

Changing a Community's Conversation



Grand Opening of the M&M Feed & Supply in Old Washington.

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As the Community Development Educator for OSU Extension in Noble County, I have the opportunity to meet with a variety of different community groups. Recently, one theme has been evident. We need to change our regional community's conversation when it comes to workforce development.

Community partners, educators, business owners, and social service leaders seem to agree that the jobs of today, and even the future, may not require a college degree. They also agree that there are increasing numbers of job opportunities here **LOCALLY**.

It's every community's dream to keep the next generation local. This is after all, our children and thus, grandchildren. For decades, we've told our children you need a college education. For some careers that is still the case. For many other trades, it is not.

Often, the trek to college may lead to what's known as brain drain - a situation in which many educated or professional residents leave a place and move to another one that gives them better pay or living conditions.

While the Appalachian region does have a pattern of out-migration, there are still success stories where young people go away for education yet return. One example is Miranda Miser. She is a graduate of Meadowbrook High School and of The Ohio State University (OSU) where she earned her degrees in Agricultural Communications and Agribusiness & Applied Economics.

She explains that deciding on one college, after applying to many liberal arts options, was difficult. However, in her

senior year of high school, she was very active in Future Farmers of America (FFA) and in her 4-H club piquing her interest in Agriculture as a career and leading her to OSU.

"I always intended to come back to the area, but was never sure if I'd be in the family business, but my heart led me there," Miser shared. "I gained a great deal of appreciation for Agriculture while interning in college with The Ohio Grape Industry and the OSU Extension Director and its Communications offices," she added. "I realized that Agriculture is so much more than 'cows and plows,' it is so much more than livestock and every day is a challenge."

Following graduation, she returned to the area in day-to-day management at the Old Washington location of the family's M&M Feed and Supply location as well as corporate media, marketing, and communications efforts for both stores.

Miranda is involved in the community as a member of the Guernsey/Noble Business Professional Women's Group, a member of the Guernsey County Farm Bureau Executive Board and as the 4-H Advisor for the Cumberland Valley Kids, one of the county's largest livestock clubs. She also volunteers for the Noble County Chamber of Commerce.

Another good example is Samantha (Sami) Schott. Sami was active in a local Noble County 4-H Club in her youth, as well as the Shenandoah High School Zeps' ladies' basketball program.

Sami earned a degree in Communications from Bethany College and returned "home" to an internship at OSU Ex-

ension in Noble County. She eventually landed her "dream" job as a 4-H educator where she has the opportunity to work with youngsters in 4-H.

Her 4-H responsibilities include project evaluation, camps, leadership and workforce skill development, junior fair and school enrichment programming. Sami lives on a small family farm with her parents, Dave and Jodi, and her brother, Hunter. Samantha was also very involved in the community as she was an 11 year member in 4-H and received her American FFA degree. Schott is a graduate of Bethany College with a bachelor's degree in Communications and Media Arts along with two minors in Marketing and Spanish. She is currently earning her master's degree from OSU and serves as Head Coach of the Shenandoah High School Ladies' Basketball program.

"When I was in high school I had the thought of I'm going away to college and NEVER coming back. However, things turned out differently and I would not have changed it for anything. I have a job I love coming to everyday, and I get to give back to a program that helped shaped me in numerous ways. I get to help out with the family farm, where we sell club pigs. Then lastly, I get to be involved at my alma mater coaching the game of basketball. Yes, most of the time I feel I need 25 hours in one day, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

Research published in the American Educational Research Journal reveals that high-achieving high school students are not necessarily more likely to leave a rural community than students who aren't as interested in academics. And of those students who do leave, high-achievers are more likely to indicate a desire to return. This desire to return home is linked to high-achievers' stronger feelings of community engagement and connection.

"Getting people more involved in the community at a younger age can

make them want to come home," shared Miser. "Programs like 4-H are building leaders and preparing youth for careers in much more than Agriculture."

We cannot deny or ignore the fact that young people are leaving the region. Appalachian youth continue the persistent refrain of, "I can't wait to leave this place." Many of them do, and some of those do not return. The economic reality of our place plays a huge role in whether or not a young person leaves, stays or returns. Yet, perception about local economic opportunities is the largest factor that influences a young person's location decision. Thus, the need to change our conversations to focus on training appropriately for "local" career opportunities.

Young people who leave rural hometowns are also the most likely to come back, something referred to as "rural return." One author, Ivy Brashear, puts it this way, "If the people of Appalachia are its greatest asset, its young people - those who are a part of the great rural return, those who never left, and those from other places who want to be a part of the region's rebirth - are most definitely the driving energy of that asset. Let us strive to harness that energy for the sake of our region's future."

A study of small communities conducted by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) found that former residents who return to their hometowns, particularly those who pursued higher education, can play a key role in improving the local economy of rural communities.

Let's talk more about the successes in rural return, about the local jobs available in health care, agriculture, oil and gas, manufacturing and more! At a web site created by the regional education service center, you can learn more about regional career opportunities at www.careersinmycommunity.org.



Miser shown with the State Young Careerist Competition Award from Ohio Business & Professional Women



Schott with team manager Kendal Snyder.