*Note: This feature story, our first, inaugurated our WKCD website. Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman, WKCD's co-founders, split up visiting these three rural towns and capturing the stories of what youth — with adult allies — were attempting to turn their communities around.*

*The story and the website caught national attention and, in this just opening world of internet storytelling, WKCD.org won an award as a website worth watching.*

# Small Towns, Big Dreams

*In Dying Rural Economies, Youth Efforts Infuse New Hope and Money*

June 2002

Scrawled over with faded graffiti, the "Dead End" sign on this dusty side road in Elsa, Texas could stand as the symbol for a dying rural America. Young people are leaving this once proud agricultural town, the sign might as well be saying. The jobs have up and gone.




Youngsters are speaking up — and sparking economic development — in what had been declining rural areas.

Seventy wind-driven highway miles from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the streets of Howard look just as bleak. An imposing red brick courthouse marks this little prairie town as the seat of Miner County, but out in the neatly sectioned farmland you can count only five people per square mile. Over at the high school, graduating classes dwindle yearly, and neighboring hamlets are slowly but surely boarding up the windows and closing down.

And in Downeast Lubec, Maine, just a stone's throw from Canada, only two of the 40 sardine factories this coastal town once shared with its Eastport neighbor remain, crippling the fishing industry that supported families here for generations.

But in these three out-of-the-way corners of America, a new sense of energy and possibility has Main Street buzzing. At the Lighthouse Café in Howard, in the auto-body shops of Elsa, and on the piers of Lubec, nearly everyone can tell you what the young people down at the high school are doing.

Mostly, that's because the youngsters themselves are standing up—and speaking up—when it comes to the future of these communities. They grew up here, and they want the chance to stay if they choose, without giving up a bright future.

"Reviving and sustaining rural areas like these," said Rachel Tompkins, President of the Rural School and Community Trust, "simply can't happen without strengthening the natural ties between school and community." Her organization works with 700 school-community partnerships—including those in Elsa, Howard, and Lubec—in some of the nation's most distressed rural areas. "The kids in these projects are showing adults that they can be part of the solution," she continued. "They are a real force for imagining what's possible in America's small towns."

# Education Is the Lever

**ELSA, TX** — "My cousin Mario went up to Princeton University" said Monica, 18, who has lived her whole life in the Rio Grande Valley, fifteen miles from the Mexican border. "He's studying to come back here and be a pediatrician."

"Community development can't happen without youth development."

Half the students at the local high school, which serves adjacent Edcouch and Elsa, are migrant farm laborers, following the crops every fall and spring since childhood to work in states far from these Texas border towns. Ninety-one percent of their parents do not have a high school diploma. But in the last six years, supported by adult mentors like Francisco Guajardo, dozens of graduates like Mario have begun to take off for some of the nation's most prestigious colleges on full scholarships.

More striking still, when they graduate they come back. And whether doctors or teachers, they head right over to the high school, galvanizing students like Monica to revise expectations for their future in a community that has long accepted its sharp divide between haves and have-nots.

This year, for example, Monica has been learning first-hand about her migrant forebears, on whose backs the regions agricultural economy thrived until a cycle of drought crippled it in the early 1950s. Now she speaks freely of the need for students like her to become health professionals, teachers, and engineers if they want to build a better future.

"We want to be able to make a good living here," she said.

Across the Rio Grande, the *maquiladoras* (twin plants) of big American companies turn out everything from auto parts to aluminum foil, displacing agriculture as the mainstay of the local economy. They hire Mexican labor at $10 a day but typically import plant managers from Northern states. For students like Monica to someday join these managerial ranks will take a better education than it took a generation ago, when their fathers and mothers picked citrus and packed broccoli.

"Community development can't happen without youth development," asserted Guajardo, 36, who himself grew up poor in one of the unincorporated *colonias*, settlements without town services like electricity and water that proliferate on this area's back roads. Four years ago, Guajardo rallied the school superintendent, alumni, and students to found the Llano Grande Center, a small community action project based at Edcouch-Elsa High School.

