



Issue 14: February 2006

The Kitchen Table Concerns of Rural Americans

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As a former resident of a small rural town in the Midwest, I am particularly excited to introduce this month’s issue which looks at the economic issues affecting rural Americans across the country. In addition to hometown pride, we decided to focus this issue on rural Americans after attending an inspiring conference in Fargo, ND this past November called the [Prairie Rural Action Conference](#). Over 100 organizations and individuals came together from across the Great Plains to promote new nonpartisan approaches and policies for revitalizing rural communities. Featured in this issue are several of the participating organizations, including Renewing the Countryside, League of Rural Voters and the People Escaping Poverty Project.

“Rural” encompasses a broad diversity of communities and populations. These articles provide a provocative and timely glance into some of the economic concerns of Rural Americans, from the problem of health care access in rural communities to the innovative approaches communities are taking to call young people back home. We hope you enjoy the issue.

Myra Batchelder
Managing Editor

Tamara Draut
Editor

We are always working to improve the *Around the Kitchen Table*. If you have any ideas, concerns, or would just like to share your thoughts, please let us know. Thanks.

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INCOME

We Need You Here:

Rural Communities Are Calling Their Young People Home

By: Andi McDaniel, [Renewing the Countryside](#)

The bright lights of the big city have always lured ambitious, curious young people out of their hometowns. According to the long held cliché, if you really want to “make it big,” you’ve got to leave small town life behind—at least for a while. But while young people once had incentive to move back to their hometowns—in the form of entrepreneurship, agricultural jobs, or land ownership—the rural life has become an increasingly difficult sell. In a phenomenon known as “brain drain,” the talents and skills of young, college-educated workers are being siphoned towards metropolitan areas, depriving rural communities of a major source of economic health.

The good news is—residents and leaders of small towns aren’t about to let their youth get away without a fight. The out-migration of youth has spurred many rural communities to inventory their assets, and come up with bold, innovative ways of reaching their young people.

What Are the Causes?

The most commonly cited reason for the out-migration of youth is the problem of income. While the cost of living is lower in rural areas, so is the typical salary for a college-educated worker. And with the average college student graduating with an average of \$20,000 in debt, it’s no wonder that salary is a major deciding factor. There’s also an overall shortage in opportunities.

But of course, it’s not just the money that has young people downtown-bound—it’s also the social and cultural appeal. Over the last few decades, there’s been one after another challenge to the social fabric of small towns—from the 1980s farm crisis to the rise in large, corporate-run farms. The deterioration in social networks in small towns has made them less attractive to young people seeking diverse social and cultural experiences.

Why We Want Them Back

“We need to figure out how to attract young people!”—it’s a refrain heard at meeting places throughout rural America. And while rural residents recognize that young people bring intangible qualities to a place, their reasons are not purely sentimental. Rural communities are also invested economically in their young people’s educations. If their college-educated offspring never return to the community, their investment never pays off. Community leaders recognize that young people are economic catalysts; not only might they become entrepreneurs, they will also purchase goods and services from their neighbors. What’s more, young people often bring a certain artistic and cultural imagination to a town. And to be truly healthy, a community must not only recognize its history, but also invest in its future.

Shining Examples

At [Renewing the Countryside](#), we've had the opportunity to meet hundreds of people who are finding ways to support themselves financially in rural areas—while also contributing to their communities, respecting the environment, and nurturing their families.

On our website, www.renewingthecountryside.org, we showcase these examples—from people like Lisa Kivirist and John Ivanko, who run a “sustainable B & B” in southwestern Wisconsin, to young 1st generation farmers growing organic fruits and vegetables in counties from Washington State to Florida. We also profile entrepreneurs—both young and old—who are experimenting with alternative energy technology, natural building techniques, and artisanship in order to make small town living truly work. Many of the younger examples are part of an often-overlooked demographic—‘reverse’ migrants, who relocate by choice to rural areas. These individuals call into question the whole concept of “brain drain” altogether. After all, there's something to be said for supporting and appreciating the “brains” that remain.

