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Are overlooked 'stayers' keeping rural Iowa alive?

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Tony Herman is a "stayer." He's the guy you see in the hometown grocery during the holiday visit, and who you ask what's up and how he avoids boredom in a place you so longed to escape.

"Drink beer and have bonfires," says Herman, 25, who helps run a backhoe service with a fellow Pocahontas graduate, Travis Schoon, 27.

Herman likes his hometown of 1,799 people in the middle of Iowa, a town that has lost one in four of its citizens since 1980, in a county where 40 percent of its population disappeared.

Iowans have made countless efforts to stop the state's rural population drain. Former Gov. Tom Vilsack recruited former Iowans and welcomed immigrants. Groups worked to gussy up Main Street for a kind of nostalgic small-town tourism. Conference attendees listened to speakers who touted attracting a young, creative class of artists and entrepreneurs. Experts waited for the telecommuters who never came. Economic development officials hustled for small manufacturing plants that sometimes didn't pay much.

Still, population declined. And what about the people like Herman who remain?

They are ignored, maybe even pitied when you see them in the grocery, and yet they are the very future of the town, say Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, a husband-wife sociologist team who moved from Philadelphia to Iowa for several months to write "Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America."

They identified a group of citizens they labeled "the stayers" who were not often encouraged by teachers or parents to attend college, worked through school to buy a pickup truck, and became invisible to the town's more moneyed and educated classes.

"They are taken for granted, as in the story of the prodigal son," said Kefalas, a St. Joseph's University sociology professor who interviewed nearly 300 young people in a northeast Iowa town they chose to keep anonymous. "They don't work as hard investing in them and just assume the old way of life will somehow work out for them."

Pocahontas is in western Iowa and similar in size to the town the authors studied. It has similar issues, too. Declining numbers of farmers, loss of manufacturing jobs and five deaths for every three births in Pocahontas County have led to depopulation. Those who are left are older, with a median age of 45 in Pocahontas County.

But it works for Schoon and others who affectionately call the town "Poky."

"I don't like the big-city atmosphere," he said. "I like to go on the weekend but to live there, I'd kill somebody or be dead. People tell me when I go to the city, 'You can't just blurt things out.'"

Yet the authors say stayers often feel rejected.

In the grocery store, cafe and tavern, you see them and wonder what keeps them here. Sometimes they wonder, too.

Pocahontas is surrounded by fields so flat the rainwater sits like a milk spill on a level kitchen table. Woods, rivers and public land are scarce.

A big statue of the Indian princess of the town's name overlooks Iowa Highway 3, which intersects with Iowa Highway 4, the Kum & Go on one corner and Casey's on the other.

Across the street in the Family Table Restaurant, Bev Williams, 43, will take your order. She's lived here all her life, save a short stint in college at nearby Storm Lake. She's been a waitress ever since.

She once had the same idea as many: Get away and never come back. But she married, had children and settled in. Now divorced, she told her children, ages 21 and 17, to do what she hasn't.

"Go somewhere. Go to college," she told them. "I want my kids to do better."

The model of education in the United States is to prepare kids for college. Pocahontas is no different.

"Those that have the ability go off. That makes a lot of sense as a community or a school. You don't want to hold them back," said high school counselor Diane Stegge. "But at the same time, you are taking them away from the community."

Kefalas said schools should do more to prepare students who have a desire to stay or don't have the money or abilities for college. Many are too busy catering to the high achievers.

"Teachers in Ellis (the pseudonym for the town in the book) were offended by our portrayal. But I'm a teacher, and it's much more fun to teach those above grade level," she said. "The challenge is how you make your school work for everyone."

Pocahontas school board member Darwin Eaton, a father of two — one who joined the military and another who stayed to work in a factory — says the focus should always remain on getting kids the most education possible while not forgetting the less gifted.

"The ones with higher education, we know there is going to be nothing here for them," he said. "We also try to focus on those with special needs. But the middle-of-the-road ones are going to become our community."

The school provides links with community colleges, offering college credits in health care and automobile technology, and a large industrial education program. A recent whole-grade sharing arrangement with nearby Palmer and Pomeroy and a new high school under construction that was widely supported also is a source of pride.