Kids gravitate to the Llano Grande Center's two-room hub near the high school entrance, conferring with young staffers like Ernesto Ayala, a recent graduate of Brown University who did return to teach in his home town. A major thrust of their activities is to reclaim the heritage of their own community, largely missing from traditional history textbooks. To do



*Poster art by student Delvis Cortez.*

These youngsters of the *colonias* have learned to push hard for integrity and authenticity in their work — and that of others.

so, students like Monica tirelessly seek out the stories of local elders and then publish them in their bilingual Llano Grande Journal as well as on videotape.

Our elders teach us many lessons," says Guajardo. "Among them is the lesson of being proud of who we are, of the struggle we have experienced, and of the realizations that are yet to come."

Students also tell their own stories in hypertext, with training from the Digital Storytelling Project at the University of California-Berkeley. Working with graduate students from the University of Texas at Austin in a class taught by noted anthropologist Henry Trueba, they are transforming invaluable community contacts into scholarly ethnographic research. Using the latest computer graphics programs, they publish a monthly civic affairs newsletter for the city of Elsa in Spanish and English. Students also broadcast from a small radio station at the high school.

If what began as an oral history project seems to have developed a distinctly high-tech spin, that is intentional. The Center's work focuses firmly on the future and on acquiring for its young people the 21st-century skills they will need to face it.

The Center has hosted eight Seminars, for example, during which roughly 120 community people held intense conversations about the future direction of their education system, economy, and sustainable development. They explored the possibilities of community asset mapping, conflict resolution, and human and electronic networking.



*Conducting the local business survey.*

Knowledge is power, students have noticed, as they continually dream of a better future for their community—and learn firsthand the benefits of personal contacts. Rosie Zamora, a graduate of Edcouch-Elsa High School and President/CEO of Houston-based Telesurvey Research Associates, provided training for the Center's staff and students in a wide range of new survey and research skills. Students learned instrument development, survey interviewing, data analysis, and report writing. They use complex statistical software to analyze local needs from housing to education and technology. They are surveying Edcouch, Elsa, and neighboring La Villa and Monte Alto to create a business directory. Students use every piece of research they conduct for the purposes of community and economic development.

Back at the Center, several students sit with Ernesto—who also is a board member of the recently revived local Chamber of Commerce—honing plans with entrepreneurial excitement and energy. "We're planning a Spanish-immersion institute here where students will stay with local families," said José, 17, who is on the student planning team for the new program to begin in summer 2001. "People could learn a lot," he said, "by

coming down here for a three-week home-stay with language lessons and activities." José leaves the obvious unstated: the visitors would also drop much-needed dollars into the local economy.


Student videographer at work.

These young people have also learned to push hard for integrity and authenticity in their work—and that of others. A recent documentary film made by outsiders highlighted the poverty of the *colonias* that many Edcouch-Elsa students call home. In response, high school students at the Center are creating their own video on life in the *colonias.* Their goal: to bring forward the voices of children and the close-knit human ties acutely missing from the other film's singular focus on hardship.

"People who live in *colonias* are proud," explained 15-year-old Patty. "They don't look at the disadvantages of their position."

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## BUILDING A COMMUNITY'S VISION

**HOWARD, SD —** Thirteen hundred miles north in Howard, South Dakota, 17-year-old Whitney regularly shows up at meetings held by the Miner County Community Revitalization initiative, housed in a renovated Main Street storefront. Every month, townspeople, farmers, and students like her come together to plan for new businesses like wind-turbine electrical generators, a cheese factory, and software programming for distant e-businesses.

"Adults, please don't see us as part of the problem. Make us part of the solution."

And when teenaged members of the strategic planning committee speak up, people listen. It was high school students like Whitney who got the ball rolling five years ago, by conducting a cash-flow analysis of local spending habits. They devised and sent a survey to the county's 1,100 registered voters, followed up with personal phone calls, and harvested a 65 percent return. Analyzing the data, students determined that fully one-third of the community's disposable income was being spent out of town. They promptly initiated a campaign to raise local spending by 10 percent.


