

# The People Who Wove Me In

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For the last few years, I've had a simple life motto I go by: take every opportunity.

It's become a running joke with the people who know me. I have a hard time saying no to much of anything. If there's an internship, I apply. If there's a fellowship, I fill out the application. If somebody is willing to grab coffee, I'll make the drive. If there's a meeting, a conference, or a chance to learn something new, I usually find a way to be there.

Some people probably think I spread myself too thin. Maybe they're right sometimes. But growing up in a rural community has taught me that opportunities don't always come around twice. When they do, you take them.

The funny thing is, I've learned that taking opportunities is only half the story. The other half is people. Most of the opportunities that have changed my life began with someone who decided to answer an email, make an introduction, or spend an hour investing in somebody they didn't really know.

A few weeks ago, I reached out to a woman with the United States Marshals Service. I didn't know her personally. I simply sent an email introducing myself and asking if she'd be willing to share a little about her career. She could have ignored it, but she invited me to meet her.

She spent part of her day showing me around, talking about her work, answering every question I had, and helping me better understand a career field I'd only read about. Then she took me to lunch, and when I tried to pay for my meal, she smiled and wouldn't let me.

She said that when she was younger, people constantly invested in her. They answered her questions, made introductions, and opened doors. She

said that because so many people had done that for her, she tries to do the same thing every chance she gets.

She didn't have to spend her afternoon with a college student. She certainly didn't have to introduce me to people she knew, but she did. Before long, those introductions led to conversations with the United States Attorney's Office and eventually an internship opportunity I never expected to have a chance at.

That's how opportunity works more often than we realize. It comes from somebody deciding you're worth a moment of their time.

I think that's something we don't talk about enough when we talk about rural communities. People often assume the biggest challenge is talent, and I don't buy that for a second. What we often lack is access.

Rural students graduate high school at rates comparable to students almost anywhere else, yet they're still far less likely to earn college degrees or attend highly selective universities. At many of the country's top institutions, students from rural America make up only a fraction of the student body, even though nearly one in five Americans lives in a rural community.

This is because many of us start farther away from the table, not because rural students have less potential.

We don't always know the internships exist and we don't always know who to call. We haven't met that person who says, "Send me your resume," or "I'd be happy to introduce you." Those things matter, and I've seen organizations beginning to recognize that as well.

This year, I became involved with Citizens & Scholars by serving on its Youth Advisory Council. One thing I've appreciated about the organization is that it intentionally looks for students whose voices are often missing from national conversations, including students from rural areas. Instead of asking young people to simply participate, they ask us to help shape the conversation itself.

Too often, decisions about rural communities are made without rural people sitting at the table. If institutions genuinely want to understand places like eastern Kentucky, they have to invite people from those places into the room before the decisions are made, not after.

I've learned something else over the past year. People are much more willing to help than we often believe. I've benefited from that generosity more times than I deserve, and I've started realizing there's a responsibility that comes with it.

One day, I hope I'm the person answering the email. I hope a student from a small town reaches out with questions about law school or working in my career field, and I can say yes without thinking twice because somebody once did the exact same thing for me.

Communities really grow through ordinary people deciding to weave someone else into the network they already have. I think that's one of the biggest lessons Appalachia has to offer. We know relationships matter.

The challenge now is making sure those relationships extend beyond county lines so young people don't have to leave home to find opportunity. They should be able to leave, learn, and know there's still a community ready to welcome them back.

If there's one thing I hope institutions hear, it's this: we need open doors. Because sometimes one conversation really can change the direction of someone's life, goals, and outlook. It certainly changed mine.