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*Champoeg Vineyards is one of the oldest vineyards in the Willamette Valley. The winemakers of the valley, about an hour north of Eugene, often host wine tastings and tours.*

**An Oasis** A clean, green place, Eugene, Oregon offers plenty of activities and medical opportunities. A number of the city's residents also credit it with "diversity," but each person with something a little different in mind.

*By Debbie Feldman*

WHEN SHE COMPLETED MEDICAL SCHOOL at UC-Davis, California native Zena Monji, MD decided to get out of L.A. So seven years ago she moved up the coast to Eugene, Oregon. "I like the greenness—it's clean. And there are outdoor options like hiking and biking."

Other things about Eugene appealed to Monji as well, such as the slower pace of life and a relaxed lifestyle. "It's a progressive area and an excellent place to raise children because of the cultural

activities and diversity," she says. Plus, "It's an hour to the coast, where you can whale-watch, and skiing is only an hour and a half away."

Situated in the Willamette River Valley in western Oregon, Eugene is 110 miles south of Portland, 60 miles from the Pacific Ocean, and 80 miles from the Cascade Mountains. Lane County's seat and Oregon's second largest city, Eugene is home to 140,500 people. Its neighbor just to the east, Springfield, contributes another 53,500 to the area's population.

Lawrence Vinis, MD, the chief of staff at [McKenzie-Willamette Hospital](#) in Springfield, practiced anesthesiology in the Washington, DC area before deciding to take a cross-country trip to find a new home. He wanted a place with "intellectual vitality, no traffic jams, cheap, quality golf courses, low crime, and very good public schools." Eugene fit the bill. "It may sound strange, but I haven't locked my doors since I moved here 12 years ago," he explains. And the town is kid-safe. "At baseball games, you can

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ABOVE LEFT, Haceta Head Lighthouse, located in Devil's Elbow State Park, is just one hour west of Eugene. The park is a popular swimming place. ABOVE RIGHT, River rafters enjoy the McKenzie River. The river runs into Eugene where it joins the Willamette River. The rivers are also used for fishing and kayaking.

turn 'em loose and know they're safe."

### Diverse perspectives

With kids in mind, Monji commends the educational diversity in Eugene and Springfield. "We have language immersion schools, target schools, and private schools, including Montessori." The Eugene school district includes an international high school, French, Spanish, and Japanese immersion schools, and an arts school. Springfield has its own school district and the cities also offer several private schools at the primary and secondary level. Vinis has been impressed with the excellence of the city's schools. He says one factor in the quality of the schools, including the public schools, is that "parents participate to a degree I've not seen before."

Alison Erde, MD, a family practitioner at Thurston Medical Clinic, relocated to Eugene three years ago with her hus-

band, an orthopedist. Erde describes Eugene as a "good place to raise children," but says that the public school system, "which was once very good, is currently slightly underfunded."

Vinis admits that ethnic diversity is "relatively little" in Lane county. While the [University of Eugene](#) enrolls students from all over the world and Hispanic and Asian cultures are increasing, Vinis notes that Eugene has few African-Americans. According to 2000 Census data for Lane County, 4.6 percent of the population is Hispanic/Latino, 2.2 percent Asian, 1.1 percent American Indian and Alaska Natives, .8 percent African American, and 90.6 percent white.

Eugene residents also use the term diversity to describe Eugene residents' viewpoints. Monji notes that "it's not so much a diversity of colors that I like about the city, but rather a diversity of attitudes. This region is progressive in that

you can believe what you believe and I can believe what I believe, and we can all live together. There's a certain tolerance for different opinions, lifestyles, and how people look." Eugene has been described as an activist town with a "Live and Let Live" attitude.

One example of this independent thinking throughout the state is the [Oregon Death with Dignity Act](#) (the physician-assisted suicide law). It's a divisive issue among doctors both within and outside of Oregon. While the AMA's position is that "assisted suicide is not compatible with the physician's traditional role as a healer," the law, the only legislation of its kind in the country, was voted in by Oregon residents in 1994 and 1997. It allows terminally ill patients who are diagnosed with less than six months to live to request a lethal dose of drugs. Two doctors must confirm the diagnosis and determine that the patient is mentally

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ABOVE, Overlooking Eugene from Skinner's Butte, named for Eugene Skinner, who founded the city. Spencer's Butte is on the other side of the city. RIGHT, Goodpasture Bridge, spanning the McKenzie River, is one of many covered bridges in Oregon. Residents found that covering the bridges protected them from decay.