Howard's grain elevator.

"These kids have more power in the control of the community than they realize," observed Randy Parry, the high school business teacher who guided their work and who now heads Miner County Community Revitalization. Indeed, just a year later, county auditors found that students had surpassed their goal nearly three times over; a 27 percent increase in local spending had yielded 15 million new dollars in revenue.

In a series of community visioning meetings, students later brought townspeople together to weigh the shared assets they believed made their glass half full rather than half empty. Some of the proposals that emerged were seemingly modest, such as to install an ATM machine at the local bank, or to expand the hours and goods at the town's only grocery store. (Both are now accomplished.) Others were more resource-intensive, like creating a day care center—launched recently through a state grant that awarded the town even more money than it had requested.



*Howard High School greenhouse.*

"Before television, people used to visit each other to play cards and eat pie and ice cream. Now we're doing the same thing again, but we're talking about how to keep our economy alive. The kids made that happen."

"It definitely made a difference to have the young people bring us together to talk about things like this," asserted Kathy Callies, who works at a game-card packaging plant in town. "The mind set of the county needs to be changed," another Howard resident agreed. "We need leaders in this county that are visionary."

A 16-year-old urged during one of these community visioning meetings, "Adults, please don't see us as part of the problem. Make us part of the solution."

Today, young people at Howard High School continue to use classroom opportunities to plant their stake in the county's future. In recent research papers, students have investigated which corporate giants are buying up what local farmland; how country-of-origin meat labeling could affect Miner County cattle farmers; and whether the area's incidence of cancer holds clues to environmental problems. East of the high school, on a plot the size of two football fields, students are growing apple trees and vegetables, selling their produce locally. In a newly built greenhouse, they grow flowering plants with an eye to future retail sales. Proceeds of their projects help pay summer salaries, fund scholarships, and compensate investors.



*Jim Mutzinger.*

These youngsters have succeeded in bringing new hope into town, old timers like Jim Mutzinger, the head of the local Farmer's Grain Coop and former school board president, will tell you. "Before television, people used to visit in each other's homes to play card games and eat pie and ice cream," he said. "Now we're doing the same thing again, but this time we're talking about how to keep our economy alive. It was the kids who made that happen."

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## Reviving a Declining Way of Life

**LUBEC, ME** — Five years ago, a handful of students and their teacher held a town meeting in Lubec, Maine to discuss whether aquaculture might help their struggling fishing community. Few people showed up. The word scared everyone off, recalled Debra, who

was 13 at the time and is now a senior at the high school. Not knowing much about it, people figured aquaculture was just another threat to the town's livelihood.



*A student observes marine life.*

Their age probably didn't help much, either. "In this community like so many others, people judge you by your mistakes, especially if you are young," Debra said. "They expect you to fail."

Undeterred and still curious, the students set out to discover everything they could about the subject—and to learn by doing. Their teacher Debbie Jamieson, who had taught everything from physics to oceanography but knew nothing about aquaculture, learned by their sides. Other adults in the community gradually pitched in, and today Lubec, with its 2,000 residents, is a spawning ground for learn-as-you-go aquaculture.

Undeterred and still curious, students set out to discover everything they could about aquaculture — and to learn by doing.



*Down at the water.*

Students, teachers, and community volunteers have turned an abandoned water treatment facility 50 feet from the school into a state-of-the art aquaculture center. Here students raise trout and Atlantic salmon in the newly purified water, fortified with their own brew of nutrients. Recently they added a hydroponics greenhouse. After applying for and receiving a lease from the state of Maine, students started their own mussel farm, and they have also launched a small baitfish business to fill a local need. "You can't help but applaud what these kids are doing," noted Bob Peacock, who used to run the sardine factory his great grandfather started in 1928 and now processes farm-raised salmon.