The Best Laid Plans

Of the strategies for retaining youth that have been tried so far, one of the most interesting is the 2005 proposal by Iowa legislators to completely eliminate state income tax for every individual under 30. It was a bold idea, an investment of nearly \$200 million that would ultimately save young people an average of 600 bucks annually. In a [New York Times editorial](#), writer Verlyn Klinkenborg argues that this amount is “not enough to undo decades of social erosion.” The plan didn't make it onto the Senate floor, but it did garner a healthy bit of discussion and media attention.

Other Great Plains states have had even bolder plans. Kansas, for instance, offers parcels of free land to newcomers. Cities, school districts, economic development groups, and individuals have made land available for families that agree to build a home on the property within two years. On top of that, they've offered tax rebates and help with down payments. North Dakota is another state that uses free land as an incentive—along with “welcome packages,” which include anything from golf club memberships to gift certificates. Apparently, their idea is having an effect; North Dakota's population increased between 2003 and 2004 for the first time since 1996.

Jobs Without Farms?

But never mind the rural lifestyle, what would young people in small towns areas do for work these days? According to the [Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture](#), with the dramatic drop in on-farm employment in the last few decades, rural residents have turned more towards jobs in manufacturing, retail, and technology-based work.

Jobs in telecommunications, in particular, require high-speed Internet access, which varies widely throughout rural areas. More and more people are using Internet technology to allow them to “live the good life” in rural areas, while reaping a good salary from a company based in the city.

And then there are those people who have found ways to “live the good life” full time. The upsurge in consumer demand for fresh, organic foods has created a growing niche for innovative small farmers who may not have much of a background in agriculture, but are passionate about living in a more ecologically-responsible way.

Take for example organic growers Wendy Munroe, Andrew Stout, and John Huscle, who started [Full Circle Farm](#) in Washington State. The trio raised the initial capital for their farm by selling eggrolls at Grateful Dead concerts—and now they bring in over \$1.2 million in annual sales. In our book *Renewing the Countryside: Washington*, Full Circle is described as a farm where, “the ideals of the organic movement have been grafted with the sophistication and market savvy of the twenty-first century, and the results have been fruitful.” And that’s just one example.

The future of rural America is inherently dependent upon young people—so it’s no wonder that rural communities are so focused on the issue. But by looking at the bigger picture, and aiming to make their towns more hospitable to youth—by enriching cultural opportunities and building stronger economies—not only might they attract young people, they’ll enjoy the benefits themselves.

*--Andi McDaniel is a program associate at *Renewing the Countryside*, a 501(c)3 non-profit that strengthens rural areas by championing and supporting farmers, artists, entrepreneurs, educators, activists, and others who are revitalizing the countryside through innovative endeavors.*

Resources:

- *Renewing the Countryside* - <http://www.renewingthecountryside.org>
- Northern Great Plains Inc. - <http://www.ngplains.org>
- Southern Rural Development Center - <http://srdc.msstate.edu>
- Center for Rural Affairs - <http://www.cfra.org>

PEOPLE

The Changing Face of Rural Communities

By: Amalia Anderson, [Main Street Project](#)

Minnesota is typically characterized as a largely “white” state, with little ethnic/racial diversity—a representation that is not altogether undeserved. Data from the [2000 census](#) shows that the majority of Minnesotans are White—89.4 percent. During the past decade, however, Minnesota has witnessed a tremendous growth in its populations of color. During the 1990’s, the Latino population [increased by 166 percent](#)—the 9th fastest gain when compared with all other states, and the highest rate in the Midwest. Minnesota, however, is not alone.

In 1900, there were only slightly more than 500,000 Latinos in the United States; today, our numbers have grown to more than 35 million. As Texas A&M Professor Rogelio Saenz writes in *Latinos and the Changing Face of America*, “the most dramatic impact of the Latino population on the demography of the nation has taken place over the last few decades. The number of Latinos in the United States more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, accounting for 40 percent of the growth in the country's population during that period.” According to the Census Bureau, Latinos became the largest “minority” group in the United States in 2002 when the Latino population grew to 37.4 million. Today one of every eight residents of the United States is Latino. By 2050, the Census Bureau projects there will be nearly 100 million Latinos, who will number one out of every three people, living in the United States.

