

## Small Town, Big Changes, Minnesota

As told by Mai Linh Gjere

Lanesboro, Minnesota

Story Narrative:

This moving story explores why people settled in Lanesboro originally in the 19th century, contrasted with a deeply personal and local perspective on what it takes to sustain a small town in the Twenty-First Century. An intimate portrait of community, economics, Main Street and the future of rural America emerges through the lens of the filmmaker, her peers, local business owners, and the town's decision makers. Produced by Mai Linh Gjere in conjunction with Lanesboro Arts, Minnesota, with technological support from Erin Dorbin.

**Mai Linh Gjere (00:00):** My name is Mai Linh Gjere. I'm a city transplant, and I'm a prime example of a millennial living in a small Midwestern town also known as Lanesboro, Minnesota. Lanesboro was created by joint stock company owners in New York with the starting population of about 600 people. The time it was founded is very much disputed, some saying 1869 and others saying 1868. In the early years, Lanesboro was just like any other small Midwestern town. Lanesboro had everything its residents needed. Somewhere to eat, somewhere to drink, somewhere to worship, and a hotel. Lanesboro grew quickly adding a flour mill, a hardware store, general stores, and eight saloons. That's two more than what we're allowed by law. In 1876, Lanesboro was at its peak with over 1,600 residents. My family moved here to Lanesboro from St. Paul in 2004 when I was only two years old. My parents, Mike and Kirsten Gjere, saw opportunity and potential here. They made the decision to relocate for several reasons. Now, 12 years later, they talk about those reasons, difference between a small town and a bigger city, and what lies for Lanesboro and its future.

**Mike Gjere (01:05):** We spent all of our summers in the country and we liked being here so we just decided we would like to live here full time. When I was younger, we had a farm near Lanesboro that we'd spend the summers at. We had the opportunity to buy a farm here in Lanesboro so we bought a farm and we decided to move down here.

**Kirsten Gjere (01:25):** All our activities were bicycle riding and we did some fishing and canoeing and we liked all that out here so we decided to move.

**Mike Gjere (01:35):** Oh, that was a lot of work. Yeah.

**Kirsten Gjere (01:35):** We bought this place at an auction, which was nerve wracking.

**Mike Gjere (01:39):** Yeah. We bought the farm at an auction and the barn was falling down, the house was falling down.

**Kirsten Gjere** (01:46): The windows were rotted out.

**Mike Gjere** (01:47): There were no fences.

**Kirsten Gjere** (01:49): Carpets smelled like mold.

**Mike Gjere** (01:51): It was rough.

**Mai Linh Gjere** (01:52): In 2016 during the spring and summer months, Lanesboro streets are bustling, people everywhere, eating, tubing and sightseeing. With a population of just 740, one would think Lanesboro doesn't have a lot going on. But by looking at Main Street, that is clearly untrue, sort of. For three months, Lanesboro is a cheerful, quaint and busy town, but it wasn't always that way. In fact, some describe it as more of a ghost town year round.

**Rebecca Hale** (02:16): It was horrible. It was literally a ghost town. There was very little to do.

**Yvonne Nyenhuis** (02:24): Lanesboro was a ghost town in '87 when we decided to take over the White Front.

**Rebecca Hale** (02:30): Right around '87, they started working on the trail and putting the right trails in. And then Mrs. B's opened around that same time and the Old Barn Resort.

**John Pieper** (02:48): Well, I would say 25 years ago, most of the buildings in town were getting close to falling down. So it was very lucky that the bike trail was built to bring people here. So that saved Main Street in Lanesboro. all these buildings.