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### POPULATION:

Eugene: 140,550  
Springfield: 53,490  
Lane County: 341,630

### CLIMATE:

Average Annual Rainfall: 43 inches (most falls between October and May)  
Average Annual Snowfall: 7 inches  
Average High/Low temperatures:  
January — 58°/30°  
July — 95°/70°  
Days of Sunshine: 294

### TRANSPORTATION:

Airports: Mahlon Sweet Field has about 27 departures per day  
Train: AMTRAK daily passenger rail service  
Bus: Greyhound bus service, Lane Transit District buses within the city  
Interstates: I-5.  
Average home cost for a 2,200 square-foot home (2002) - \$212,362  
No state sales tax

competent to make the request before a doctor can prescribe (but not administer), the lethal dose.

Munir Katul, MD, a retired urologist who practiced in Springfield for 25 years, recalls when the issue was debated four years ago at a forum at the [Lane County Medical Society](#). He believes that “the majority of doctors in Lane County and Eugene were not opposed to the law.” Katul served on a task force in the Lane County Medical

Society that matched patients with primary care doctors who were available to assist them with prescriptions for lethal medications. He says the law “has improved the quality of dying.” In addition to the issue of the law, the debate surrounding it has helped to increase awareness of the importance of pain management in end-of-life patients.

### The social calendar

Another aspect of life in Eugene that

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does not lack diversity is the availability of arts and recreational facilities. Vinis appreciates year-round activities such as fishing, kayaking, rafting, and canoeing. Anglers can fish the Willamette River, running between Eugene and Springfield, or in the McKenzie River, which joins the Willamette north of town. Vinis says even more activities lie within an hour's drive of Eugene. "In the mountains, there's snow-shoeing, snow-boarding, and skiing. The coast is a great getaway, with rocky headlands, hiking, and storm watching in winter."

Eugene residents can take advantage of the city's 105 parks year round, which offer more than 23 miles of hiking/jogging trails, bike paths, indoor and outdoor pools, athletic fields, tennis courts, and rock columns for climbing. The city also has a lighted softball complex, 12 community/recreation centers, and year-round, professionally staffed recreation programs for all ages and skill levels. Erde praises the number of parks in Eugene and the enrichment programs for children, including camps and arts activities that contribute to the city's kid-friendliness.

One thing that adds to Eugene's rich cultural and educational environment is the University of Oregon, the first public university in the state. Founded in 1876, the institution's professional schools include law, architecture and allied arts, business and administration, education, journalism and communication, and music, as well as a graduate school. The university houses a museum of art, a museum of natural history, department of dance, university theater, and the Oregon Humanities Center. With total enrollment just over 20,000, the university has earned national and international reputations in public policy and planning, language studies, creative writing,

and neuroimaging.

As well as its role as an educational oasis for the region, Eugene offers an abundance of opportunities in the arts. [The Hult Center for the Performing Arts](#) is home to the [Eugene Symphony Orchestra](#), [Eugene Ballet Company](#), [Dance Theatre of Oregon](#), [Eugene Opera Company](#), [Willamette Repertory Theatre](#), and the [Oregon Mozart Players](#). Each year, the Hult Center hosts the [Oregon Festival of American Music](#) and the internationally-acclaimed [Oregon Bach Festival](#). In 2001, a world premiere recording from the Oregon Bach Festival won a Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance.

Each September, the city hosts the Eugene Celebration, a giant street fair with parades and music. The town also hosts an Annual Asian Celebration, a Scandinavian Festival, and an Oktoberfest. For wine enthusiasts, the region boasts a dozen wineries. The town's seven museums include [The Science Factory](#), a children's science and technology center, and the [Eugene Public Library](#)'s collection includes more than 285,000 items.

For sports enthusiasts, the University of Oregon's [Autzen Stadium](#) hosts PAC 10 football and city sports. The university's [Hayward Field](#) hosts regional, national and international track and field events, and Eugene's [Civic Stadium](#) is the home for the [Eugene Emeralds](#), a Class A professional baseball team and affiliate of the San Diego Padres.

### Economic realities

Despite an economic downturn in the 1980s, due mostly to the decline of the timber industry, today Eugene's economy appears strong. Manufacturers of compact discs, computer chips and software, plastics, electronic instruments,

timer products, sport and pleasure boats, and machinery dot the region.

Companies which recently arrived or added jobs include Hynix Semiconductor America, Inc. (formerly Hyundai), Symantec, Molecular Probes, and Monaco Coach.

The cost of living, while lower than many places in California, is a little above average, particularly for housing. According to the [ACCRA \(American Chamber of Commerce Research Association\) Cost of Living index](#), Eugene rates 107.2 in composite, compared to a national average of 100. In specific costs, Eugene rated an average 101.4 in grocery and 100.5 in transportation, 87.0 in utilities, and 116.8 in housing.

Although higher than some in the region, housing costs in Eugene are much less than in San Francisco or Los Angeles. The average cost for a 2,200 square foot home in Eugene is \$212,400. But livable rural areas surround the city. Monji notes that it's possible to "live in the country and have some land and still be close to town and within your call limit."