Currently, Latinos are the largest “minority” population in six of the ten largest cities in the United States—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia, not to mention Detroit, San Antonio and Dallas. As a community, Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population—and this growth is especially striking in rural areas. Unlike the often cited statistics about out migration and declining populations in rural areas—the 2000 census shows that Latinos account for 25 percent of all non-metro population growth during the 1990's. This increase is not going unnoticed in states like Nebraska, which experienced a [155 percent growth](#) in its Latino population—or Minnesota with an increase of 166 percent. In fact, other than the Native American Population, Latinos are responsible for *most, if not all*, of the growth in otherwise declining rural communities.

As William Kandel and Emilio Parrado write in their article, *US Industrial Transformation and New Latino Migration*, “the total Latino population has actually expanded at a faster rate in rural areas than in urban areas. ... [And] half of all rural county Latinos now live outside the Southwest, where for centuries the largest concentrations of Latinos had settled.” This change in Latino migration has affected and been most affected by the [transformation of the U.S. meat-processing industry](#). In the last few years, rural areas have witnessed breathtaking changes in their racial and ethnic demographics. Far from random and haphazard, the movement of Latinos to rural communities has almost exclusively been due to “jobs” which have attracted new immigrant populations to areas of this country that have never seen these populations before. Meatpacking, poultry processing, corporate dairies and traditional agricultural fieldwork are just a few of the [types of employment](#) to which this new population has been heavily recruited.

These population changes have been particularly dramatic in the Southeast and the Midwest. Today Latinos are no longer concentrated in “historic” Latino states such as Texas, California, New York and Florida. Instead, states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Minnesota and Nebraska are among those that experienced the largest growth in their Latino population from 1990 to 2000. And [“New and Emerging” Latino populations](#) are growing in Iowa, Kansas, Wisconsin and Missouri. Today, nearly half of all non-metro Latinos live outside the Historically Latino Southwest. Between 1980 and 1992, the number of Latinos in 10 mid-western states - Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska - climbed from 1.2 million to 1.8 million. This growth has been associated with the restructuring of the meat-processing industry and the [expansion of low-wage jobs](#) in the Midwest, primarily in non-metropolitan areas. States such as Missouri

saw a 92% growth in their Latino population as of the 2000 census, while others such as Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska realized a 100-155% increase.

New and growing Latino communities provide significant opportunities for economic development rural revitalization. Already businesses are increasingly relying on Latinos as entrepreneurs, employees, investors, and consumers. Schools and other educational systems are finding that Latinos are the growing student population. In coming years, we will become educators, administrator, and school board officials. Political institutions will find that Latinos will play an increasingly powerful role in the outcome of elections—as voters and political candidates. Health care systems will increasingly see Latinos as health care recipients, providers and translators. Media outlets will find they have new multilingual consumers. Finally, Religious institutions will find Latinos as new membership, and as Religious and Lay Leaders.

As Latino populations in rural communities continue to grow, it's important for institutions, organizations and individuals to recognize them not just as consumers and workers, but as contributors in all facets of society—bringing much needed economic and population revitalization to small towns and rural communities. There's much more to this beyond the dollars- and-development pitch that is the usual (and important) cornerstone of economic revitalization. Far from being a homogenous population, Latinos are instead a mix of citizens and non-citizens, immigrants and refugees, political asylees, permanent residents, adoptees, native-born and naturalized people. We are Indigenous, Mestizo, Chicano, Asian and Afro-Latino. We are old and, increasingly, young. We are multilingual—speaking Spanish and/or English as well as many of the first languages of this Hemisphere like Mam, Kekchi or Mixtec. In our migrations to rural communities, we bring our dynamic and vibrant cultural traditions, languages and histories—our identities, our selves, which are not only invaluable, but the most significant contributions of all!

Amalia Anderson is a Maya/Latina organizer and the Project Director for the Main Street Project, which uses a combination of grassroots organizing and policy work to document the economic challenges facing people in rural communities, give voice to their hopes, and the tools to create change.