**Rebecca Hale** (03:03): And little by little it got busier and busier.

**Mai Linh Gjere** (03:07): In the 1980s, Lanesboro's railroads were transformed to the Root River Trails, a 42-mile bike trail. Despite the controversy surrounding it, the trail's opening greatly changed Lanesboro. Then in 1987, a group of artists received a fund from Nancy McCormish who had inherited \$5,000 from her brother after he was killed in a rock climbing incident. These artists created the Cornucopia Art Center now called Lanesboro Arts. In 2010, they merged with the Lanesboro Arts Council and took over the St. Mane Theatre. Finally, in 1988, the Commonwealth Theater was created. The openings of these organizations caused a huge tourist boom. It made Lanesboro nationally known as a top rural art place. It made Lanesboro what it is today. Now thanks to the trail, arts and businesses, Lanesboro attracts about 60,000 tourists every year. But what about after tourist season? When the shops close up for the winter and the streets are quiet, who are the people left? What are we and 739 other people doing here? Where do we shop and eat? What are our needs? Can you tell me what kinds of businesses you'd like to see in Lanesboro?

**Speaker 7** (04:03): Probably just more agriculture things.

**Speaker 8** (04:08): I'd like to see a bigger grocery store.

**Speaker 9** (04:10): Clothes shops.

**Speaker 10** (04:11): I'd like to see a bigger supermarket.

**Speaker 11** (04:15): What kind of business that I would like to see are ones that appeal more to the local citizens, not just tourists, that could be open year round. Say a sports bar or something that appeals to younger people as well.

**Speaker 12** (04:27): Well, I'd like to see a multitude of different types of businesses. Not only ones that will draw the tourist, but will also draw the local people. I'd love a hardware store.

**Speaker 13** (04:38): I grew up here. I would love to see things for kids to do. For teenagers.

**Speaker 14** (04:43): I'd like to see it more probably interesting businesses, not just the regular restaurants or little shops that bring people. Something maybe more for the residents.

**Mai Linh Gjere** (04:54): What about the current businesses? How often do the residents visit them?

**John Pieper** (04:59): My name is John Pieper. I own the Old Village Hall restaurant in Lanesboro with my wife Sarah. We got here probably during the big first boom. So there was quite a few things done that year. I would say 10% of the businesses, local, Lanesboro, Preston, Rushford, people wanted nicer food so over the last 20 years, we've become a much more fine dining destination, but very casual. Casual fine dining.

**Lori Bakke** (05:27): I'm Lori Bakke and I own Granny's Liquor. Right now we're more locally based. I have a punch card which is kind of like a rewards card. Every time you make a purchase of \$25 or more, you get a punch. After 10 punches, we give you \$5 off and I have over a thousand cards that I've given out.

**Mai Linh Gjere** (05:45): We may not have some of the things that the residents want, but fortunately, we do have some businesses, multiple restaurants like John Pieper's, a liquor store, a gas station, a sales barn, and even a grocery store, although it may not be what residents expect.

**Rebecca Hale** (05:57): My name is Rebecca Hale. We own Community Grounds Market and Coffee now. We actually purchased the business the end of last summer. We have many groceries. We have organic foods. We have just your staple, a lot of the staple items that people would want to have in their own homes. I have the coffee shop now that we just opened over the weekend. Average customer is right now, well, over the course of the winter, it was the local people that came in and really supported us. I was really happy with the support that we received. There were a lot of people not utilizing us and whether it's just that they forget that we're here or they're not comfortable coming in our door.

**Mai Linh Gjere (06:51):** Grocery stores are key businesses in downtowns, yet 14% of small town groceries were lost between 2000 and 2013. Why did they close? While rural town saw loss of population, a loss of buyers and many customers choose cheaper groceries available in largest nearby cities from larger chain stores. Rising shipping costs and the price of items like produce also become very expensive, making it hard for small stores to compete. Because of this, few are willing to take the risk of operating a grocery store in a small community like Lanesboro.

**Mai Linh Gjere (07:18):** But what about Lanesboro's previous groceries? There's Otto Moe's, one of the first, and most recently Village Foods that closed in 2008. Village Foods was a huge part of Lanesboro's community and when it closed, many people were devastated. Now that we do have a newer grocery store in town, why aren't more local people recognizing or utilizing it? Maybe it's because it carries different items than traditional grocery stores residents are familiar with. Maybe it looks a little different. Either way, the question is, will more residents offer their support to this community business to help it grow?

**Rebecca Hale (07:45):** I'm hoping that they reach a point where they're comfortable coming in.

**Mai Linh Gjere (07:50):** Do you think most residents have that mentality of trying to help out the community by buying things?

