

Note: Our Vital Connections On Air episodes are audio-based interviews. Written transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before referencing content in print.

**Christy Kallevig:** Welcome to Vital Connections on Air, a podcast brought to you by University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality that explores the trends and topics important to communities and leaders throughout Minnesota. My name is Christy Kallevig, and I'm excited to be joined today by Ben Winchester, who is the senior research fellow with the Center for Community Vitality, as we discuss rewriting the rural narrative.

**Christy Kallevig:** Hello Ben.

**Ben Winchester:** Good morning.

**Christy Kallevig:** Today we're going to be talking about the rural narrative. When I approached you about joining us on this podcast, you mentioned the idea that really, it's not our grandpa's rural anymore. What are you what are you seeing when you take a look at the changes within rural Minnesota, and really, rural America.

**Ben Winchester:** Sure. I think it's important to kind of identify what we mean when we say the rural narrative. Part of the premise I've got in the research I do, is that the narrative we're using to describe our rural communities is straight out of 1950, but quite honestly like we're not all farmers out here in the country, right? We've got very diverse jobs, you can look at our economic composition reports that we've done in Extension that show that we have a much more diverse economy, and I would say, thankfully, so than ever before. You know there have been I would say dramatic changes that have occurred in our small towns in the nineteen hundreds. From the mechanization of agriculture, to the introductions of roads and interstate highways systems, to the rise of regional centers, to the restructuring of our main streets, for example, where we lost our hardware stores, grocery stores. But you know almost all of those trends are the result of globalization. It's not the result of our small towns shooting themselves in the foot because nobody wants to shop locally. It's a fact that when you're in a small town you can't necessarily afford the economies of scale that provide products and services in ways that are competitive with regional centers. So, I just like to remind folks every time you hear about a hardware store that closed in small towns there is one that closed in the metropolitan area, too. But in the metro you don't tend to hear about it, because you know there's three or four other options within two miles. When you close your only hardware store, you lose your only grocery store in a small town, that has a fairly significant impact on the psyche, the identity, it's what you drive by every day, and it's closed.

We also witnessed things like school consolidations. And all of these events our towns struggle with. It almost seemed like one more nail in the coffin of our small town, like when we lose our hardware store, there is one more nail. We lose our grocery store, there's one more nail. When in fact we haven't seen really the death of our small town or small towns across the state. In fact, in the past 50 years, just three towns have dissolved. The latest one is Tenney, and that's in western

Minnesota and their population is six. So I think you know a town of six people might be a risk for closing, but certainly not Mylan, with over 200 people, or Clarkfield or Ely or any of these other towns that people tend to think about, who by the way, have went through these dramatic changes.

So on one side we've got a narrative that built upon the past, that these changes that we went through there. We still have people living in our communities [wh0] remember this change. They remember the struggles when they lost the ability to have an elementary school. Now they only get the high school, or in some places they don't have any school, right? It was all taken from them, and the school was put in between all of the towns out in the open country. So this is what you run into and this is honestly the narrative I ran into quite a bit when I first started doing my work in rural studies. At the same time, the data doesn't show a story of just death and doom and gloom and decline.

In fact, since 1970's, the rural population has gone up by 11 percent. So on one hand, we do have this historical narrative that impacts [people] everywhere and we still see people drawing upon that narrative to describe where our small towns are going to go. I would argue that we need to be careful about the language we use.

**Christy Kallevig:** So if you have a community that is coming to you and wants to look at the narrative, what are some things that you encourage them to look at?

**Ben Winchester:** Sure. So one of the things I look at, is when the first data points I ran across when I started doing serious studies was the fact that in any five-year period, about 46 percent of Minnesota households move. This kind of blew me away, like boy we actually made a pretty big turnover of people, right? So you could do a very simple thing, which is to ask your city clerk to keep a little tick sheet on the number of water disconnects they do, how many people were in that household, how many people move out. Then do another tick sheet on how many people are moving in and you'll find there's a consistent turnover every year in every town. So this started to play that you know what small towns are not just losing everyone. We need to better understand who we're losing and who we're gaining, and this led to my research on migration. So the migration studies tend to be dominated with a narrative about losing our high school kids, which is called the brain drain. So, on one hand you do lose your high school graduates anywhere between 30 to 70 percent of your high school graduates are going to leave after high school. I guess I don't view this as a major problem. It is been happening forever. You want people actually to turn over from a social capital perspective, because that way you are introducing new ideas into your community. At the same time, when I started doing research on who's moving in and who's moving out, I noticed there was a steady consistent migration of people in their 30s and 40s and 50s moving into our rural communities.