Resources:

- Main Street Project - <http://www.mainstreetproject.org>
- League of Rural Voters - <http://www.leagueofruralvoters.org>
- Center for Rural Strategies - <http://www.ruralstrategies.org>

EDUCATION

Small Schools, Small Districts:

Good for Rural Kids, Economies, and Democracy

By: Rachel Tompkins, President of the [Rural School and Community Trust](#)

Among the many public policies that are damaging to rural communities, the most devastating may be state schemes to eliminate schools from the American countryside.

Rural communities are small, scattered across a big landscape and often economically struggling. Likewise, the schools that serve these communities are generally small, isolated and fiscally distressed. Many states have or are considering plans to force or induce small schools or small districts to consolidate. Many more are ratcheting up curriculum requirements that increase costs without providing the funding small schools need to meet these demands.

These policies ignore a profoundly simple reality: Small schools work for kids and for communities. And, research indicates that consolidating them saves little to nothing in operating costs.

The educational research is crystal clear: students do better in smaller schools, especially students from low-income families. They not only score higher on standardized tests, but they are far more likely to graduate high school than students in large schools. They participate in more extracurricular activities and take on more leadership roles. They have fewer discipline problems. And, their parents are more likely to be involved in their children's education. In study after study, small schools have been shown to cut poverty's power over student achievement.

Despite the challenges of rising poverty and shrinking resources, rural community schools perform well compared to other schools. And the fact that a school exists is a starting point for educational improvement not available where there is no school.

The main reason small schools work is that everyone is needed, in curricular and extra-curricular activities alike. Small high schools need students to sign up for physics—or band or calculus or Spanish—in order to offer the class. Large consolidated schools have more incentives to actively discourage lower-scoring students from taking challenging courses. A Nebraska study documented that the larger the rural school, the broader the course offerings, but the lower the participation rate across the whole curriculum. When kids are not needed, they don't participate.

The same is true in extra-curricular activity. If a small school wants to have a band, or a football team, or a dinner theatre, it needs most kids to sign up. That means the 4'10" freshman in a high school of 100 has a good chance of starting on the basketball team, but she'll be lucky to be in the stands in a large distant school. Participation rates matter because students who take part in extra-curricular activities are more likely to graduate and to make successful transitions to adulthood.

In rural areas, a big school also means long bus rides. Many kids can't stay after school to participate in activities, unless their parents—or their coach or conductor, if they are really talented—can arrange transportation home. In consolidated schools, opportunities tend to be limited to those who are both talented and affluent.

Those long bus rides—in some states kids are on the bus longer each day than they are in the classroom—also discourage kids from taking advanced classes that require extensive homework. Leaving for school at 5:00 a.m. and returning home at 5:00 in the afternoon stymies even the most ambitious and dedicated students.

Adolescents need to be known, needed, respected, and responsible. Small schools close to students' homes can fashion academic activities around real community issues and let students do work that is independently valuable to adults in their community. In many rural schools, students publish community newspapers, do research for community development projects, operate local businesses and document local history. Academic work of real-world value is irresistibly engaging to even reluctant students, and it is difficult to arrange when schools are not in communities.

Schools benefit communities in other ways, too. Schools, especially high schools, anchor rural communities. Recent research in New York State showed that small rural communities with schools have higher housing values, lower poverty rates, more entrepreneurs and professionals, fewer residents dependent on public assistance and more people employed locally than similarly sized communities that don't have schools.

Schools provide adults with leadership opportunities in parent-teacher groups, booster clubs and school governing bodies. Schools bring people to town, where they shop, congregate to discuss local matters and support local events. They help forge a shared identity that encourages community improvement and breeds hope. When there is no local school, these avenues for community development and responsibility don't exist.

The case for small schools is sometimes misused. Some communities fight to keep their local school because they do not want to integrate their kids with children who are poorer or of a different racial or ethnic background. Some small schools are hostage to the corrupt forces of nepotism, graft and privilege. These pernicious attitudes and practices are inexcusable when they occur in communities of any size. But in most instances, rural communities want to keep their schools because they are better for students.

Finally, schools give communities political power. Where small schools are plentiful in rural communities, people participate in local politics. They serve on school boards, argue over school budgets, practice the kind of face-to-face accountability that matters most. Schools are incubators of democracy and the more dispersed schooling is, the more dispersed will be political power. When rural communities fight for the right to have a school, they are fighting for democracy as well as for their kids.

