Community Shows Up

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On May 16, 2025, an EF-4 tornado tore through Laurel County, Kentucky. Nineteen people lost their lives, hundreds of homes were damaged, and entire neighborhoods were changed overnight. It was one of the deadliest tornadoes in Kentucky in recent years, and it happened in my hometown.

Like most people here, I knew plenty of folks who had been affected, and my family felt the effects of it too. In the days afterward, I walked through some of the damaged areas. There were homes completely gone, vehicles overturned, and debris scattered across places that had once been so familiar to me. It was hard to believe what you were seeing. What stood out to me most, though, was not the damage. It was the response.

One of the hardest-hit areas was around Wyan-Pine Grove Elementary School. The school quickly became the center of a lot of the relief work. Teachers, school staff, parents, churches, and volunteers worked together to help families who had lost so much. Donations poured in from across the region.

Organizations also stepped in. Samaritan's Purse showed up big and got to work by serving meals and providing support to survivors and first responders. The Christian Appalachian Project rigged up a makeshift relief center in London where families could find whatever help they needed. Local churches opened their doors and community groups coordinated efforts. Neighbors truly helped neighbors.

For me, that was one of the clearest examples of community investment I have ever seen. People invested their time and energy into helping complete strangers because they understood that when one part of the community hurts, everybody feels it. The tornado is one huge example, but it is absolutely not the only one.

Growing up here in Eastern Kentucky, I often felt there was a gap between our community and the opportunities beyond the region. My schools were filled with caring teachers and excellent students, but many opportunities simply were not visible to us. Internships, fellowships, and networks often felt like things that were outside of the realm of possibility, or you just never knew they existed in the first place.

As I got older and into college, mentors and professors began introducing me to new opportunities. They encouraged me to apply for programs and helped me both see and think bigger. What they invested was trust.

These experiences helped me understand something more important, and I’m sure it’s similar for other rural communities. Community investment is rarely just about money. A lot of the time, it’s about that real connection.

Here in Appalachia, relationships are everything. Trust is what holds it all together. People want to know that someone genuinely cares before they open up or ask for help. That trust is built through consistency, and it is built by showing up.

That is why relationships are so important to the success of communities like mine. They connect people to opportunities and folks to rely on that they might not have had access to before. At the same time, I think there are still gaps that need attention.

One gap I’ve noticed, like I stated a moment ago, is the lack of connection between rural students and opportunities outside the region. That is where this kind of investment matters.

Imagine if every rural student regularly had more chances to meet people working in different fields. Imagine if more organizations made a bigger effort to reach students from Appalachian communities. Imagine if rural schools had stronger partnerships with universities and employers across the country.

I think we would see more students pursuing opportunities they never thought were possible. More young people returning home with new skills and experiences. More communities keeping and growing the talent that already exists here.

The real-life cost of disinvestment is not always obvious. Over time, it looks like opportunities disappearing and young people leaving for good. It can create the feeling that success is limited and that rural communities are simply expected to get by with less. I do not believe that has to be the case.

The tornado response reminded me of what is possible when people invest in one another. Most importantly, I saw what happens when the foundation of trust already exists before a crisis occurs. Communities are strongest when relationships are strong. That is true during disasters, but it is also true in education, economic development, and everyday life.

Communities grow when people believe in each other. And, from what I have seen right here locally, that still matters.