

What Rural Means to Me

Place & Perspective: April 2026

What does "rural" mean in your lived experience?

In my lived experience, rural meant limited access to resources. That's the simplest way to put it. While I was in school, I never felt that students had what they needed to fill the gaps in our school system. Those gaps weren't abstract to me. I was placed on an IEP early on, and that experience was eye-opening. It showed me exactly where the cracks were. Not just in the curriculum or the building, but in the way support was supposed to work. There were people who tried, but trying isn't the same as having enough. Rural meant fewer tutors, fewer specialists, longer waits, and a quiet understanding that you might have to figure things out on your own.

I remember sitting in meetings where teachers and administrators talked about my IEP like it was a puzzle they didn't quite have the pieces for. They meant well, but meaning well doesn't fix a shortage of trained staff or a budget that never seemed to reach the students who needed it most. Other kids in similar situations fell further behind, not because they weren't smart or willing, but because the system simply wasn't built to catch them. Rural schools often operate like they're twenty years behind, and if you're a kid who already needs extra help, that gap feels like a chasm. You learn to advocate for yourself before you even know what that word means. That's not a lesson I asked for, but it's one rural life gave me.

What assumptions do people make about your community?

More often than not, the assumptions about my community are negative. I currently live in North Tulsa, which is a predominantly Black community. People from outside tend to describe us as disjointed and unconnected. I hear that a lot. But honestly? North Tulsa is the only place where I can say I truly feel like I am part of a community. I've lived in other parts of Tulsa, and I always come back here.

There's a reason for that. When times get hard, we come together. We support one another in ways that don't make the news, because no one films a neighbor bringing groceries or a church opening its doors after a crisis. Outsiders see the statistics. We see each other.

I remember when a fire tore through a row of apartments a few years back. Within hours, people had opened up their homes, set up donation drives, and started cooking meals out of their own kitchens. No city program coordinated it. No news crew showed up until the next day. That's what outsiders don't see—the quiet, constant work of looking out for your neighbor. They assume that because we don't have shiny new developments or trendy coffee shops, we must not have connections. But connection is almost all we have, and we've turned it into something durable. You learn quickly in North Tulsa that community isn't about convenience. It's about showing up. And we do, over and over again, whether anyone is watching or not.

What's true that outsiders might not see?

What outsiders might not see is how focused we are on bettering our community—through education, connection, and understanding our history. North Tulsa has a deep, rich history. We want to share it. Not just the hardships, though those are real, and they matter. But also the fact that our ancestors' lives were grand. They built things. They created culture. They raised families with dignity in a system designed to deny them that. We want to honor their legacy—not as victims, but as people who kept going. That's what drives so many of us here. We study our history because it teaches us what we're capable of. And we keep working on education and connection because that's how you honor people who never got the chance to finish what they started.

Take the story of Greenwood District, what used to be called Black Wall Street. Outsiders might only know the 1921 massacre, and that matters, we don't hide from it. But what they don't always see is what existed before the destruction. Over six hundred Black-owned businesses. A hospital. A post office. Schools. Lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs building something from nothing because they had no other choice and they had every bit of will. That legacy is still here. It walks through North Tulsa every day in the people who start small businesses, who mentor kids after school, who teach our history in living rooms and church basements because the formal curriculum

leaves too much out. We are not just surviving what happened. We are building on what was already built. And that is something you cannot see from a distance. You have to live here. You have to listen. And if you do, you will hear a story that doesn't get told nearly enough—not just of struggle, but of greatness.