What do they need from the rest of us? They need us to understand that, in schooling, "small" works, communities count, and the poorest communities can support good schools when properly funded. They need a commitment that every child should have a good school close to home, run by adults who care for their future. They need policies that

respect rural children by protecting them from long bus rides. They need policies that support rural schools where they exist, reopen schools that have been closed, and rebuild schools where they are needed.

Resources:

- Rural School and Community Trust - <http://www.ruraledu.org>

HEALTH

Access to Health Care for Rural America: Why It Matters

By: Mary Wakefield, Ph.D., R.N. & Brad Gibbens, M.P.A

Center for Rural Health

**University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences,
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Some may wonder why maintaining access to high quality health care in rural America is important. After all, there are parts of the country where livestock vastly outnumber people and making health care available is expensive. In fact, states like North Dakota have considerable land mass designated as frontier—commonly defined as less than seven people per square mile. Ensuring access to health care in remote areas can be daunting. However, policymakers and others too often look at rural health care as ‘either/or’ rather than the harder work of determining “what and how.”

New technology for example, offers some rural communities the opportunity to continue providing the complement of health care services that existed historically. This may mean having a home health nurse attend a patient’s needs in their home. In another rural area a ‘virtual’ visit (the ‘what’) through the application of health information technology (the ‘how’) may achieve the same outcome. In other words, viewing rural communities, as with viewing rural health care systems, as all the same is both simplistic and simply inaccurate. Solutions to ensuring access may be as varied as interpreting the notion of ‘rural’ itself.

Embedded within the concept ‘rural’ are shades of gray, ranging from very low population density frontier areas with people living and working in that same location, to areas with fairly large numbers of people living in rural communities and commuting daily to large urban centers. For example, it is not uncommon to find people living in rural West Virginia and commuting daily to the nation’s capitol, Washington D.C. Across this “rural continuum”, a relatively large number of people can be counted. Surprising to some is the fact that about 20 percent of Americans live in the various dimensions of “rural America”. This constitutes a population roughly equivalent to that of France.

The health care infrastructure that services rural dwellers is as varied as the population itself, with perhaps one exception. Some of the redundancy in availability of health services that

exists in many large metropolitan areas is typically missing across rural areas. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. For example, the large volume of specialists and services available and provided to Medicare beneficiaries in Dade County, Florida—as well as in other high population density areas—is not generally found in rural America. Given recent studies that indicate that high cost, supply-induced care is not always tied to high quality patient outcomes, this is one difference between rural and urban health care that should not be troubling to rural Americans.

However, there are services that are important to be able to access with relative ease—particularly given the health status of rural populations. Contrary to popular myth, rural Americans are not necessarily healthier than their city counterparts. Rural populations tend to exhibit higher rates of alcohol consumption, smoking and obesity than urban populations—all of which, left unaddressed, serves as a trip wire for serious chronic illnesses. In general, rural areas can be characterized as older and poorer than urban areas, according to the Institute of Medicine's 2004 *Quality Through Collaboration* report. An older population, with more chronic conditions, accesses health care more and impacts the health system directly. This also impacts provider payment as rural health providers tend to rely more heavily on the adequacy of Medicare payment.

Rural areas must also contend with income disparity. Typically, household income is lower in rural areas as compared to urban. Poverty is a factor as well. In 2000, about 85 percent of poor counties in the U.S. were rural. Again, more health problems are associated with people with lower incomes. According to a 2003 study published by the Kaiser Commission, uninsured rates are much higher in rural than in urban populations (24 percent versus 18 percent). These economic challenges compound the difficulty in ensuring geographic access.

Another set of problems facing rural areas relates to the rural health system itself. For example, rural communities tend to have significantly greater difficulty recruiting health care providers. In 2000, rural areas had more than 100 fewer physicians per 100,000 people than did urban areas. Nurses represent an emerging shortage area as there are nearly 70 fewer nurses per 100,000 people in rural areas than in urban. Rural areas consistently deal with shortages of mental, dental and emergency health care providers. An urban dwelling heart attack victim can often count on highly trained, salaried paramedics and emergency medical technicians to respond relatively rapidly. Alternatively, rural Americans often depend on emergency medical service volunteers who struggle to maintain basic credentialing and avoid burnout as they watch their numbers thin; all while managing their day jobs.

