

Stories of Knox County: Final Paper

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April 30, 2017

Stories of Knox County Final Paper

Stories of Knox County offers a collection of stories and viewpoints on what it means to be a part of Knox County, and how that has changed over time. Through this collection, we aim to contribute to Kenyon's growing efforts toward community involvement and Community Engaged Learning (CEL). Kenyon's location in Knox County offers a unique and exciting opportunity for people with vastly different backgrounds and perspectives to hear each other's stories. We hope that Kenyon will continue to view community as an invaluable resource, and that both the college as an institution and its students as individuals can become more of a resource to the community as well. The project provided interviewees with an opportunity to reflect on what constitutes life in Knox County, and a platform to preserve and share their history and stories. For the interviewers, this project offers an opportunity to tap into and learn from the knowledge that community members have, especially concerning this place, in order to give Kenyon students a stronger understanding of the community they live in.

This project found much of its inspiration in Howard Sacks's sociology class "Life Along the Kokosing," and to good timing. Sarah Aguilar and Maria Brescia-Weiler took Professor Sacks's class in the fall of 2016 (after Gabe Jimenez-Ekman took it in the Spring of 2016), and began to develop a greater interest and understanding of life in Knox County, and in rural Ohio more generally, just as the presidential election was coming to a close. In light of Trump's victory, analyses of why "rural America" was so overwhelmingly in support of a candidate that terrified and repulsed much of "urban America" were everywhere. We got the impression that everyone got to weigh in on the state of life in rural America except for rural Americans themselves. At times of extreme political polarization, it is more important than ever for everyone to be given a platform to speak their mind and engage with others. With the knowledge that most of us don't know many with very different backgrounds and opinions than their own, and that even if we do know such people, most of us won't or don't know how to seek out people for constructive and comfortable conversations, we realized the potential of oral history to facilitate a similar kind of dialogue. Therefore, early in the spring semester, we proposed *Stories of Knox County* to Clara Román-Odio, Professor of Spanish and Associate Director of Community Engaged Learning at Kenyon College. The first phase of this project was an independent study, SPAN 493, which consisted of weekly meetings with Professor Román-Odio in which we trained for, planned, discussed, and analyzed interviews with Knox Countians. The CEL project aimed to interview a cross section of residents that are both diverse and representative of the community. Hence, it strove to

include, among its interviewees, variety in age, belief systems, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, level of activity in the community, and geographic localization within the county (i.e., urban/rural). The stories we gathered, we planned to share with the community in at least two ways, as a public performance and as a public humanities exhibit.

While the inspiration for this project was partly political, our conversations with people for *Stories of Knox County* were not, for the most part. We believe that it is both more valuable and more interesting to try to understand what people care about, how they feel about their communities and how they think they could be improved rather than why people voted for a certain political candidate. In both Sacks's class and throughout interviews conducted in Román-Odio's independent study, it is apparent that while people do care about national politics, they seem to be far more invested in local issues and the development of their community. We hope that the themes and narratives that emerge from these interviews (which of course provide a very limited but diverse understanding of life in Knox County) will serve as a more nuanced counterpoint to the narrative of rural decay that we are inundated with.

When creating *Stories of Knox County*, we had to be diligent in choosing who to interview, and what we wanted to ask them. Professor Román-Odio connected us to Jen Odenweller, Director of the Office of Community Partnerships at Kenyon College, and Tamara Anderson, head of the Diversity Coalition of Knox County, to help us find contact information for a diverse group of interviewees. Odenweller and Anderson offered us not only contact information for people in certain demographics but also background information on these individuals that was crucial for the development of interview questions. From there, with the help of our professor and project director, Román-Odio, we began to arrange meetings, create consent and assent forms, and draft questions for each interviewee. We met weekly with Prof. Román-Odio to track our progress, adjust our calendar and goals, and to discuss key principles of oral history. During this time, we also examined several sources on both the history of Knox County, the nature of rural life, and oral history best practices (see Works Cited). We were also trained on interview etiquette and practiced transcriptions with the help of Jenna Nolt, archivist specialist for Kenyon Digital.¹ We used equipment provided to us by Sociology Professor Ric Sheffield and a camera provided by Studio Art Professor Greg Spaid. There are countless individuals who made this project possible, and we are grateful for their support and assistance. After conducting interviews, we transcribed and coded for themes. The following is an analysis of major themes that emerged.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is often misconstrued as a one sided relationship, benefiting only the vitality of the community. Obviously, individual benefits from living in a community that is flourishing are key, but community engagement also has an impact on the individual's sense of worth. As we talked to people it became clear how their lives