So while on one hand you lose your 18 to 25 year olds, you're gaining near 30 to 50 to 60 year olds. And in many ways the gains that you see can offset the losses. So when you look at the counties, for example, in southwestern Minnesota--everybody likes to look at total population, like the sign outside of town. Did the population go up or go down? And use that as a measure of success, when in fact what drives population change in southwest is that your population on your side may go down, but it's only going down because the kids that are leaving outnumber the

number of people coming in. So that's just one data point is you've got this growth, consistent growth across the state. In fact, across the United States in 30 to 50 to 60 year olds moving into our rural communities. So that's one data point. It's kind of refreshing.

**Christy Kallevig:** Absolutely. And what kinds of things are drawing folks into those small towns?

**Ben Winchester:** Yeah it's not all carpenters who like the pheasant hunt. You know what? So we've done focus groups and surveys and interviews across a number of states with partners in Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota, and we found out pretty consistently there were three top reasons that brought people to a community, and more importantly, to a region. Once they identified the region they wanted to be, they would look for a town. More importantly, they would look for a home. Anyway, the top three reasons people gave were, number one, a slower pace of life. People wanted control over their lives again. I think the tagline like "life on my time" tends to hold true. The top two reason is safety and security. That's especially true with people with children. And number three was the low cost of housing. Now in Minnesota, moving into a small town just for a job was not in the top 10.

And that quite surprised us. We thought people migrate for jobs, but then as the more we thought about it, the more we think you know what we are becoming, our life and our work, are becoming less intertwined. So if you imagine in the 1920s, you had to move to where the jobs were, where that's not especially true today. You can be self-employed, you can be a non-employer, you can be a self or sole proprietor, you can be a 1099 worker, you can be a remote worker, a telecommuter. I mean we've got all of these occupations now that afford the opportunity for us to live in the place that we want and live in a place where we work. So we see this pretty consistent pattern with regards to people choosing a region. I would say from a marketing perspective, it's almost impossible to identify a market segment.

But we heard lots of things, like I used to go to Bible camp up by Alexandria and I always liked the area. Or I have a local foods community that I want to be tied with and I want to move to a local foods community now, and I know western Minnesota has a really good opportunity for that. So, it's kind of all these quality-of-life reasons that get people to a region. And then at the same time, once they get there, then they start looking around for a house, and then they start looking for a job. So [going] down the list. Quality-of-life seems to be the trump card for all of these opportunities.

**Christy Kallevig:** You brought up an interesting point in talking about looking at a region. Oftentimes we get really focused on looking at our own community. Is it better for a group of communities to come together and work regionally to change that narrative or is it important to start at one community changing their own individual story?

**Ben Winchester:** Yeah, I think this is a great question. I think it is vital for us to move beyond our city boundaries. I do an exercise called "living in the middle of everywhere." So what you do is you take a map of your region and you put a star where you live. So I lived in Hancock for 12 years; put a star in Hancock. But I worked in Morris. So put a star where you live, an X where you work, and then X where your spouse or partner may work, and now draw a circle around.