**Speaker 30 (07:58):** No, not everyone. I think a lot of people are all about the price and where they can get it the cheapest and don't think how they're helping a family.

**Mai Linh Gjere (08:08):** How often do you go to the businesses around your area?

**Speaker 15 (08:11):** Pretty often, like once a week.

**Speaker 16 (08:13):** Not very often.

**Speaker 17 (08:16):** Often. Because I'm in Rushford a lot, I do a lot of business there. But when I am in Lanesboro I do business here.

**Speaker 18 (08:24):** Not very often.

**Speaker 19 (08:24):** I don't.

**Speaker 20 (08:26):** So I can get pretty much everything I need here.

**Speaker 21 (08:29):** About once a year because we're not from around here.

**Speaker 22 (08:32):** The restaurants we patronize. I think that's about it.

**Mai Linh Gjere (08:39):** But what is next? We know the current needs of the community are. So how do business owners, local leaders and residents plan to achieve them?

**Robin Krom (08:44):** As you know, we are right now, we're pretty much a tourist community. And we would like to grow this town into a real heavy 12-month

community so in the wintertime, we don't have businesses that close that can sustain themselves for over the full year. The concept plan basically is an outside look at Lanesboro. A person that is coming here that is a nationally recognized, that is working with Lanesboro to advise us and suggest to us with the input of our people here in Lanesboro, our citizens, what they want and what would make Lanesboro a brighter place and more productive, attract more people as we look to bring young families into this town. And that's one of the areas that we're trying to concentrate on with our concept plan is bring families from 27 years old to 40. We're missing that age group with families and young children to sustain our school system and grow our tax base. So areas that would bring those people to town. We're finding out there's a lot of telecommuters out in the world and if we could make Lanesboro inviting for those people to come and do business here, work from their home, that is a big factor for us to look at.

**John Pieper (10:24):** The challenge is getting them here the first time. I think once you get them here, we can keep them, but to get them to come to a town of 750 people is a challenge. That's why we're going to have, hopefully, Kelly help us with that.

**Kelly Asche (10:37):** My name is Kelly Asche. I'm the program coordinator here at the Center for Small Towns. We at the Center for Small Towns, we help build capacity for communities by hooking them up with students to help them complete any sort of community development type projects that they have going on. And also us at the staff and myself included help communities develop work plans and what community development projects might look like and help them implement those projects. I also do a little bit of research on the side on small town issues.

**Robin Krom (11:05):** In our focus, after high school and going into college, we fully expect our young people to go out and get an education and that sort of thing. But we're finding that there's been several surveys done in the past by different areas that younger folks, after getting their college degree and working in a big city are looking to come back home in the rural setting and leaving the big metropolitan areas. Currently that's some of the sight that we're seeing happen. Those are the kinds of people that want to grab onto. We want them to be invited into this town. We want them to be able to a make a living and sustain themselves in this town and be able to raise their children here.

**Kelly Asche (12:01):** Just a quick talk about migration trends. In small towns and in rural Minnesota, everybody thinks that once you turn 18, everybody leaves small towns and they aren't ever coming back, but that's actually not true at all. Small towns in rural Minnesota do lose 18 year olds. They lose them like crazy. And the only place you see gains in 18 to 29 year olds are counties that have four-year universities in them. After that though, from 30 to 49 year olds, our small towns and rurals see a huge amount of in-migration of 30 to 49 year olds. And these are people with young families. They may have young kids. They're looking for the home that are particularly a little bit more affordable. And if we look at some of the research done

on these folks, why are you choosing to move to small towns? Because let's face it, small towns and rural areas aren't actively recruiting 30 to 49 year olds, they're recruiting...

**Kelly Asche (12:49):** You talk to a small town, they're like, "God, how do we keep our 18 year olds?" And it's like, "No, you're not going to keep them. That's a losing battle." But you can recruit these 30 to 49 year olds who are doing it and we're not even trying. And if you ask them, why do you move back to small towns? The top three, four things are all around quality of life issues. So they want a slower pace of life, they want them small class sizes, access to outdoors and affordable housing is the other one. So housing that's a little bit cheaper or more affordable or in their price range. What's interesting is that you don't see jobs mentioned among these folks. They're not moving because of a job. They're moving because they want to live someplace and they figure out the job after that. And the job might not be in that community. It might be 30, 40 miles away. That's just the way it is.

