

A Perspective on Rural Community Success

By Cher Hersrud, Special Projects Officer

“We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say “It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem. Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.” Mr. Rogers

Having grown up in a rural community, and having worked with, and for rural communities for more than 30 years, I have tremendous respect for the many heroes across the state; their strong commitment, and the rural voluntary culture keeps our small towns alive. It takes effort and resilience; facing weather, farm economy, loss of population, and more.

I have learned a great deal, which has consistently increased my respect for rural residents. It is why I work for, and strongly support the work of Strengthen ND well after my retirement. The organization's focus is rural ND, and Megan Langley, the Founder and Executive Director is passionately rural.

I have traveled statewide, from community to community providing advice and information, and importantly telling stories of what other communities are doing. I met with countless boards to support and encourage the important work they do, and I have written publications and articles, and offered workshops in rural communities. The work I do with Strengthen ND continues my passion for all things rural; allowing me to write about rural North Dakota.

I have learned much that I believe is important. What follows are consistencies of success that I have experienced and noted over the years. Each community is a little different; however, those that will be saved are those that all work together. No grant, or consultant can save your town – it has to, and can be done by area residents.

Find the Champions and Become Heroes

A majority of rural communities achieve success through a champion with passion and vision. Notably, that person is most often someone who has left the community and returned, or has moved into the community as a new resident. This is due to their “new” view of a community and its assets. Residents who have always lived in a community can be jaded and discouraged. Someone who comes back to or is new to your community has fresh eyes, and can notice the assets and opportunities that exist, and most often have new ideas of ways to succeed. The mentality of a community is important; “we have always done it this way” will not help your community.

During my ten years of traveling the state full time, I encountered this myself; driving through a community for the first time and noticing beautiful, historic buildings, or nearby outdoor parks and recreation areas, often it was the local restaurant or history museum. Each town had its own unique features. When I raised these to residents, they often seemed surprised. Further discussion led to a more positive community view.

The point is that it takes someone with passion to begin and facilitate the process to community success. Become a hero and encourage and support the champion. Join in and work with them, bring your friends and family into the process, and by that I mean as many people as you can. Successful communities are not driven by one person, they are driven by the community itself. And never leave out the youth within a community – listen to them, they are your future.

Two great examples are: 1) Sheyenne, ND, where Champion Patti Larson gathered residents together to address community issues and the response was so great that the community has divided their project work into silos, so that people can work within one of their interest or knowledge areas. Residents of all ages are involved in areas of housing, downtown development, and more.

2) The Nelson County Arts Council created and has offered the biggest selling art show in ND – for 30 years in 2023. Co-founded by champion Brenda Bjorlie, originally from Texas, the Pekin Art Show is run by volunteers from across the county, who have specific areas of work, based on their interest.

Each community is different, each is small; however, each town has/had a champion with passion and a community of heroes who worked together. It has to be done by the community itself, and it can be done. I could cite many other examples of community success. There are many rural champions and heroes across the state, and we need more champions and heroes to step up.

How is it done? Look for the champions and accept and encourage them. Bring others into the fold...everyone. Some of the best ideas come from residents that are not the champions, and some of the best champions are those who listen and learn from residents. If a community is going to succeed, it takes the whole community and a willingness to support new ideas and work together toward community success.

Strengthen ND cannot save your town; however, we can provide the resources so that your residents can. Check the Rural Resources and other tabs on our website: www.strengthennd.com



StrengthenND®