How far do you go out to shop and eat out? And then draw another circle around how far you go out to play. And you find out that there is a there is a huge region that you live in. Right--so between where you live and you work might be 20 or 30 minutes. Between where you live and shop and eat out is 45; and shop and play is an hour, or sorry—two hours. So ultimately, you live in the middle of everywhere. So you know, when I lived in Hancock I didn't want to eat out at Buddy's every time I went out to eat. So my wife and I we would go down to Benson or to Alec [Alexandria] or to Willmar, to Glenwood, or you name it. You would enjoy the region. So I think as we think about how people live their lives today. We are very mobile. We want to enjoy the diversity of our region, and that we need to think beyond our city boundaries. And this has implications for a number of reasons. So for example, if I'm looking to move to Hancock, and I run into the mayor and the mayor is like, "Yeah, you're going to love Hancock, you know we've got Buddy's Bar and Grill, we've got a full K12 school. And then I then I say. "Well yeah, I'm also looking at moving to Cyrus." And then if the mayor says something parochial like "Well, you don't want to move to Cyrus they've got nothing going on there"—right? Trying to get you to move to Hancock.

Not only did you just downplay Cyrus you down played yourself because why do I want to live in the middle of nowhere? I want to know that there are things all over the region that I can enjoy, whether it's Green Mill or you know going to Mi Mexico in Benson. I mean there's all of these opportunities for us to explore the region. I think we need to recognize this fact of human life now is very mobile and that we actually enjoy some of these things everywhere around our homes.

**Christy Kallevig:** You're absolutely right--the exercise that you mentioned. I got to participate in one of your sessions where we did that, and I was amazed at how large my circle really was. And everybody at the table when we compared, it was really surprising to see how far we reach every day. What are kind of some key strategies that people need to think about or work to put in place to rewrite that narrative?

**Ben Winchester:** Well, I think a real easy one is [to] get to know your newcomers. One of my Extension colleagues here Neil Linscheid and I—we call this the best 150 dollars ever spent—and it's a newcomers supper, and it's not a supper where everybody in town gets to know the newcomers. It's a supper just for the newcomers, and it's there for a number of reasons, but one of the biggest outcomes out of that is the newcomers say, "I can't believe how many other newcomers there are." Because once you start looking around your community and finding them you will be blown away. And how many new people there are. And because of the nature of social society today, where we are somewhat more disconnected than ever before with regards to place. It might be difficult to see people, like you know, I comically say that you know it's dark in the morning and dark when we get home in the winter. For six months out of the year, you wouldn't even know if somebody moved in down the street.

You wouldn't even know if you were pumping gas next to your new neighbor because we just don't have these opportunities for social engagement anymore. So, I asked people like when is the last time you had a newcomer over for supper? When is the last time you actually talked to someone about why they made the move? So here's the advice I've got is [to] have a newcomers supper to get newcomers to see they're not alone, because if you know anything about moving it

is a big question mark, when you move to a small town and you don't have previous connections there, it's scary. You don't know who to go to for daycare or an electrician or a plumber or if your power goes out in the middle of the night.

It is a scary, scary situation to move into a town and have no connection. So on that side alone, there is great benefit to having the newcomers kind of commingled with one another and find people with like interests. Like, "Hey, I like to canoe, too," you know things like that. At the same time, interviewing newcomers. For example, I've given a brain gain presentation in Southwestern Minnesota and the Pipestone newspaper and decided to run a "newcomer of the week" every Friday, where they would go and interview a newcomer family, and just kind of make them real to folks in the region. So I think it's important not just for adults to do this, but for our kids. And I think there's a really good value that can be had in getting our young people to interview people that are new to the community to hear all these reasons why people are choosing in their town.

Because in many ways we keep we hearing a narrative in our towns, like you need to get out. Right. And like there's a misplaced notion that only the lucky few escape, when in fact we have people moving in all the time. So there would be great value in having some of these young people actually explore the motivations for all of these folks moving into our rural communities. And when you hear all of these reasons people have to move in, you're going to second guess the reasons why you leave, and you may actually see an opportunity to return. So we've got colleagues, that's kind of interesting ... we've got colleagues at the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and they do a program where they go and interview high school kids like juniors and seniors and they asked them, like "If you intend to move away, do you think you'll move back?" Right? And on one side, I don't like asking an 18 year old what they're going to do in five years [which has] zero predictive value to it. But, imagine you have two towns. Town A, 40 percent of the kids said they want to move back and Town B, it was 80 percent. What is the difference between those two towns? It's the narrative. Are they hearing that this town is a place that [they] can actually live, in that [they] can work in, and that you can enjoy life in? And if all you are surrounded with, I would say, are the doom-and-gloomers about your town, it's going to be very difficult to give any motivations to your young people to return. When in fact, once these young people hear all these reasons why people are moving today, it might get them to second guess their town and to see it as a viable alternative to living outside of the town, or to bring them back home. So, the kind of bottom line between all of the work I do is that I want to remind people that there are people choosing to live in your town. Every day, people choose to move to your town. It might not be every day in our towns, but every week, every month, there are people choosing to move [to] your towns for what you are today and what you will be, not what you were.