¹Nolt, Jenna. "Archiving Oral Histories from Start to Finish." *The Oral History in the Liberal Arts Toolkit*. N.p.:n.p., 2017. N. pag. Print.

have been enriched because of their close relationship to the community, whether it be from volunteering, activism, philanthropy, or simply day-to-day life. Their interactions with the community have contributed to their placed mindset. The stories they shared prove community engagement is a symbiotic relationship.

Family Ties

The family is the smallest unit of community and therefore is an optimal model for describing the positive effects community involvement has on the individual. Selflessness and altruism are key factors in a functioning family dynamic. While an individual must sacrifice for their family in some ways, the benefits of a built-in support system allow for a richer, more secure, and advantageous lifestyle. To many of the interviewees, family was a significant part of their lives, and the value of being placed was passed down to them. Many believe that seeking careers close to home may limit professional opportunities, but it allowed several interviewees to pursue professional advancements, while maintaining a family life. For Denise Conway, owner of Foster's Pharmacy, the proximity to her and her husband's parents have allowed the two of them to balance work and family.

Yeah, my parents are still in the area, my husband's parents are still in the area. They're all retired, and so, quite honestly my husband and I would not be able to do what we do at a full time schedule as what we do if we did not have four grandparents who were completely retired and willing to literally raise our children from infancy to now. Because they did. It was amazing, we had, our children were both really very unexpected, not planned, so that kind of threw a hitch into things...They all four put themselves out there to take our young children in infancy so we could work full time jobs...So our parents have been blessings, huge blessings to us.

While Denise received support from family in the form of childcare, transforming her career and life, Courtney DeCosky's family was an essential part of her overcoming her addiction and regaining control on her life. While telling us about how she called her mom when she felt trapped by her alcoholism she said: *"I got off the phone with her, I don't really remember, but she was on the plane the next morning. And she saved my life."* Afterwards, family continued to assist Courtney on her path to recovery. She stayed in Richmond with her aunt while doing an outpatient program. The love, devotion, and support from family enabled her to become again a productive and active member of her community. In Courtney and Denise's cases, the support from their families substantially improved their lives and alleviated their life challenges.

Members of the Dudgeon family sacrificed a great deal for the functionality of their farm because their livelihood depended on it. The Dudgeon children worked hard year round. They learned to set aside their own agendas for the greater good of their family's farm. In making that sacrifice, they were instilled discipline, a sense of accomplishment, maturity, and work ethic. Rita Dudgeon said,

Retired Judge Ronk, in our court systems, made a statement the other day, that I was just going, "Wow, I'd never thought about it." He was juvenile judge. He said, "I have never

had a young individual in my courtroom that exhibited livestock at the County Fair.” He said, “Those kids have a purpose, they know what responsibility is, they know what consequences is.” And I find that amazing that I had never put that together. But he said, “The young people today need to have responsibilities, they need to know what the consequences are if they don’t.”

The Dudgeon children’s lives consisted of the farm, school, 4-H, and church with very little room for hanging out with friends or pursuing activities they were interested in individually. But, with that selflessness they were instilled with values many people today lack. Considering many of their children grew up to work with agriculture, it is obvious they value this childhood experience.

Changing Roles of Institutions

The symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community, and the social safety net it creates is formalized and strengthened by local institutions. Changes in the needs of the community have changed the ways and amounts that these institutions are used. Former executive director of the YMCA Robert Denzer said:

There was a time [the YMCA] was the place for youth when I came to Mount Vernon. It was the entertainment center, you might say, the place for all activities for youth. That has changed considerably, because change is inevitable, and a lot of other things have come into the community and filled voids that the Y was trying to fill.