"We usually send off 90 percent of kids to either two- or four-year colleges," Stegge said. "I do think family background and economics play a role. There are families that never left and don't have a lot of education. Those kids aren't encouraged to expand their horizons."

On the other hand, industrial technology teacher Brian Blomker says it's tough to convince parents of low-achieving students that vocational skills might be a better fit. "They want that four-year degree," he said.

Yet who can blame them if they leave? Blomker, who is also the mayor, can't.

"People are leaving. There are no jobs," he said. "Northwest Iowa is overlooked. It's not a priority for state officials."

The first thing prospective industry asks is: Do you have a work force?

"No, we don't. You've got to get the work before the work force," he said. "So you just keep running into walls. I don't know what to do."

Next to the cafe, Heather Sindergard, 19, is working the counter at the pharmacy.

"People my age think they want the big-city life, but I don't think they give their hometown a chance," she said.

She took some community college courses in Fort Dodge but wanted to stay closer to home. So she earned a pharmacy technician certification and is planning a move to a nearby acreage with her boyfriend.

Relationships and children often keep people in town.

Ashley Vinsand, 22, had a child three years ago but she and the child's father split up. So she works at the grocery store and lives in her parents' basement.

After a recent shift, she was chasing after her energetic daughter and two dogs at home. Her military boyfriend's dog tags dangle from her neck. They have big plans upon his return from Afghanistan, and it might not include Pocahontas.

"It doesn't seem like everyone has a voice," she said. "They need to listen to the younger generation as much as the older generation because we will keep this town going."

Pocahontas County has the state's highest pregnancy rate for women under age 20 — 17.5 percent. Small-town girls have children earlier, Kefalas said, and it's a key factor in staying in town.

Others return after short stints away for job training.

Nicki Bunda, 30, trained in Cedar Rapids for radiology.

"In school you were looked down on if you didn't go off to college somewhere," said Bunda, who moved back 10 years ago, married a hometown man, had three children and works at the local hospital.

"At first when we started working here, we thought our friends (who moved away) would make fun of us. Most said they would never come back. But after you go live in a bigger city, perception changes. We live on an acreage, we let our kids run around and not worry about them being safe. Our friends are jealous now."

The city's economic development director says they are discussing plans for a "Welcome Back to Town" program to attract young families.

"We are going for emotional appeal," said Alissa O'Connor. "The kids can be closer to grandparents."

Emily Seiler buys into the emotions. The local insurance agent with children says, "The kids walk down the same school hallways we walked down. That's a comfort."

The challenge, however, is how to make a decent living. Research shows that Iowans ages 18 to 35 are drawn to surrounding states by higher wages, according to Jodi Grover of the Generation Iowa Commission, whose goal is to attract and retain the next generation.

There are fewer farmers left to juice the local economy.

"On a rainy day like this, this place (used to have) 20 or 30 farmers in it," said Mike Eichler, who has lived in Pocahontas all his 67 years and runs Ike's Bar. "Today there is one."

There are fewer manufacturing plants, and lower wages at plants have led to a rural underclass, said Kefalas.

Their fathers had a pension and enough money to have a summer fishing cabin. "The young guys look and say, 'I'm not making that.' "

Kefalas said her goal was simply to lead more discussion of the great hollowing out of the countryside and the need to move to a 21st-century rural economy.

The programs trying to attract back young high achievers haven't worked in any of the handful of states that have tried them, she said. What is needed is a macro-level effort, a reorganization of agriculture to nurture sustainable farmers, more efforts and training of people in computer fields, alternative energy, biotech and in medical disciplines, such as nurse's aide, that are in great demand.

"They take simplistic approaches to their solutions," said Bill Menner of the USDA Rural Development office in Des Moines. "Agriculture and the Iowa economy go hand in hand."

He said Iowa is investing in alternative energy, has strong links between community colleges and the work force and is marketing its quality of life.

"The stayers" say it's not as if they are sitting on their hands.

Herman and Schoon have dreams, too. Herman hopes to live in a remodeled home one day, one that he bought about a year ago after it was foreclosed on.

And after the local bowling alley closed this past summer, they kicked around plans for more entertainment options.

"Me and him are talking about going to the city about building a dirt racetrack," Herman said. "You could race cars or trucks, or even have a rodeo. You could have tractor pulls, all the stuff they used to do in small towns."