Rural health care providers and consumers aren't looking for hand-outs conveyed through a "soup-kitchen" contrived health system to ensure access to a set of health care services. They should however, be able to expect that policymakers, payors, insurance companies and others will make some effort to understand the rural context that makes delivering rural health care different. They should also be able to expect that, to the extent possible, rural-sensitive policies, payment and health coverage expectations are crafted thoughtfully and creatively—as opposed to a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Payment policies and regulations, designed for urban healthcare systems are too frequently retrofitted for rural health care. Reimbursement and regulatory policies should not penalize rural providers for characteristics that are beyond their control, such as low patient volume and fixed overhead, often found in delivery systems located in sparsely populated areas. Instead, policymakers and other health

care stakeholders should encourage the development of new approaches to sustaining a set of community-relevant services. A good example of emerging trends are rural health care networks being built around shared services, purchasing and other common functions. Another example that needs to be nurtured is the application of health care technologies that connect rural people to health care resources and are reimbursed by mainstream payors rather than forced to limp along in search of ongoing grant funding.

Much of what is unfolding in health care in rural America is invention catalyzed by necessity. Some of the strategies pursued in our most remote areas ultimately may be the most cutting edge approaches to health care service design. The nation isn't well served by geographically determined health care haves and have-nots. We are well served when supportive policies allow ingenuity and creativity to grow new approaches to ensuring health care access.

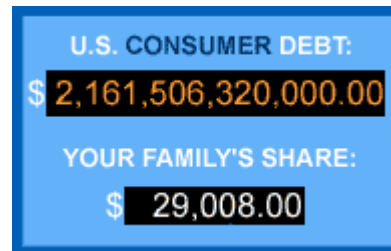
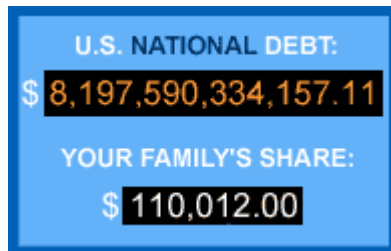
Resources:

- Center for Rural Health - <http://www.med.und.nodak.edu/depts/rural>
- Rural Assistance Center - <http://www.raconline.org>
- Office of Rural Health Policy - <http://www.ruralhealth.hrsa.gov/>

DEBT CLOCK

The Federal Reserve Board released its monthly summary of [consumer credit](#) on February 7, 2006. According to their statistics, consumer credit increased 3 percent in 2005 and nearly 2 percent in December. After increasing at an annual rate of 5.25 percent in the third quarter, consumer credit remained basically unchanged in the fourth quarter and now stands at \$2.16 trillion. Revolving consumer credit for the fourth quarter was \$801.3 billion, down slightly from \$802.4 billion in the third quarter.

The 3 percent year-to-year increase in consumer credit marked the smallest increase since 1992. Still, fifty-nine percent, or nearly three-fifths, of consumer credit is in high cost non-revolving credit and charge card debt.



LYSA'S PERSONAL TABLE

Lysa's Table: The People Escaping Poverty Project Herstory

By: Lysa Ringquist, Co-Founder of PEPP

People Escaping Poverty Project **PEPP** began in 1986 with mostly single parent women organizing around steep cuts in public assistance. The cuts if passed would interrupt the lives of thousands of women and children in the state of Minnesota.

In Moorhead, MN, two women who were social work students had become aware of the proposed cuts authored and introduced by our own House Representative.

They recruited about 25 -20 single parent women to a meeting to talk about the issue and to recruit anyone interested in organizing to fight the cuts. We all shared incredible determination despite experiencing domestic abuse, homelessness and being scrutinized with stereotypes now that we were single parents. Having only a high school education we were struggling to make ends meet in low paying jobs that didn't meet our basic needs. With no other alternatives we found we had to access public assistance to make sure our children were cared for. Not interested in staying on assistance forever we enrolled in college to increase our access to higher wages.