He described how the Y used to provide meeting spaces, opportunities for exercise and organized sports, youth dances and a food service-- all things which people now seem to be able to find elsewhere in the community. Some of the burden taken off of the YMCA has been transferred to other institutions. Denzer describes people now going to gyms, or participating in school sports teams, which didn’t exist when he first moved to the area in 1954. Former teacher Paula Barone outlined other ways schools may be taking on some of the former responsibilities of the Y, such as providing students with meals.

Similarly, libraries seem to be pushed more and more to take on new roles in the community. “*We worry that the world changed, and libraries don’t get the same kind of use,*” said librarian Mary McGavick, in reference to the ways formatting and access to information have changed. But this certainly doesn’t mean that libraries are less important to the community than they once were. “*We have regulars who, I don’t know what they would do without us,*” said fellow librarian Cassandra Peters. This includes young people who spend time in the library using its new Teen MakerSpace to experiment with robotics or play on an iPad, as well as adults looking for legal counsel they don’t know how to get elsewhere and, perhaps most notably, the area’s homeless community, many of whom spend their days in the library when they can’t stay in shelters.

There was also an emphasis among interviewees on the importance of education and the ways that educational institutions can help to make up for economic inequality and drug use. In discussing ways to combat substance abuse, Denzer said:

It starts with education, with the young people. Of course, parents have to be educated too, since the fact that there's a change maybe in the person's personality, or whatever it is, some clues. Cause there's a lot of, you know, a child changes when they get involved. And parents need to be aware of that. They can't put their head in the sand and think, "Oh, it's not me," or, "It's not us."

Several interviewees also referenced poverty as a potential cause of drug use, and the way that institutions can combat it. McGavick discussed the importance of technology libraries and other institutions can provide in a community where many people don't have access to such resources elsewhere. In this way, institutions attempt to account for the ways that less formal support systems, such as families, may fall short. Peters added:

We have a large number of computer illiterate people in our county. That's not anything new to us, it's constantly people who don't have email addresses, people who don't know how to turn a computer on, people who don't know how to get on the internet. Libraries exist to help raise people to a common level...It's to help close that gap, you know, so the information isn't kept for the rich people."

Similar to Barone's comments about schools, there is a sense that libraries are being stretched too thin as they struggle to keep up with changing community needs. In addition to technology, McGavick and Peters often find themselves having to provide legal services and advice for which they have limited training and time. From schools to government committees to the YMCA, these institutions have an implied responsibility in keeping the community healthy. They are sometimes unable to meet these expectations because of lack of funding, the limits of small town institutions, and problems beyond their control, such as job loss and the fact that this area is sometimes described as a "boring" place to be a young person.

Philanthropy and Generosity

An indicator for the community's level of participation and engagement is the amount of resources community members devote to what they care about. Multiple participants dedicate time, money, energy, and talents to serving the community in many forms, whether it is participation in community projects, philanthropy, or volunteerism. In return, interviewees have shown a heightened sense of pride, appreciation, and fulfillment because they are a part of something greater than themselves.

Paula Barone, a retired school teacher and Kenyon College alum is a telling example of someone who has been enriched by community volunteerism. Her work with *Learning Trails*, an oral history project about the Pittsburgh Plate Glass factory workers to be available at Ariel Foundation Park, enlightened her about the roots of the community. She said:

You know I think that it's important to our community's history, it sort of says where we've been and, you know, this is where we're going. It's to honor the work and the workers who have gone before us.... It's an added dimension to our community. If we only think about what we are right now, then, you know, I think we're just not very rich

and there's a richness there that we just need to avail ourselves of and find out about. And it makes things make more sense too.

The *Learning Trails* project is a good example of how Paula's contributions to the community are providing access for people to learn about the community's foundation, but also has benefitted Paula by giving her an outlet to talk to members of the community, learn new aspects of the community, and contribute to something she cares about. The oral history project facilitated enriching experiences for Paula, benefitted the community by archiving parts of its history, and honoring those who deserve it.

