

Lake Country

NEIGHBORS



THE DEWIS FAMILY
*California transplants savoring
the Wisconsin life*

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Katie Emanuelson
Photography



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THE DEWIS FAMILY

California transplants savoring the Wisconsin life



BY JULIA JAEGERBERG | INSIDE PROFESSIONAL PHOTOS BY KATIE EMANUELSON PHOTOGRAPHY

I'D LIKE YOU TO MEET JOHN AND COURTNEY DEWIS and their two young sons – John-John (5) and Darwin (3.5) – who moved here from Southern California last summer after John accepted the position as head of the University Lake School in Hartland. I had the pleasure of meeting John last summer when I wrote an article about his arrival at the school. He liked Wisconsin then (summer), and he says after experiencing a year of Wisconsin's ever-changing seasons – the family says it's not looking back!

It all begin in grad school

Courtney and John first met in graduate school at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, about 30 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. And their first date was memorably on June 6, 2012, during the transit of Venus across the sun.

"I recognized Courtney from our seminar on the Pre-Socratics, western philosophers who pre-dated Socrates, people like Heraclitus, Thales, Democritus and Parmenides," explains John. "She was walking across a parking lot by the graduate school dormitories carrying an extra-large Ziploc bag of what appeared to be yellow range balls from the adjacent driving range."

At that moment, John believed it was poor form to pick up range balls, so he thought, "She's a thief!"

"I pulled the car up beside Courtney said 'hello,'" John says. "And Courtney explained that she periodically collects range balls from the parking lot and then hits them back over the net to the driving range. But Courtney didn't have the right club to clear the fence. I said, 'Looks to me like you need a seven iron.'"

John then parked his car and pulled a seven iron from his trunk! "We spent the afternoon watching Venus roll across the sun (through safety glasses) and hitting range balls back over the net with a seven iron – and I guess the rest is history."

Courtney and John were married in 2017 on the first fairway of the San Gabriel Golf Course near Pasadena, California – fitting as it was golf that actually brought them together.

"My mother's only request for the wedding was that John wear shoes – and he obliged although he still wore no socks!" kids Courtney.

"We have many special memories together, one is knocking avocados out of a large California tree most of which were just out of reach," laughs John. "Another is knocking cherries out of a tree. Most of my best memories appear to be about gathering fruit from trees!"

Courtney's passions for soccer, philosophy and religion

Courtney grew up in South Pasadena, California, and then attended Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where she studied archeology and modern religious movements.

She also played Division 3 soccer during her first four college years where she led her team to conference championships. "You'll find Courtney in Dickinson College's Hall of Fame for most assists as a sweeper, which is a great thing to be recognized for – since assisting goals instead of shooting them means you're always giving glory to others," shares John.

"After my undergraduate studies, I moved to California where I earned my master's degree in philosophy and theology from Claremont Graduate University outside of Los Angeles," says Courtney. "After grad school, I took a job in education teaching mathematics and history at the Gooden School, a small Episcopal School in Sierra Madre, California. There, I started an Advisory program for students, created its STEAM curriculum (STEM plus Art), taught computer coding, and always enjoyed working with students with special needs. I became the Dean of Students before leaving the school during the pandemic to help raise our boys."

John – always about education

John grew up just outside Philadelphia where he attended the Haverford School, a Quaker-founded all-boys school where the students wear a coat-and-tie and study Latin.

For his first two years of college, John attended the highly selective and even more highly unusual two-year program at Deep Springs

College located forty miles from Bishop, California, on an isolated cattle ranch in Deep Springs Valley in Southern California.

"Deep Springs College identifies three pillars of education – academics, labor and self-governance," John explains. "The college is largely run by its own students, who admit the freshman class, hire faculty and oversee a 300-head cattle operation."

After those two years of study, John headed east to study art at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he earned his bachelor's degree. "From there, I headed back to California to continue my studies and earn my master's degree in philosophy from Claremont University," says John. "Philosophy is supposed to secure unemployment, but I've found it to be great preparation for a life working with young people, who are keen to argue, and I am keen to help them sharpen the impulse. Philosophy is also good at getting you comfortable being wrong or just not knowing things, which turns out to be important in education. Most importantly, studying philosophy introduced me to my wife!"

After grad school, John helped start the Episcopal School of Los Angeles, a 6 through 12 school in East Hollywood that bridges the divide between the life of a great independent school and a failing public system, he explains.

"The process of starting a school 'from scratch' was transformative to my understanding of what a school could or should be," says



John, "and in particular as a place where students can discover their own agency and be accountable to their own intellectual and social powers."

John went on to serve on the founding faculty of the Sequoyah High School in Pasadena, before returning to Deep Springs College as its first full-time development director in 2017. John also started his own boutique college admissions consultancy when he graduated from Harvard in 2000, and has helped thousands of students get into their top-choice colleges, including all the Ivies.

John wrote a book on how to write the college essay called *Hack the College Essay*, which receives roughly 1 million views on Reddit each year. "One of the things that excites me about being Head of University Lake School is that I can help students think strategically about the colleges and life experiences that will challenge them to lead extraordinary lives of great purpose, leadership, and service to others."

Yoga, squash and adventurous family times

As an avid player and fan, Courtney has been waking up at 4am to watch and cheer for teams during the FIFA Women's World Cup Soccer competition on the other side of the world!

