

“Don’t Give Up On Home”

Jackson Harris

Growing up, my sister and I spent hours watching our favorite...well...OUR PARENT’S all-time favorite TV show—the Andy Griffith show. This was back before the full seasons came out on DVD, so we watched episodes that had been recorded onto VHS tapes—some of you in the arena may not remember what those looked like... but we had hundreds of them. Literally, we have a closet full of these things even today, just because they were such a big part of our childhood, we’re too sentimentally attached now to throw them away. That show was such a big part of my life that Mayberry, U.S.A. was my favorite place in the world as a child and I had never even been there. Here’s the thing though: my family doesn’t enjoy just any old Andy Griffith episode, oh no...in fact, some might consider us to be Mayberry snobs. You see, our family only watches “the real” episodes—the first 159 episodes that are in black-and-white to be exact. The show ran for eight seasons total, and seasons six through eight...well...they’re not very good.

But why are those episodes so different? Though the setting of Mayberry itself changed very little over those eight seasons, it was the people that changed the whole dynamic. Deputy Barney Fife left town, Gomer Pyle joined the Marines, Ernest T. Bass goes into the woods, and isn’t heard from again. And in the end, America’s favorite community just wasn’t the same.

“Community” isn’t about the place, it’s about the people.

Today many of America’s communities are experiencing the same sort of exodus, but instead of losing iconic cast members, our hometowns are losing our most valuable assets—young,

educated leaders. I'm talking now, about the people in this arena.

In agriculture, we talk a lot about “urban sprawl” and we know how growing cities negatively impact the amount of land available to produce food. But urban sprawl also takes a toll on our societies and communities that are left behind as newer, flashier places are built up. When people go to the new places that means they're leaving the old places.

As new suburban areas are developed, young people—from rural small towns as well as the heart of the inner city—are drawn away from their original communities in pursuit of more career opportunities, safer neighborhoods, and better schools for families. The phenomenon is referred to as “brain drain”—and it is shrinking the population of small towns, and the heart of our cities. People around the country are giving up on home.

This creates a major problem. As educated, talented young people move away, these original communities are left in need. Our home towns and neighborhoods need the innovation and creativity of our generation. These communities need everyone from doctors to restaurant owners. They need teachers. They need the businessmen, preachers, entrepreneurs, farmers, barbers, police officers, firemen, engineers, architects, mechanics—they need *US*... whatever we decide to be in our career. Most of all, our communities need us to not give up on them.

Census data shows that the populations of our nation's rural counties are shrinking rapidly. Nearly 60% of rural counties shrank in population last year, up from 50% in 2009. In 2012, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said that “...Rural America with a shrinking population is becoming less and less

relevant to the politics of this country, and we had better recognize that and we better begin to reverse it.” Rural America can’t be relevant unless young people like us choose to stay in or move to rural areas to grow businesses and start families.

Today I think members of our organization face a tough choice as they consider their future and where they will start their career. We know our communities need us, and we may even sense the urgency that Secretary Vilsack alluded to in his speech. But our home towns—whether in rural Alabama or downtown Detroit—simply may not offer the jobs we need to make a living, or start a family. So what are we to do?

In FFA we love our creed and our mission statement. We read them, we memorize them, we recite them and we try to live by them. I believe current conditions are forcing young adults to choose between “career success”—what we focus on in our mission statement, and “making an impact in our home and community”—that we state in our creed. We shouldn’t have to choose between the two. We should not have to move away from the communities we love in order to find career success, and we shouldn’t have to live in want or poverty if we choose to stay and serve the places that need us. I think that there is a third option. It’s not easy, but it is fun. Our home communities may not offer us the opportunities we want as they are right now. But that’s where we come in. We have the opportunity to exercise our creative might. We have to start seeing our communities—and our futures differently..

Ya know, in high school, I was on my FFA chapter’s tractor restoration team. Each summer we would pull an old rusty antique tractor out of a barn or the woods and totally restore it, front-to-back, completely back to showroom quality as

it was originally designed to look. My first year on the team, we rolled the old hunk of rust into the shop and my advisor asked what we saw when we looked at it. Someone said “a mess”—someone said “a locked up engine”—someone said “a crushed radiator.” I remember turning to my advisor and asking, “what do you see?” He responded, “a shiny orange 1946 Case tractor.” After a few months of long hours in the shop and lots of hard work, that’s exactly what we had in front of us. We could have given up on that old tractor. We could have left it in the woods where we found it since it was past its prime; its heyday was long gone. We could have just bought a brand new tractor. But we didn’t. We put in the work, we cranked up the creativity, and we brought that old machine back to life.

We can see our communities the same way. We can see our communities for their possibilities rather than their imperfections. If we ever want to make progress, to create the sort of community that we really want to live in, we have to see our home towns not as they are, but as they can be.

People around the world are starting to do just that.

For instance, in Chicago, the founders of the organization “FarmedHere” reimagined the purpose of an abandoned warehouse, and have since turned it into the nation’s first indoor vertical farm—a 90,000 square foot aquaponic facility. They’re producing needed fresh food in an urban area while also creating 200 local jobs. Think of your own home town and where there might be an empty grocery store, an abandoned Walmart, or deserted factory—if we started to retrofit and re-purpose these structures, we may go a long way towards eliminating food deserts and shrinking the unemployment rate in our country.