Denzer revealed how interacting with the community made him proud to live here. Throughout his life, he has been a part of Kiwanis and the Mount Vernon Historical Society, and is a Red Cross blood donor. With his job at the Y, where he constantly worked with volunteer groups, he was witness to all of the generosity in Mount Vernon both through volunteerism and philanthropy. He said,

I say I'm proud of the community, but there's a reason I'm so proud of it is because of the people who are here and the benefactors in this community, unbelievable. Of course Karen Wright has done such great things, and there were people before Karen that were philanthropists. I mean to raise 960,000 dollars for a YMCA in a top population of 15,000, unbelievable. Unbelievable.

Activism

Several interviewees expressed how the size of the community allowed them to feel a stronger sense of responsibility for problems and a clearer understanding of how an individual could make an impact in ways that they couldn't in a larger city. Denise Conway spoke about using social media and personal connections to garner support for a school levy.

I don't know whether I would have had those opportunities to do that if I lived somewhere big. I don't think I'd be able to find my way into volunteerism, I feel like I might get lost because I'm really not that type.

Benji Ballmer, who runs Yellowbird Foodshed, serves as a middleman between farmers and community members as a way to save small farmers time and energy, and expose people to fresh produce and locally grown food. Benji initially planned to own his own farm, but his life course changed when he recognized problems with the current food system. He said:

I saw a bigger need that needed met.... My uncle once said to me when I was young, and I've always thought of it ever since, the phrase is, "Let him who sees the need consider himself the one called to meet the need."

Benji and Denise are very good examples of everyday people who were inspired to make a difference in their community when they saw it was necessary. Their activism was made possible by their empowered attitude and devotion to the community. Activism is a method for individuals to respond to changing landscapes, and it illustrates how they

civically engage with their community.

Availability to Impact

Given the size of the community, and the close, personal connections of those within it, many interviewees had professional opportunities they may have not had access to elsewhere. Because of their professional advancements, they have taken on leadership roles in the community. The reasoning for taking on leadership roles may be due to the confidence their jobs give them, the heightened community interactions from their positions, or perhaps a sense of motivation to reinvest their talents back into the community that provided the opportunity in the first place. The symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community is exemplified in these scenarios. By opening professional opportunities to community members, these participants have had the ability to become closer to the community themselves, and, in turn, develop into prominent community members.

Former police chief and current mayor of Fredericktown Jerry Day, who assumed he would work in factories his whole life, was offered an entry position at the police station that did not require a college degree. Day began training and eventually became an officer, and finally the head police chief in Fredericktown, where he served for 35 years. His hard work and ability to interact with the community inspired him to run for mayor. The town of Fredericktown offered Day opportunities that he otherwise never would have received. One small job changed the course of Day's life and work forever, allowing him to explore a field he knew little to nothing about, and gain influence he never would have otherwise received.

Similarly Denise Conway's career was fast tracked because she was able to develop close personal ties to the former owners of Foster's Pharmacy by working there through high school and college. Because of this, Denise was given the opportunity to own her own business only a few years after graduating from college. When she learned about possible cuts for school funding she thought to herself, "*As a business owner I'm like, 'What can I do?'*" Seeing herself as a valuable force in the community shows how her status as a business owner influenced how she viewed her role as a community leader.

Suffocation vs. Comfort

While some interviewees felt that the smallness of the community provided a sense of safety and comfort, others found it to be suffocating in some ways. Karen Bush's *Escape Zone* provided an example of the ways that a close-knit community can provide the support needed to make a project successful, and the role of religion in such an endeavor. The *Escape Zone* is a place in Mount Vernon where children and teenagers can go to if they need a safe place. She outlined how many members of the community donated generously to allow *Escape Zone* to move into its current building, the old Armory Building on 1 Mansfield Avenue. Bush praised the role of religion in this project and the broader community, but was careful to mention that it is not forced upon anyone who attends. She said, "*We don't have a sit down everybody's gonna listen to the message kinda thing. God brings us kids at the right time.*" Nonetheless, this focalization of faith

is potentially alienating to those who do not share its value. In contrast to Bush, we got a glimpse of what life was like as an outsider, someone who did not practice religion in Knox County from Cassandra Peters. Peters has memories from her young years of being ostracized because her family was not religious. Peters explains,

The problem is the people all know who you are and they all know who your parents are...it was generally thought by most of the people that I went to highschool with--not the people I went to highschool with, their parents--that we worshipped Satan. I was not allowed to hang out with a lot of people in my highschool because we worshipped Satan. It was basically because we didn't attend a church.