**John Pieper (13:38):** For good or bad, none of my kids are going to stay. They're going to be dispersed. It'll be their choice when they're in their thirties or forties, would they ever want to come to a... And I don't think it's just all about Lanesboro. Once you've been raised here, it doesn't matter where you are, you may end up in Estes Park. You may end up in Bend, Oregon, but you may end up choosing a place to raise your children that is like Lanesboro. It doesn't have to be Lanesboro. But I think that opens up... and I think it's the other way around too, is that if we have people that were raised in some of these kind of unique places, that if they happen to be in the Midwest, that could really help us recruit.

**Mai Linh Gjere (14:23):** So we figured it out. We know who the people are who live here, the reality of living in a small town, and we know what many people desire and need in town. So what about the future of Lanesboro? How can Lanesboro attract young families? Will young families and young people move back to Lanesboro? What could bring them back?

**Speaker 26 (14:38):** Tell me what your plans are after high school.

**Mai Linh Gjere (14:41):** I'm not that quite sure. I know I definitely want to go not around my area. It's kind of interesting to study abroad too, or sort of go to a bigger city as far as college goes.

**Olivia Obritsch (14:57):** Yeah. My plans for after graduation are to go to Benedictine College, which is in Atchinson, Kansas. It's another small town atmosphere. So I'm not really changing from Lanesboro all that much. And I am considering going into engineering. That is one thing that might prevent me from coming back to Lanesboro because there's not many jobs that don't have to do with tourism or the arts. They don't have many professional job opportunities here in Lanesboro.

**Nora Sampson** (15:28): I would like to go to college and I would like to become maybe a biochemist. And I would like to move away from Lanesboro and probably not move back.

**Nolan Anderson** (15:39): I'm not sure exactly if I'll stay in Lanesboro or not. It's a nice place to live, obviously. I'm young, so I'm really not and might go to the cities for college, but I would obviously love to come back here and I'm pretty sure my parents plan on living here.

**Speaker 26** (15:54): And could you imagine yourself ever returning to Lanesboro?

**Mai Linh Gjere** (15:58): I don't think I could see myself returning to Lanesboro to live there.

**Nora Sampson** (16:05): Because I feel like there wouldn't be many job opportunities here. They have the ethanol plant in Preston, but that's a job that would get boring after a while. So it's just that there aren't many job opportunities around here.

**Olivia Obritsch** (16:19): While I would consider coming back to live in Lanesboro after my college education, it hinges on whether I can get a job here.

**Mai Linh Gjere** (16:31): After all the research and interviewing I've done, I'm now faced with a question, will I return to my hometown? Before this project, I would undoubtedly say no, but now I almost feel different. There's no doubt I'll leave when I turn 18 and go to a bigger city and go to college. But when I finally settle down, will I settle down in a small town? Will other people? I've already seen a few young families move here. My friends, my classmates, even my own family. But will the concept plan work? Will I move back? I hope so. I also hope when I'm 30 years old that Lanesboro will be different. That in 2032, more businesses will be open for the residents. While people will move in, maybe even more job opportunities.

**Mai Linh Gjere** (17:06): One of the most important things that Lanesboro has yet to manage is balance. A balance where Lanesboro isn't desolate, but also not a noisy city. Balancing its unique and charming personality, but also bringing in new and changing. But will Lanesboro be willing to change? I believe that everyone's capable of change, that everyone can achieve it. It's just that everyone's afraid or worried that things will go badly. Or worse, they believe they're too small change anything. I used to be with that too. But to be honest, it's completely a lie. You can change and you can be involved in your community. It's just that no one wants to work and no one wants to change things for others. We just want change for ourselves or we want people to change it for us. But our community won't get better with chance, it'll get better with change. Hopefully my generation will be the ones to change it.

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