Earlier this year, I made a trip to California. While I was there, I heard the story of the origin of a favorite snack food “baby carrots.” Since we call them baby carrots, I always assumed that they must have been taken away from their parent vegetables at an early age, which kind of made me sad. Apparently, these carrots aren’t infants at all! As the story goes, one carrot grower named Mike Yurosek grew tired of having to throw away so much of his crop each year because they didn’t fit the size and shape requirement that the grocery stores wanted. He became so frustrated with the waste, he perfected a way of rounding down oddly shaped carrots into uniform pieces.. Since the finished product was so cute, he called them “baby carrots” and sold them to the stores. Within a day on the shelf, the first grocery store was ordering more. Thus, the “baby carrot” was born. Today, 70% of the 1.9 billion pounds of carrots that are grown in California are made into “baby-carrots.” One man took a fresh look at his produce that was thought to be worthless, and ended up creating a whole new market—and turned his community of Bakersfield, California into the “baby carrot” capitol of the world. What resources does your community have? Where can we turn waste into a new opportunity?

Our generation is finding that same creative spirit, and I am optimistic that it will help us inherit a positive future, and keep our communities alive. It has been said that we are going to be the most entrepreneurial generation since the 1880’s and I don’t doubt that, because I know that just within our organization, our supervised agricultural experiences bring in \$4 billion annually. But we can’t earn that title of “most entrepreneurial” by sitting back and filling job openings as they present themselves—we have to create them where they don’t already exist! Opportunity

has to be made, and worked for. We **can** build opportunities for ourselves wherever we desire, from the rural countryside to the inner-city. We **cannot** give up on our dreams and our communities. We have to stop trying to make our dreams fit the world, and start making the world fit our dreams.

I read a wonderful quote the other day from a man named Howard Thurman. It goes like this, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

So business and innovation keeps a town or city alive, and in the near future, our generation will be in charge of making sure there are enough jobs here at home to keep our entire country strong. Still, even with the jobs—there is something missing, something maybe even more important. A sense of community.

Just like in Mayberry, “community” isn’t about the place. It’s about the people. It’s about us.

Mayberry was the town that many people wish, deep down, they could live in. Not much traffic, plenty of social events, beautiful buildings, a movie theatre, you name it, Mayberry had it. But it wasn’t the infrastructure, or the architecture, or the geographic location that made that community so loveable. It was the people. The people there knew each other by name, and not only that, they talked to each other on the sidewalk and genuinely cared about their neighbors. The people of Mayberry hosted parades to celebrate major holidays, they hosted community arts programs and if it was a weekend afternoon, you could find the members of the community playing a game

of softball or having a picnic. Those people breathed life into that place.

Now today, we may believe that a community so engaging and healthy is nothing but a fantasy—a Hollywood dream of days gone by. But the fact of the matter is...communities similar to Mayberry were at one time scattered all across our nation, and whether they were small rural villages, or urban neighborhoods, the essence of community where people knew and interacted with their neighbors, used to be easier to find. Take a look at this—Where are the parades now? Where are the community bowling leagues? Where are the town bands? Where are the places people can sit and talk?

I don't know about you, but I want that sort of community to be real again. I want to know my neighbor. I want to live in a place where I know the teachers at the school, the local law enforcement, and the butcher at the grocery store. I think we all might yearn for that sort of place deep down. A place we feel connected to—a community that actually feels like “home.” If we want a better community, we have to create it ourselves. It's not about the place, it's about the people. I believe that breathing life and energy into our communities is one of the most important ways we impact our homes as FFA members and chapters. We're taking these sort of steps around the country.

This year I have met members from Maine to Oregon who work hard each year to build beautiful parade floats in their school ag shop.

Numerous local chapters—like Coopersville FFA in Michigan—help to feed their neighbors by managing a community garden.

Talented musicians within our organization, like those that make up FFA String Bands back home in Alabama provide entertainment for community activities.

Members I met at Tuscumbia FFA in Missouri hosts an annual tractor-pull in their hometown that draws spectators from surrounding counties, and provides a boost to the local economy.

We repair houses. We collect canned food for the local pantry. We host farmers markets. We plan barbeques. We visit the elderly. We clothe the needy. And we support local businesses. FFA members breathe life into their communities, and we must keep it up. We must continue living to serve and never give up on home.

What will you do? How will you lead your chapter in service to your hometowns? How will you begin to use your individual strengths and talents to serve others and create opportunity?

If we do nothing, we will continue to face brain drain and city decay. Our small towns and urban centers will continue to be left for the comfort of suburbia and many people with no other choice, will be left behind. As future leaders, our communities rely on us to foster growth, create jobs, provide quality education, and bring new energy into our communities. If we are proactive—if we make the choice each and every day to “go all out” in the service of our home and community— we can turn the tide of development, use our innovation to create opportunity, and breathe vital life into dying communities— those that mean so much to us, our neighbors, and the health of the nation. So let’s chase our dreams. Let’s create a future of career success for ourselves, and let’s create opportunity in the places that need us the most. We cannot give up on home, we

must reimagine it. Let's reinvent the communities we love. Sure, it will be challenging, but in many cases the places that are most available and open to innovation are those that need them the most. Places like those that we all come from.

Let's begin right now, to hold true to the best traditions of our national life, and make an impact—as FFA members and chapters—in our homes and communities which will stand solid for our part in that inspiring task.