here, especially in what I want to do," said Mason Combs.

Combs, whose father was a coal miner before being injured in a rock fall, plans to attend the University of North Georgia, a military college, to major in strategic and security studies, then join the Army and perhaps ultimately work in the national security field.

Cassim said he doesn't plan moving back to Harlan County after college, but will keep a close connection.

"My kids will have ties to Harlan and they'll be proud to be from Harlan County," he said.

Shoemaker, whose grandfather was a coal miner, said he's not sure he'll be able to come home, but would like to.

"I'd say not to count us out," he said.

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MIGRATION

Research for the Kentucky Housing Corporation released this year found the state has a housing gap of more than 200,000 homes to buy or rent.

State lawmakers have set up a task force to tackle that issue this year.

Local officials also said while efforts to entice people to move to Eastern Kentucky will help increase the population, that alone won't offset out-migra-

tion.

"Gains are gonna be incremental compared to the exodus," said Brock, the Bell County judge-executive.

The other piece of the equation is keeping current residents. That means working to create more jobs.

"You gotta have other opportunities for other people," Hall said.

'I LIKE THE SPIRIT'

Morgado, a native of Venezuela, said he had never heard of Harlan County when he decided to leave Tampa, but while searching online for a house with some acreage in a rural area, he found a listing for a house and 7.3 acres at Baxter, a community near the city of Harlan.

He worked with a real-estate agent to buy it without seeing it first-hand. He paid \$185,000 for the 3,400-square-foot house and the land, according to the deed.

Morgado said his cousin, who

works in real estate in Miami, told him after seeing photos of the house that it would cost at least \$800,000 in South Florida.

Morgado, a native Spanish speaker, jokes that he had to re-learn English when he moved to Harlan because the local accent was different than what he was used to, and said he misses the beach and sometimes the nightlife in Tampa.

But it's an easy drive to Lexington or Knoxville if he wants a bigger selection of restaurants or entertainment, Morgado said. Some people told Morgado he

was crazy to move to rural Kentucky.

But he loves it.

He said the internet works well, and the county was quick to clear the steep road to his house when it snowed last winter. It's a short drive to Walmart with little traffic, and the people have been friendly and helpful, including a nearby neighbor who treats him like family, Morgado said.

"I like the spirit of the people here."

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