"I spend most of my 'free time' doing yoga at our favorite studio, Amplifi in Delafield," shares Courtney. "I also love to read science fiction, and walk our dog through Nashotah Park with a loveable crew of other dog parents. I've also recently taken to baking focaccia with the boys."

John loves to play squash, and he actually drives to Madison to play at an indoor facility called Madison Squash Workshop. "When you play squash, the squash ball travels about 176 mph," he explains. "The players are a lively bunch representing many countries who play competitively under the leadership of a great pro named Damon Bourne. It's the best squash outpost in the Midwest outside of Chicago." John is also an avid lake swimmer and stand-up paddler.

The family attends Zion Episcopal Church because John-John said he'd like to travel by water to get to church, and Zion is perched on the edge of Lake Fowler. "It's a great little church where several of the priests are affiliated with Nashotah House Seminary," says Courtney. "In their morning Bible study, they appear all to know both Greek and Hebrew and are not afraid to discuss Homer and Kierkegaard alongside the gospels."

Two inquisitive little boys – and a fun-loving pup

Of course, John-John and Darwin are curious and engaged well-educated young boys!

"John-John is the master of asymmetrical airships when it comes to designing with LEGOs," explains his father. "He's also really into sailing right now, and loves everything about the Pine Lake Yacht Club – Coach Coral and Coach Delia, who's a fellow student at University Lake School. And his little brother Darwin believes he can swim, which makes aquatic life entertaining and temporarily high-stakes. They both love learning to swim with Ruth Ann at the Wisconsin Athletic Club."

John-John and Darwin both talk a lot about China, they like to look for bats in the evening and they'll read anything by William Steig like *Dr. DeSoto*, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* and *The Amazing Bone* current favorite books, according to their parents.

Courtney and John are in the habit of indulging curiosity down whatever rabbit hole it might take them when their boys ask questions about the world.

"John-John asked us recently which is bigger, a really big giant or a really big number?" shares Courtney. "After much discussion he decided that even though both live in the imagination, that numbers are a little bit more real than giants, and probably live in a special place called the 'mathination.' We can't argue with it!"

The family also enjoys their lives with an Australian labradoodle named Guinan who's named after Whoopi Goldberg's character from *Star Trek*, the 600-year-old El Aurian bartender in the 10-Forward Lounge aboard the *USS Enterprise*," explains Courtney. "Our Guinan is 8 months old and has been a great addition to the family. John-John calls her Chi-Chi so that name appears to be sticking, which is easier to say than Guinan! She's an easy-going dog but also very excitable. So, we work with both states."

Lake Country life

The Dewis family lives in Stone Bank on a lovely plot of land that's mostly maples, oaks, hickory, cherry, walnut – and unfortunately plenty of toppling box elder and buckthorn to battle.

"We love having deer and turkeys in the yard and have lost count of all the different birds we've seen this summer like catbirds, thrashers, blue birds, warblers, nuthatch, cardinals, chickadees, blue jays, cedar waxwings – and even a kestrel," says Courtney.

The family didn't realize it had any neighbors until the leaves dropped as winter approached and they could suddenly see their neighbors' houses through the trees!

"We love our neighborhood and especially our two nearest neighbors, Terry and Patricia across the street and Richard (a Laker alum!) on the 80 acres just behind us," says John. "Richard is a great cribbage player and fixed Darwin's scooter. The boys like helping him put away his chickens at dark. And in May, Darwin enjoyed carrying his scissors over to Richard's place to cut asparagus."

John says his first purchase in Wisconsin was, naturally, a Stihl chainsaw. "Richard has helped me drop a bunch of hazardous trees, none of them on the house yet. Terry served in Vietnam and is a great reader, loves Cormac McCarthy, and he and I usually talk in our pajamas when we get the mail. You really couldn't ask for better neighbors!"

Wisconsin – the right move for this family

John and Courtney shared that they made the move to Lake Country for the incredible education that their boys would get at University Lake School – and so John could take the job as its new head of the school.

"People look at us funny in the winter when we say that we happily left California to become Wisconsinites, but there has never been any doubt in our minds about the move," states John. "We love it here. And, our school gets kids off their iPhones and into trees and good books. This is the life we wanted for our boys – and Lake Country is the community where we want them to grow up."

In addition to exploring their new state, they also love to visit their cousins in the Finger Lake region of Upstate New York. "Spending time between the lakes here in Lake Country and Owasco and Skanateles on the other side of the Great Lakes watershed will be an annual pilgrimage," says Courtney. "I have a dream of catching an Arctic char fish, so a trip up north is in the works!" Far north!

John says that getting to work as the head of the school that their boys attend is a great part of life for their family.

"We get to drive together down the slow and winding Highway C through the lakes every morning and then up through the magical forested drive of the University Lake School set on 180 acres," John reflects. "This year, Darwin will be in our first fully outdoor all-season 'forest classroom' on campus, which is tucked back in the woods next to the owls and among the oaks. And this fall, Courtney is helping to coach the middle school boys and girls soccer teams."

John and Courtney find that many of their family's activities happily involve the vast extended family of ULS graduates in Lake Country. "Lakers are the most dedicated, interesting, funny, passionate and successful people we've ever known," says John, "and we're now proud to call ourselves Lakers! 'Sanctuary,' they call it. And we agree!"



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