

What Rural Means to Me

Place & Perspective: April 2026

When people ask me what “rural” means, I could give them the textbook answer. Sparsely populated. Far from cities. Fewer resources. That’s what most folks picture. But that’s not all that comes to mind for me.

When I think of rural, I think of family. I think of the kind of place where everybody knows your name, your parents’ names, and probably your grandparents’ names too. I think of teachers who don’t just teach you, but check on you. I think of neighbors who don’t wait to be asked before they help. You’ve probably heard the phrase, “it takes a village.” Where I’m from, that’s not just something people say. It’s how we live.

I’m from London, Kentucky, nestled in the southeastern corner of the state. Central Appalachia. And if we’re being honest, when most people hear that, they already have a picture in their head of poverty, struggle, and lack of education. And to be clear, there are real challenges here. You don’t have to look far to see them. But the problem is, for a lot of people, that’s where the story ends.

It’s easy to make assumptions about places you’ve never been. I do it too sometimes. We all do. But Eastern Kentucky is a whole lot more than what shows up in headlines or statistics. This place is full of some of the hardest working people you’ll ever meet. People who will genuinely do anything for one another without thinking twice. People who show up. Every single time. And people who have been overlooked for a long time, not because they lack ability, but because they’ve been underestimated.

What outsiders don’t always see is how strong the sense of community really is. It’s in the small things. It’s in the way people check in on each other. It’s in how schools aren’t just buildings, they’re the backbone of everything. In a lot of places around here, the school district is the largest employer. But more than that, it’s the center of the community. That’s where rural education comes in.

Now, I'm not going to pretend everything is perfect. Kentucky doesn't rank at the top in education outcomes. That's just a fact. There are gaps. There are limitations. There are students who don't always get the same opportunities as others across the country. But what we do have is people who care. Deeply.

We have teachers who go above and beyond every single day. I'm talking about folks who stay late, who spend their own money on supplies, who push students to be better because they believe in them, even when those students might not believe in themselves yet. That kind of dedication doesn't always show up in rankings, but it matters more than people realize. And things are changing.

There's been a real push, especially here in Laurel County and across Eastern Kentucky, to rethink what education looks like. It's not just about getting through high school anymore. There's more focus on what comes after. Programs like GEAR UP have been huge. They're helping students see college as something that's actually within reach, not some far-off idea. And when it comes to higher education, people might assume access is limited. But that's not the full picture either.

Eastern Kentucky is home to something pretty remarkable. You've got schools like Berea College and Alice Lloyd College that offer no-tuition education to students who qualify, and most do. Think about that for a second. In a place where money can be tight, there are institutions saying, "If you're willing to work for it, we'll make sure cost isn't the reason you can't succeed." That's powerful.

And then you've got the University of the Cumberlands, where I go. They've made a real commitment to affordability. We're talking about keeping costs down to the point where students are paying around two thousand dollars a semester out of pocket. That changes things. That opens doors.

So yeah, rural education has its challenges. No doubt about it. But there's also innovation happening. There's investment happening. There are people fighting every day to make it better. What it looks like here is a mix of grit and hope. Limited means, sure. But unlimited potential. And that's the part I wish more people could see.

Because the truth is, a lot of "bright" students from places like mine feel like they have to leave to succeed. Like opportunity only exists

somewhere else. And I get that. There's a reason people go. But for me, it's different.

If I had the chance to choose where I was born and raised, I'd pick London, Kentucky every single time. No question. Because this place made me who I am. It taught me the value of hard work. It showed me what it means to care about people. It gave me a community that backs its own in a way that's hard to explain unless you've lived it.

And instead of leaving for good, I want to stay. I want to build something here. I want to create opportunities so that the next generation doesn't feel like they have to go somewhere else to make something of themselves.

"Rural" isn't just a location. It's a perspective. It's a way of life. It's people showing up for each other when it matters most. And if more folks took the time to really see places like Eastern Kentucky, not just for what we lack, but for what we have and what we're building, I think the story they tell would start to sound a whole lot different.

So here's the question I keep coming back to: what would happen if we stopped underestimating rural communities, and started investing in them the way they've always invested in their people?

Because I've seen what we can do with a little.

Imagine what we could do with more.