

Small Town, Big Changes

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In conjunction with Lanesboro, Minnesota

Marlon Jerry: My name is Marlon Jerry, 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 that were allowed by law. In 1876, Lanesboro was at its peak with over 1600 residence.

My family moved here to Lanesboro from St Paul in 2004 when I was only two years old. My parents, Mike and Kiersten Jerry, so opportunity and potential here and 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 in its future.

Mike Jerry: 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.

Kiersten Jerry: All our activities were like bicycle riding and we did some fishing and canoeing and we liked [inaudible 00:01:32] up here so we decided top me.

Mike Jerry: That was a lot of work.

Kiersten Jerry: We bought this place at an auction, which was nerve-wracking.

Mike Jerry: Yeah. We bought the farm at an auction and-

Kiersten Jerry: It was-

Mike Jerry: The barn was falling down. The house was falling down.

Kiersten Jerry: The windows were rotted out.

Mike Jerry: There were no fences.

Kiersten Jerry: Carpet smelled like mold.

Mike Jerry: It was rough.

Marlon Jerry: In 2016, during the spring and summer months, Lanesboro streets are bustling people everywhere, eating tubing and sightseeing. With a population of 740, one would think Lanesboro doesn't have a lot going on. But by looking at Mainstreet, 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: It was horrible. It was literally a ghost town. There was very little to do.

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

Rebecca Hale: Like around '87, I started working on the trail and putting the bike trails in and then Mrs B's opened around that same time. And the old farm resort.

John Pieper: 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 saved Mainstreet of Lanesboro, all these buildings.

Rebecca Hale: And little by little, we got busier and busier.

Marlon Jerry: In the 1990s, Lanesboro's railroads were transformed into the Root River trails. A 42 mile bike trail. Despite the controversies surrounding it, the trail's opening greatly changed Lanesboro. Then in 1987, a group of artists received a fund from Nancy [McMormish 00:03:19], who'd inherited \$5,000 from her brother, after he was killed in a rock climbing incident.

He's [inaudible 00:03:24] the Cornucopia Art Center now called Lanesboro Arts. In 2010, they merged with the Lanesboro Arts Council and took over the St Mane theater. Finally in 1988, the Commonwealth theater was created.

The openings of these organizations caused a huge tourism boom and made Lanesboro nationally known as a top rural art place and 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: Probably just more like agriculture things.

Speaker 8: I'd like to see a bigger grocery store.

Speaker 9: Clothes shops.

Marlon Jerry: [crosstalk 00:04:11].

Speaker 10: I'd like to see a bigger supermarket.

Speaker 11: 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: Oh, well I like to see a multitude of different types of businesses, not only ones that will draw the tourists but will also draw the local people. I'd love a hardware store.

Speaker 13: I grew up here. I would love to see things for kids to do. For our teenagers.

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

Marlon Jerry: What about the current businesses? How often do the residents visit them?

John Pieper: 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 business is 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: I'm Lori Bakke and I own Granny's Liquor. So 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.

Marlon Jerry: We may not have some of the things that the residents want, but fortunately we do have some businesses, multiple restaurants like John Piper's, a liquor store, a gas station, a sales barn, and even a grocery store although it may not be with residents expect.

Rebecca Hale: My name is Rebecca Hail. We own Community Grounds Market and Coffee now. We actually purchased the business the end of last summer. We have mini 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. Have the coffee shop now that we just opened over the weekend. Average customer is right now, well, over the course of that winter, it was the local people that came in and really supported us. I was really happy with the support that we received. There are 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.

Marlon Jerry: Grocery stores are key businesses in downtowns, yet 14% of small town groceries were lost between 2000 and 2013. Why did they close? Well, rural towns saw a loss of population, a loss of buyers and many customers choose cheaper groceries available in larger, 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.

But what about Lanesboro's previous groceries. There was [inaudible 00:07:20], one of the first, and most recently Village Foods that closed in 2008. Village Foods is a huge part of Lanesboro 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 the 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: I'm hoping that they reach a point where they're comfortable coming in.

Marlon Jerry: Do you think most residents have that mentality trying to help out the community by buying [inaudible 00:07:55]?

Rebecca Hale: 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.

Marlon Jerry: How often do you go to the businesses around your area of Lanesboro?

Speaker 16: Pretty often. Like once a week.

Speaker 17: Not very often.

Speaker 18: Often because I'm in Rushford a lot, I do a lot of business there, but when I am in Lanesboro I do do business here.

Speaker 19: Not very often.

Speaker 20: I don't.

Speaker 21: So I can get pretty much everything I need here.

Speaker 22: About once a year because we're not from around here.

Marlon Jerry: Oh.

Robin Krom: The restaurants, we patronize. I think that's about it.

Marlon Jerry: But what is next? We know what the current needs of the community are, so how do business owners, local leaders and residents, plan to achieve them?

Robin Krom: But 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-months community so in the wintertime we don't have businesses that close, that can sustain themselves over the full year. The concept plan basically is an outside look at Lanesboro. A person that has come in here that is 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. 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. 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: It's the challenge is getting them in 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 have hopefully Kelly help us with that.

Kelly Asher: So my name is Kelly Asher. I'm the Program Coordinator here at the Center For Small Towns. 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.

Also us 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: Our focus, you know, 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 the 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 site that we're seeing happen.

So those are the kinds of people we want to grab onto. We want them to be invited into this town. We want them to be able to make a living and sustain themselves in this town and be able to raise their children here.

Kelly Asher: Just a quick talk about migration trends. So in small towns and in rural Minnesota, everybody thinks that once you turn 18, everybody leaves small towns, they never come back. 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 [inaudible 00:12:29] see a huge amount of in-migration of 30 to 49 year-olds. These are people with young families. They may have young kids. They're looking for a home that are particularly a little bit more affordable. If we look at some of the research done in 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 were recruiting ... You know you talked to a small town like, "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."

If you asked them, "Why did 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 small class sizes, access to outdoors and affordable housing is the other one. So housing that's a little bit cheaper and 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: For good or bad, none of my kids are going to stay. They're all going to be dispersed. It'll be their choice when they're in their thirties or forties, whether they would ever want to come to ... 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 Ben Orion, but you may end up choosing a place to raise your children that is like Lanesboro. 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 they happen to be in the Midwest, that could really help us recruit.

Marlon Jerry: So I 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 25: Tell me what your plans are after high school.

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

Olivia Obritsch: Yeah. My plans for after graduation are to go to Benedictine College, which is Atchison, Kansas. It's another small town atmosphere, so I'm not really changing from Lanesboro all that much. I am considering going into Engineering and 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: I would like to go to college and I would like to become maybe a biochemist. I'd like to move away from Lanesboro and probably not move back.

Nolan Anderson: 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 ... I 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 25: Could you imagine yourself ever returning to Lanesboro?

Mai Gjere: I don't think I could see myself returning to Lanesboro to live there.

Nora Sampson: Because I feel like there wouldn't be many job opportunities here, like they have the ethanol plant in Preston, but that's kind of a job that would get boring after awhile. So it's just that there aren't many job opportunities around here.

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

Marlon Jerry: After all the research and interviewing I've done, I'm now faced with the 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'm turn 18 and go to a bigger city and go to college. But when I finally settle down, will I have settled down in a small town? Or 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. More people will move in, maybe even more job opportunities.

One of the most important things that Lanesboro is 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. Afraid that things will go badly or worse, they believe they're too small to change anything. I used to be 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.