Steven J. Butdorf, MD has succeeded in that. The family practitioner has been practicing in the Eugene area for 19 years, nine at Thurston Medical Clinic. He lives east of Springfield, and has enough land to raise and ride horses, and participate in the active equestrian community.

A mild climate contributes to the low utility costs and year-round activities, but warmer winters have a down-side. "Winters can be dark and gray," says Erde. But, the town's proximity to mountains and the ocean, which make for mid-winter getaways, makes up for any climate issues. Mild winter temperatures are welcomed by many. Says Vinis,

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“There is a lot of rain, but no snow generally. It’s English weather—a two- to three- season climate, really.” The area’s long growing season makes for good gardening. If you don’t fancy shoveling snow and like your winter temperatures mild, the climate would work for you. Even if you crave snow for skiing, the mountains are about an hour away.

It’s a fact that in Eugene, salaries for doctors are less than other regions. “But, many have traded high income for a relaxed, pleasant lifestyle,” Vinis says. And, while reimbursement is less than in other parts of the country, doctors who want to live in Eugene don’t seem to mind. Vinis chose Eugene-Springfield because of what he described as the “benign” medical climate and the collegial community of the doctors.

Like Vinis, Butdorf considers the lower pay a “trade off.” He, too, describes a healthy medical climate and good morale among physicians in the region. “I like this medical community—it’s a collegial environment, even when we have competitiveness. This is a high quality medical community for the size of the community.”

Erde also praises the “quality of medical care” in Eugene-Springfield and adds that there is good communication between the University Medical School in Portland and physicians in Eugene.

Monji, who practices ob/gyn at [Oregon Medical Group](#), the largest multi-specialty group practice in the region, also cites the medical community as one of the main reasons she chose Eugene. “Doctors are down to earth here. There’s a camaraderie between physicians in this region.” Monji is the president of the [Lane County Medical Society](#), a group that boasts an impressive 96 percent membership. “There’s a very active medical community,” she

says. The Medical Alliance, an auxiliary organization for spouses and partners of physicians, is also active in the region.

The Eugene area offers a good amount of medical facilities for a town of its size. [Sacred Heart Medical Center](#) is a 432-bed regional tertiary medical center owned by [PeaceHealth](#), the Bellevue, Washington-centered health-care provider and the area’s largest private employer. PeaceHealth also operates [Cottage Grove Hospital](#) in nearby Cottage Grove, [South Lane Medical Group](#), a primary care group in Cottage Grove and Creswell, and [PeaceHealth Medical Group](#), a large multi-specialty group practice in Eugene-Springfield, as well as Midwifery Services in Eugene. PeaceHealth has plans to build a new medical center in Springfield in the near future.

In October, McKenzie-Willamette Hospital, for nearly 50 years a community-owned, not-for-profit hospital in Springfield, merged with Triad Hospitals, Inc. to become McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center. Triad, headquartered in Plano, Texas, owns and manages hospitals and ambulatory surgery centers in 17 states. MWMC plans to build a replacement hospital in the Eugene-Springfield area by 2006. The hospital’s services include a Level III trauma center, rehabilitation services, occupational health services, and women’s health services. Along with the new facility, the hospital plans to expand cardiac services.

The growth of these facilities translates to a need for more physicians. According to Butdorf, “there’s a need in the community for family medicine and primary care across the board.”

Vinis says, “Specialties in demand in the Eugene area include family practice,

general surgery, anesthesiology, and ob/gyn.” He says that Thurston Medical Clinic has needs in family practice and primary care, as well as gastroenterology and general surgery. Vicki Gray at [MedSolutions](#), a medical recruitment company in the city, says there is currently a demand here for physicians in internal medicine, family practice, ob/gyn, endocrinology, cardiology, orthopedics, general surgery, gastroenterology-urology, and radiology.

With all that Eugene has going for it, it’s no wonder that the city is steadily growing. Population projections for Lane County are 352,944 for the year 2005 and 377,341 for 2010. Eugene is a desirable place to live for many reasons, not the least is its family-friendly and hospitable nature. “People are friendly here,” says Monji. “There’s a wholesome quality about the city.” ■

*Debbie Feldman is free-lance writer based in New York City.*

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Convention & Visitors Association of Lane County Oregon  
541-484-5307  
[www.cvalco.org](http://www.cvalco.org)
- Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce  
541-484-1314  
[www.eugenechamber.com](http://www.eugenechamber.com)
- Eugene Schools  
[www.4j.lane.edu](http://www.4j.lane.edu)
- University of Oregon  
[www.uoregon.edu](http://www.uoregon.edu)
- City of Eugene  
[www.ci.eugene.or.us](http://www.ci.eugene.or.us)