

A Sanctuary for the Whole Family

Hinesburg, VT



From left to right: Becky, Lilla, Sion, Sonnet, Jonathan, Christa and their dog Windsor outside their home in Hinesburg, Vermont.

A home-swap program brought Jonathan Brathwaite and Becky Alford to Vermont for the first time nine years ago. Each visit, they would stay longer. Each departure, it got harder to leave. With a growing family confined to the cramped space of a Manhattan apartment, they began to think more seriously about giving their kids the opportunity to grow up outdoors with a slower pace of life far away from the noisy and crowded bars, streets, and subways of the city.

In July 2017, the couple and their three children —Sion, Sonnet, and Lilla— officially moved from New York City to their new home in a woodsy, rural corner of Hinesburg, Vermont. Yet Becky and Jonathan knew the biggest move was still ahead of them: Becky’s mother, Christa, was now even further away, and living alone with serious health issues. They knew they needed to bring the family together.

Eleven years ago, when Becky’s father passed away, he had told her to take care of her mom who had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, which meant she was also highly immuno-compromised. “I didn’t know how to do this when we lived in New York,” said Becky, “But arriving in Vermont, we finally had the space to do this!”

“We knew sooner or later, it was going to have to happen,” says Jonathan, of Christa’s move to join her daughter and grandchildren in Vermont. “And we didn’t want to have to do it during an emergency, during a crisis.” They were not a moment too late. Exactly a year before the COVID-19 pandemic, Becky and Jonathan moved Christa to their home in Vermont and began construction on a small cottage less than a hundred feet from their home where Christa could have her own small kitchen, bedroom, and a play area for the grandchildren. A few weeks before the pandemic hit Vermont, Christa moved in.

“The emergency that we were foreseeing is now upon us,” said Jonathan, in August at his home, six months into the pandemic and Christa’s move into her adjacent house. “This was the crisis that we were trying to avoid and thank God we did. We missed it by a few months. We hit right at the right time and we feel blessed that it happened. The move to Vermont has literally been a lifesaver.”

For Christa, the transition came with a powerful silver lining: the opportunity to reunite with her daughter and watch her grandchildren grow up. “When Becky left for college at NYU, I knew she wasn’t coming back and would root herself in New York and there was no possibility for me [to be] in New York,” said Christa. “So for us coming back together is like a dream come true.”

“The pandemic is the exact scenario of a panic situation we were trying to avoid. We missed it by a few months. The move to Vermont has literally been a lifesaver.”

- Jonathan





Lilla shows her grandmother, Christa, a frog she caught in the yard between their two homes. “In New York, you’re running all over to get your kids involved and it’s so expensive and stressful,” says Jonathan. “Here we can give the kids the opportunity to be outdoors at all times.”



Sonnet and Sion chat with their grandmother in the small cottage that the Alford-Brathwaite family built on their property. The kitchen area has a play area, kids’ books, and seats at the counter for each grandchild.



Christa with her grandkids Sion, 11, Sonnet, 8, and Lilla, 3 in Hinesburg, Vermont.

Photos and text by Anna Watts for the Vermont Futures Project