Beyond religion, several interviewees discussed how nice it is to live in a community where everyone knows everyone, where people say hi to each other on the street. Rita Dudgeon, Denise Conway, and Courtney DeCosky all expressed fond memories of playing in the street growing up, with the knowledge that many adults in the community knew them and knew who to talk to if they were acting up. But this love for the small town environment was not universal among interviewees. Mary McGavick, who has worked in the community for decades but only lived here for a few years before moving away again, told the following story about why she no longer lives in Knox County:

I have a story about going to the store in the middle of the night, and for whatever reason was buying the biggest bottle of wine and condoms, and one of our patrons of course, now deceased, of course was like, "Whatcha got in the bag?" I moved within like a month. (Laughter) 'Cause that's a perfectly normal small town question, I was like nope, nope. It was real.

Relationship between Local and Global

Due in part to the rapid development of technology in the past 20 years, global forces have become increasingly present in seemingly insular communities. Interviewees frequently discussed their experiences with tensions between the local and the global. Although global influences encourage diversity, we found that they can pose threats to the rural way of life. Some younger community members, however, have reconciled the two and use technology and international influences to strengthen their sense of community and improve communication. Many interviewees also discussed the effects of integration that comes along with global forces; by creating dependencies on external factors such as the global economy, and federal regulations, global forces make Knox County more vulnerable to forces beyond its control.

Diversity

Knox County is relatively racially homogenous; the 2015 Census reported that 96.7% of its residents are white.² For community members who do not share characteristics with the rest of the community, be it race, sexual preference, or religion, this homogeneity can

²United States Census Bureau. "Knox County, Ohio." census.gov. 1 Jul. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2017

make it difficult to find a sense of community. Tyra Brown, who is a member of Black and LGBTQ communities, spoke about her experiences with technology as a means to find community in rural Knox County.

“Facebook’s a big part of my life... there’s a lot of groups, that’s kind of where the LGBTQ community comes in and black people. I don’t know black people around here, I am my own black friends. That was my way to connect... Mental health groups, there’s a group for everything and I’m in all of them.”

Increasing global influence and the development of technology and online communities have allowed people who would normally feel like outsiders in Knox County to develop their own groups and feel a sense of solidarity. Although it does not fully mitigate her differences from the vast majority of Knox County, the ability to connect with people who live further away and learn about what they have in common has allowed people like Tyra to find social groups and build a sense community. Odalys Fajardo, a Hispanic high school senior, discussed intersections of local and global when she mentioned her *quinceañera*. Unlike Tyra, who found solidarity in communities of people she had more in common with, Odalys brought her own culture to Knox County and exposed people to global traditions. Odalys also discussed how she finds “*community and camaraderie*” at Fiesta Mexicana, a local Mexican restaurant that serves a similar function to Tyra’s Facebook groups.

Jeremiah Cline, general manager of Athens Greek Restaurant, has taken advantage of global connections in order to supply his store with the proper ingredients and gain customers. Jeremiah’s business exemplifies the possibilities that global forces can bring to Knox County, both in terms of providing the resources for it to exist and the demand for goods that are less traditional. Global forces have reshaped the local to be more inclusive and diverse. Furthermore, they have given people like Odalys and Tyra methods of embracing their differences from the general population of Knox County, and surrounding themselves with like-minded people, whether they do so virtually or physically.