Believing we were acting responsibly, we were determined to stay on course and fight this proposal. Over the next several months, on top of all of our other responsibilities, we met consistently, developing and refining our action plans and strategies, and seeking advice from experienced organizers. We developed a petition to use as a talking tool to go door knocking in identified neighborhoods, on campuses, and with our families and friends. We built an ally base by going to area churches, colleges, and nonprofit organizations to talk about the issue and myths of poverty; increasingly we found people who supported us and who would help us spread the news. We met with our legislators at the capitol and presented our petition. Our voice together with other Minnesotans made an impact and the bill was defeated! Recognizing that we had power in numbers we saw importance in developing into a formal organization and PEPP was born. We think it's an important part of our herstory to add that the Representative who proposed the cuts, lost when he ran for re-election 1988. In an interview he stated his reason for losing was because the large numbers of non-income producing voters. We know the real reason he lost was because the increased number of untapped voters. PEPP is celebrating its 20th year in Community Organizing with a focus on issues that affect people living in poverty. If you want to learn more about People Escaping Poverty Project go to our website at www.pepp.org.

TALK OF THE TABLE

Rural Organizing Project: Building a Movement for Just Democracy

By: Amy Dudley, Rural Organizing Project

Members of Oregon's [Rural Organizing Project](#) (ROP) understood the dangers of devolving funding trends as they gained steam back in the early 90s. Words like 'neoconservative' and 'neoliberal' didn't mean much, but the new norm in small town Oregon—rural schools without bus service, prohibitive athletic fees and library closures—certainly hit home. ROP quickly expanded our focus from exposing the Right's scapegoating of queers, most dramatically in our defeat of 1992's Measure 9, to promoting caution around the Right's fast moving tax revolts that started with Measure 5 in 1990.

ROP recognized the Right as the common force that was constricting democracy. First with the LGBT wedge and then, while we were busy fighting homophobia, they hit us with tax cuts; just as they are using the wedges of immigration and gay marriage today to play on the worst in people and distract from rational policy discussions on these issues as well as funding for vital human needs, not the war in Iraq. So in 1995, ROP started hosting conversations about fair taxes, functioning communities and inclusive democracy in living rooms around the state. The Right was attempting to sell the tax revolt as justice for working Americans who were frustrated with their own growing tax burden. ROP talked explicitly about how defunding government services was a threat to democracy and that a more fair tax system would support economic justice in the form of higher taxes on corporations and lower taxes for low-income families. Despite our efforts, tax cuts won popular support at most ballot boxes and continue to plague our rural communities.

But as the floodwaters rose along the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina, drowning poor community after poor community, rural Oregonians quickly recognized a common lens through which to promote the value of good government, fair taxation, and racial and economic justice in 2006. This led to our campaign to Rebuild America.

The vision of Rebuild America is articulated in a People's Pledge that calls for fair taxation, corporate accountability and living wage jobs. The Pledge links the need for funding of vital human needs, healthcare and education to a shift in budget priorities beginning with an end to the war in Iraq and funding for renewable energy that would reduce US dependence on foreign oil. The Pledge concludes with a call for civil rights, civil liberties, and, most specifically, immigrant rights—many of the first casualties of democracy in times of crisis or economic depression experienced by many rural communities.

Members of the 60 local human dignity groups that ROP works with in small towns around the state of Oregon are taking action with the People's Pledge as their vision statement. They are collecting signatures of folks who will use their vote to support policies and initiatives that advance this vision and then educating folks on just how to do that. A key piece of this education is building solidarity with immigrant communities and supporting the development of allies who will speak up for immigrant rights and against the thinly veiled racist arguments that the anti-immigrant movement is using to divide communities while preying on the real fears and frustrations of unemployed and underemployed working class people in rural communities.

In addition to political action, local groups are creating community projects that meet one another's needs in ways that our de-funded infrastructure is not. One example is a newly formed soup kitchen in Madras, Oregon that provides a hot meal for the community along with progressive food for thought. These groups are expanding the progressive network by

building a caring community that works to meet one another's needs while advocating for democratic policies that can prioritize and realize the economic justice needs of the greater community.

Amy Dudley is an organizer and program director for the Rural Organizing Project. For more information on ROP, go to www.rop.org.