Nobody cares that your hardware store closed 15 years ago. I didn't move to Hancock and wonder what happened to the hardware store that was here 20 years ago. I didn't care. I saw hope and opportunity for what that town was today. And I think we have to be careful when we hold on to this negative historical narrative about these changes we went through, because it impacts all of the reasons that people have for moving there or coming back or even staying there. So I just think it's vital for us to check how we talk about our towns.

**Christy Kallevig:** I think you bring up a great point. We don't often think about marketing our hometown to our own kids or to people [who] are living there, but we do need to make sure that we've got a good message, regardless if you're new or you've been there for 50 years.

**Ben Winchester:** That's right.

**Christy Kallevig:** Are there any communities that you have visited or shared your research with that you have seen that have really taken hold of the message and are working to rewrite their stories?

**Ben Winchester:** Yeah, actually so [many] over the years here. I've given presentations across the state. We've got a lot of efforts and a lot of initiatives right now across the state that are geared around this. I would call [it] the people attraction's strategies. So it's less about industrial recruitment, right, about the brick and mortar and more about bringing people to our communities. Because as you know, many of our communities just are not one stop shops anymore. They are the place where you live and work.

So there are a few, if you look in western Minnesota we got the West Central Initiative has a program called Live Wide Open. Oh we've got Greater Minnesota Rising in the Northwest. We've got the Fairmont Area Life Program out of Fairmont in South Central. Well, the Regional Development Commission out of Appleton runs a program called Get Rural. On the western side of the state, the little bump on the western side has a program called MNbump.com. We've got Rushford Peterson Lanesboro Arts. We've got a program called Discover Southwest Minnesota out of Marshall, Southeast Minnesota Together out of the Initiative Foundation down there. In Northeast there is a young professionals group called REJEB, and there's an organization called Northforce, which actually is a really great program and is trying to do this kind of people attraction strategy. So there are a number of efforts across the state that kind of organically sprouted up because honestly at this point there isn't a well-worn path to how to you know bring newcomers in and how to ensure that we're doing this in a strategic way.

So I encourage anybody to try anything at this point. There is once you get out and start hearing the stories that people have about why they made the move—that's your marketing right there.

**Christy Kallevig:** Well and it just sounds like there's so much energy when you list all of those organizations. There's just passion and excitement about making sure that people know about the good stuff that's happening in small towns.

**Ben Winchester:** That's right.

**Christy Kallevig:** That is very exciting. Any parting words that you have for us today Ben?

**Ben Winchester:** I mean aside from the obvious which is celebrate where you're going. You know, don't hold on to where you've been. I think the narrative even today that we hear is so tied to the historical notion of what we were is very difficult to get past that. So you know as we look forward, I think you know listen to those new voices go out of your way to find these new people

and to hear and reinvigorate your communities regarding where you're where you're at today and where you're going to go tomorrow.

**Christy Kallevig:** Great advice, Ben. Thank you so much for being with us today and we look forward to having you join us again to talk more about the Brain Gain.

**Ben Winchester:** Thank you Christy.

**Christy Kallevig:** Thanks again to Ben Winchester for being our guest today. To learn more about the work that Ben and our colleagues at the Center for Community Vitality are doing. Visit our website at [extension.umn.edu/community](http://extension.umn.edu/community). Here you will find more information on the Brain Gain and other resources and research to help you rewrite your community's narrative. Also check out the leadership and civic engagement alumni blog and follow us on Facebook and Twitter to stay connected with the Center for Community vitality.

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Vital Connections on Air.