Stifling Local Dialogues

Although global forces have provided some citizens with more options, they have also restricted the options of residents who are used to a more traditional rural way of life. Global influences have encouraged dialogue between the local and the global, which promotes diversity, but can stifle local dialogue, remove unifying factors among citizens, and pose a threat to sense of place. The internet has allowed people to find new social groups if they don’t particularly like their local community. The replacement of community hubs like downtown family-owned shops with chain stores on Coshocton Avenue has caused public spaces to become less common, and have further limited the opportunities for people to bond and communicate with their community.

Family farmer Chuck Dudgeon was particularly concerned with technology’s effects on communication and its tendency to curb local dialogue. Chuck viewed the biggest problem facing Knox County to be a lack of communication and an emphasis on

individualism.

Chuck Dudgeon: We really don't want to hear someone else's point of view. We have preconceived notions about everything. And our opinion is the only one that matters. Well, guess what, that's not really true...

Clara Román-Odio: Where is this coming from, this perspective of not listening, of not caring?

Chuck Dudgeon: Technology. We are the most intelligent bunch of idiots of people on Earth that's ever been here but yet we're the dumbest, because everything you want is there (Points to Clara's iPhone). You can get every answer you want right there.

Chuck emphasized the importance of maintaining community traditions, values, institutions, and activities rather than an individualistic approach to life. Denise Conway discussed how the process by which values are instilled in children has changed as a result of technology: “*Now parenting is completely different because now we have this third element of this social media molding her and controlling her and kind of combatting against our parenting style.*” Many older Knox Countians seemed to have been highly influenced by their parents in terms of their ideals, life goals, and principles. However, Denise suggests that the influence of technology adds a new guiding force for the development of children, and by having exposure to the rest of the world at an arm's length away, kids are able to gain influences from many sources rather than just their parents.

Urban Sprawl and Economics of Global Forces

As global forces have provided locals with opportunities to earn money and capitalize on needs and wants of people further away, they have caused considerable change in Knox County. People moving out of Columbus to get away from the city have influenced the audience Knox County caters to, and big businesses have moved in and started competing with smaller family-owned stores. Some interviewees expressed frustration with a weakening sense of community as a result of the growth of Coshocton Avenue. The urban sprawl from Columbus has introduced community members who are used to an urban way of life and do not conform to rural values. These changes are all made to create new markets for Knox Countians, but the restructuring, which takes place to allow for them, makes Knox County vulnerable to the fluctuating demands of other regions. Chuck Dudgeon expressed frustration with the fact that urban sprawl has started to leak into Knox County, and seemed worried about the long-term effects of adjusting to accommodate urban people.

So now [people from Columbus are] migrating into Knox County more and more [to get away from the helter-skelter of city life], and progress will follow them.... That is my biggest fear, that these people's gonna come to Knox County, we're going to build more roads, we're gonna build a bypass, whatever you wanna call it, we're gonna build more stores, more shopping malls, and then the people's gonna say, "It's too busy for me, we're gonna move a little farther away." Then these businesses will fail, and then we're

gonna be an armpit (laughter). That's my fear.

Mark Sheasby, who has worked in factories in Knox County for almost his entire life, had similar concerns.

I think [Knox County's] turning into a retirement community more than it has anything. There's still some industry in Mount Vernon, but the high-paying jobs are about gone. The really good paying jobs are about gone. There's lots of jobs for ten dollars an hour, twelve dollars an hour, but it's hard to raise a family in Mount Vernon on ten or twelve dollars an hour.

This phenomenon goes hand-in-hand with Chuck's observation; as jobs are leaving Knox County, most people who live here are either not financially responsible for children, or they are commuting to Columbus or other cities. Chuck and Mark both observe a change in the level of industry in Knox County, and steady decline in the number of people who both live and work in the community. This indicates a shift towards a bedroom community, which would be extremely detrimental to the long-running sense of community and rural values in Knox County. Furthermore, it creates vulnerability for the Knox County area. This vulnerability is partially due to the fact that most businesses are no longer locally owned. Robert Denzer reminisced that early Mount Vernon was industry-heavy, and most business was locally owned and operated rather than part of a large corporation. Because its residents now depend on the global economy, the economy in Columbus, or other external factors which are not under their control, Knox County's economy has become more fragile. Coshocton Avenue has become a major place of retail in Mount Vernon, and led to the closing of several "mom and pop" businesses, further increasing Knox County's link to national and international economies.