Back in the classroom, students have devised a scientific experiment yielding important data about the optimum diet for enhancing the roe of sea urchins, a delicacy in Japan and a potentially lucrative item for struggling fishermen. And with 35 to 40 of the high school's roughly 100 students taking aquaculture classes at any one time, ideas for new projects proliferate as rapidly as the mussels now growing again in Cobscook Bay.

One group of students, for example, is monitoring phytoplankton, a toxic alga that can potentially harm fish and, in turn, humans. They send their data to the Maine Department of Marine Resources and to marine biologists internationally. Another group is studying the feasibility of cultivating two species not common to Maine waters, tilapia and yellow perch. A third is creating plans for a small commercial fish smokehouse to be operated by students. Yet another is breeding tropical fish for retail sale.



*The high school aquaculture lab.*

The work has spread in other ways, too. For the second year in a row, Lubec students have hosted an International Student Marine Conference, where 200 of their peers from Maine and Canada share their work and research. Lubec

Consolidated School also expects to be certified this coming fall as Maine's first vocational aquaculture site for high school students.

Just as important for this North Atlantic town, students have joined the local debate about how to save Lubec's deteriorating marina—upon which fishermen and other mariners depend—from the destructive waves of the stormy "Northeast fetch." Students wrote, filmed and produced a documentary video with dramatic footage of the marina besieged by snow, wind, and high surf during a raging winter storm. Film in hand, they aim to revive the town's heretofore unsuccessful drive to win state or federal assistance for necessary repairs to the marina's crumbling piers.

All but gone now is the skepticism that first greeted the students' efforts. "I admire the energy of these kids," observed Dianne Tilton, head of the regional economic council. "I admire the results—what they've done with hydroponics astounds me. And I admire how they've pushed people to think differently, to see the powerful link between a community's economic future and its kids."



"We've shown ourselves and everyone else that it's not getting it right the first time that matters. It's working through mistakes, taking chances."

In turn, the town's residents are expressing their growing confidence in a most concrete way. Despite ever-tightening budgets, Lubec has added $100,000 over the past two years to support the aquaculture program.

"Our success with aquaculture has come from trial and error," reflected Debra, now 18, on the ups and downs of the past five years. "We've shown ourselves and everyone else that it's not getting it right the first time that matters. It's working through mistakes, taking chances, correcting what's wrong. That's how we learn—and how we make the impossible possible."

**Work—and Money—Follow the Dreams**

Almost $6 million will reach South Dakota's Miner County over the next five years from the Northwest Area Foundation. The grant helps fund an $18 million community revitalization project that will provide area families with supports from day care to distance learning. Students have already launched a town website and are working with local businesses to advertise their goods and services in cyberspace.

At Texas's Llano Grande Center, students wrote a grant that brought in federal Empowerment Zone funds to support their community development efforts. The local Chamber of Commerce now shares the Center's two-room space at the Edcouch-Elsa high school, where young people field inquiries about local businesses.

In Lubec, the high schoolers' enterprises in aquaculture will benefit from a recent $6 million anonymous gift to support revitalization efforts in their county and two other in Maine.

"Young people can change the way a whole town operates. Let me tell you, it's a breath of fresh air."

Perhaps the biggest change in these small rural communities, though, is something crucial yet intangible: their expectations. The Forum for Youth Investment, an organization studying youth and community development worldwide, has found a direct link between expectations of young people and what they end up doing. If young people are not widely expected to make a difference in their communities, these findings show, they most likely will not do so—since expectations shape the opportunities open to young people and, in turn, provide the models by which young people shape themselves.

However in Lubec, Howard, and the Rio Grande Valley, young people—helped by a handful of teachers who believed in them passionately—have turned this dynamic around, changing expectations through their own actions. For themselves and their communities, they have created new possibilities around every corner.

"Young people can change the way a whole town operates," said Tom Kilian, who at 77 has seen South Dakota's Miner County through a prairie lifetime and can tell you how the twentieth century changed it. "People tend to think that kind of change is always bad. But let me tell you, it's a breath of fresh air around here."