Jeremiah Cline discussed how his experience on Coshocton differs from that of downtown Mount Vernon, claiming that there are "*no faces on Coshocton Avenue to talk to.*" He saw a disconnect between workers on Coshocton and those in the town square, which implies a divided community. The contrast between the sense of community downtown and the isolation on Coshocton is clear and powerful. As global retail impedes on the territory of the local, effects are felt on an economic level, but also a personal one in terms of how business transactions are made.

The Local Fights Back

Despite the growing presence of Coshocton Avenue and increasing difficulties to stay afloat as a small retailer, interviewees seemed optimistic about the future of downtown Mount Vernon. Through conscious efforts by community members, including philanthropic wealthy Mount Vernon natives, downtown Mount Vernon has experienced a revitalization. Librarian Mary McGavick discussed her experiences with downtown Mount Vernon with a very optimistic attitude, as did Denise Conway:

I'm so excited with what's happening in downtown Mount Vernon. To see what it was like when I was a little girl, we had, I would go shop in downtown Mount Vernon, that's where I bought my clothes, that's where we bought jewelry, and then those things faded

away. And now those things are coming back and that is what's so cool.

In the instance of downtown Mount Vernon, the global has impeded on the local, but the local has banded together to maintain its most important characteristics. After global forces slowly chipped away at local shops, people realized that they missed having a more personable downtown, and efforts like First Friday began and have made an impact, as community members have regained a more positive outlook on downtown. The local has continued to push back against the global as exemplified by Benji Ballmer's Yellowbird Foodshed, which provides a way to keep locally grown food in the community, and provide farmers with more time to work on their own farms.

Several interviewees saw global forces, like technology, as potential tools for unification, activism, community engagement, and education to strengthen the community. Robert Denzer was especially optimistic about how global forces like technology will be harnessed by locals to improve the future of Knox County. His hopes were validated by Denise Conway, who discussed how technology helped her make her voice heard and improve the community. She has managed to use technology to organize Knox Countians and preserve a sense of community and civic duty. Her Facebook campaign for a school levy, she believes, was successful largely due to the role of the internet. She further discussed the potential for using social media to build community:

[I use Facebook to] let people to know there are success stories and there are people that wanna come back to Mount Vernon to keep making it great, or Fredericktown, or Danville, or Gambier, to keep making it great, because it allowed us to grow, experience and come back and bring our experiences there.

Many of the unique elements of Knox County are due to people's interest in the well-being of the community, and by using social media as a tool to strengthen that interest, Denise manages to use global forces to help reinforce local values.

Effects of Increased Regulation

Sweeping regulation on federal and statewide levels has had significant, and mostly negative impacts on rural areas like Knox County. Lawmakers are often accused of passing regulation with urban areas in mind, and our interviews indicated that rural locations are often cast by the wayside when regulation is considered. At a time where global forces have made it increasingly difficult to run a small business in the first place, these regulations are another significant burden for small businesses to bear. They encourage businesses to become part of a larger grid that conforms more uniformly, but this solution contradicts a cornerstone of rural living. Agricultural regulations, as well as technicalities of healthcare systems and other industries, have created difficulties for the ways in which some Knox Countians make a living. Denise Conway has experienced problems operating a small business under larger, increasingly complicated power structures. She brought up that she has lost a significant number of customers due to health insurance policies, claiming that insurance companies “*run the show.*” In addition, Chuck Dudgeon discussed the myriad problems he has encountered as a result of regulation:

I mean, we need checks and balances all through, but they're making it so that the small guy is...it's almost impossible to get in the business...Every time you add another fee, license, whatever, pretty soon guys are just gonna give up and say, 'I can't do it.'

Although global regulations are necessary for public health, Chuck argues that they are made to accommodate big business and heavily inconvenience smaller businesses. For instance, differing slaughterhouse regulations between states have caused an extremely centralized slaughterhouse system that makes small slaughterhouses impractical and rare. This lack of infrastructure, in turn, makes it harder for small-scale farmers who slaughter and distribute meat locally. Despite a wide array of urban-centric regulation, Chuck noted that some regulations can benefit the preservation of rural life. He has sold the rights to his land to the Ag Easement Program, which guarantees that it will never be developed and always remain as farmland. Although initiatives like these are less common, they are designed with rural people in mind.

Conclusions

Throughout our interviews and analysis, we came to better understand that while Knox County is certainly an example of a rural community, it is not necessarily representative of rural life in the Midwest. There are a lot of things that make Knox County fairly unique. Several interviewees stressed the importance of its location, especially proximity to a fairly large city, Columbus, as a source of opportunity and potential threat. Proximity to Columbus not only puts the area on the radar of travellers and tourists, but also makes it susceptible to ex-urban sprawl. This growth has the potential to threaten traditional rural values, but it is also part of what allows Courtney DeCosky to continue to pursue the arts in Mount Vernon, and what makes Benji Ballmer's Yellowbird Foodshed a functioning business.

This area is also unique in the amount of wealth that exists here. As Denzer told us in his account of raising the money to build a new YMCA building, "You can't believe how many millionaires there are [in this area]," due to the history of local industry. While much of the industry is gone, some of the wealth remains. Many interviewees referred to the generosity of philanthropists, especially Karen Wright, who have given back to the community in the form of substantial donations that have formed the foundation of much of the downtown's survival and revitalization.

Finally, simply the fact that we, as college students, are here makes this area different than other rural counties. The three colleges in the area (Kenyon, Mount Vernon Nazarene University and the Central Ohio Technical College) contribute to its social fabric. For example, these institutions play large roles in downtown revitalization. Jeremiah Cline expressed the economic importance of the visitors brought to the area by the colleges. Benji Ballmer expressed Kenyon's importance for Yellowbird Foodshed and the local farmers it supports; having Kenyon as a reliable customer allows Yellowbird to exist. Cassandra Peters and Mary McGavick mentioned using both Kenyon and the Naz as academic resources for individuals and collaborators for the library as a whole. Karen Bush described how volunteers from the Naz have made it possible for The Escape Zone to host over a hundred kids and teenagers for Friday night basketball and

other activities. Denise Conway expressed appreciation for Kenyon volunteers at Wiggin Street Elementary, where her children go to school. Courtney DeCosky is employed by Kenyon, as well as Mark Sheasby's wife, Mrs. Pam Sheasby, and neither Paula Barone nor Karen Bush would be here if they hadn't first come for college. While the relationship between the colleges and the community is certainly not a perfect one, it has also been proven essential to much of the growth of this community and there seems to be hope that this relationship will only evolve to be more productive and collaborative. Knox County's three colleges, its proximity to Columbus, and the presence of wealth, differentiate it from other similarly sized rural communities. As we make claims about rural life, it is with the full understanding they may not be universal, due to our small sample size and the unique nature of Knox County.

We intend to present the materials we have collected through both a performance and a public exhibit. Maria Brescia-Weiler will create the script using interview transcripts over the summer, with the intent of opening the performance by the end of the fall semester. To this end, we established a partnership with MTVArts in Mount Vernon with the help of Courtney DeCosky. We will host auditions for MTVArts members and Kenyon students so that the cast and crew will be a mix of people from both communities. Maria has experience in directing a play of a similar format (*The Laramie Project*) and will take on a leadership role in this part of the project. In reading these interviews, we recognized how much more powerful they are when you hear them. A performance will provide the opportunity for viewers to not only hear them, but to hear them in a shared space where they can react and discuss together in a more immersive environment.

In the fall and spring semesters, we plan to create and display the *Stories of Knox County* exhibit at the Wright Center, featuring photos of interviewees from studio art major Alex Comerci as well as excerpts and analyses of the interviews themselves. This exhibit will be temporary, but we are hopeful that it will be displayed more than once. Ultimately, our goal is to amplify these voices and get members of the Knox County community and the Kenyon community in the same space (physically and mentally) to talk about values, concerns and how we can all invest in and improve the place we share.

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