



**I Am a
Rural Teacher
is a national
advocacy
campaign that
gives voice to
rural teachers.**

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The I Am a Rural Teacher campaign is dedicated to giving voice to America's rural teachers.

About



We believe

in the power and relevance of rural teachers. They have a strong sense of place, mission, and rural identity. They are savvy communicators, networkers, and users of new media. They recognize the value of community, collaboration, and connectivity. Rural teachers are leaders and catalysts for change; their voices—individually and collectively—are important.

I Am a Rural Teacher is a collaboration between the Rural Schools Collaborative, National Rural Education Association, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Ozarks Teacher Corps, and The University of West Alabama's Black Belt Teacher Corps. The Campaign is supported by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Rural Schools Collaborative

Rural Schools Collaborative was launched in 2015 by a small group of rural school and community advocates. Our mission is straightforward—to strengthen the bonds between rural schools and communities through place-based engagement, rural philanthropy, and the development of teacher-leaders. RSC is led by a volunteer board of directors and includes nine Regional Hubs, which are located throughout the United States. A small staff and a group of dedicated Advocates support our work.

RSC's mission-driven work includes four signature programs. The overarching goal of these efforts is to support the development of thriving and sustainable rural communities:

PROMOTES School-Centered Philanthropy with strategies that address rural capital flight and enhance resources for student learning

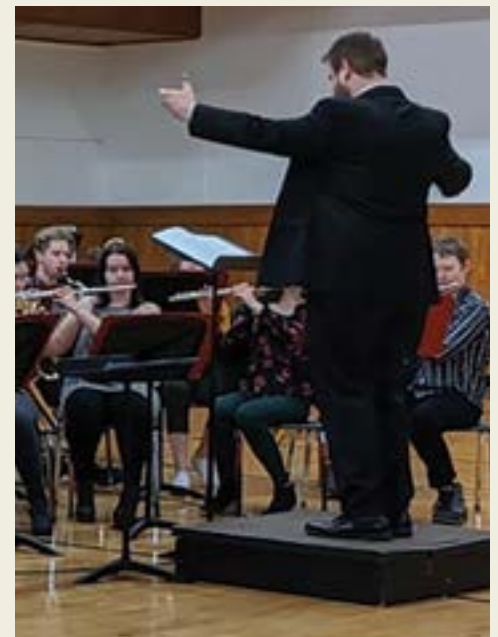
SUPPORTS Teton Science Schools' Place Network, a place-centered learning community of small and rural schools

MAKES "Grants in Place," grants that help provide support of innovative place-based learning projects to rural teachers

STRENGTHENS the recruitment, preparation, placement, and retention of rural teacher-leaders through the Rural Teacher Corps Initiative.

National Rural Education Association

The NREA was originally founded as the Department of Rural Education in 1907. It is the oldest established national organization of its kind in the United States. Through the years, it has evolved as a strong and respected organization of rural school administrators, teachers, board members, regional service agency personnel, researchers, business and industry representatives, and others interested in maintaining the vitality of rural school systems across the country.





**“We want to improve
the community.”**

Kylee Payne, Monmouth, IL

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION AND TEACHERS AS PLACEMAKERS

Place-Based Education

Rural schools are often the center of their communities. Their classrooms, fields, and gymnasiums are often used as a place to gather and spend time together. This is why rural schools are uniquely positioned to develop the Place-Based Education model. In Place-Based Education (PBE) the local community creates the context for classroom learning. Through PBE, students focus on the challenges facing their local places, and community members become an integral tool in the teaching and learning process.

Rural Schools Collaborative supports and advocates for PBE in rural schools. We have partnered with the Teton Science Schools to bring the Place-Based Education model to rural schools across the country. In one middle school in Monmouth, IL, the entire sixth grade has transitioned to PBE for its science, history, and English classes. In these classes, students determine the curriculum for themselves, talk with local experts, and are engaged with the natural environment.

Teachers Are Placemakers

Through place-based learning efforts, teachers are able to express their dedication to the community:

- They root classroom learning in the unique history, environment, economy, and culture of their place.
- They are active in the community and with school events.
- They are mentored and become mentors—both inside and outside the school.
- They have a strong sense of place, mission, and rural identity.
- They build relationships with students, parents, community members, and local organizations.



“[School communities] means involving stakeholders. Everybody has to be a stakeholder in this because success in the community is determined by the skill level we put out and the abilities of our students. It’s the parents, the students, the teachers, the school.

It’s not a triangle, it’s more like a Venn Diagram where everyone has an overlapping stake in supporting our students.”

Lisa Bufford, Cusseta, Georgia

Teacher Perspectives

“Being in a rural school you really start to understand that you can help your students. Not only academically but mentally or emotionally. Just being a supporter or advocate for them when no one else is in their life. And that’s what you have to tell yourself as an educator—I’m going to make a difference.”

Courtney Young, Monmouth, IL





Throughout the I Am a Rural Teacher campaign, we've shared over 100 teacher perspectives on rural school policies and practices.

We started with collecting perspectives on everyday life as a rural teacher—the opportunities and challenges. When the pandemic closed schools, we shifted focus to share how rural schools are stepping up to meet the challenge of COVID-19 and take care of each other. We received more than 85 responses from 18 different states! In addition, we launched the "Black Rural Teachers Matter" to share the important stories of Black teachers.

“Black Rural Teachers matter because we have to learn how to do more with less. We have to learn how to accomplish tasks with the bare minimum and oftentimes minimum support. Oftentimes these schools’ resources are more limited so you have to become a master artist and learn how to intertwine different activities and materials to accomplish lessons.”

Tracee Moore, Spring Lake, NC

left: Courtney Young values the relationships that she has with individual students and their families. Monmouth, IL
right: Ozarks Teacher Corps members learn about the value of place during a 2019 workshop

“I do not want to talk about the education we provide or the programs we have implemented. I want to talk about community. I want to talk about the Valley Heights family. For me, this is the most important aspect of teaching in a rural district.”

Kaci Smith

Waterville, Kansas

THE PRICELESS COMMODITY OF A RURAL FAMILY

 **Kaci Smith** *Waterville, Kansas*



Valley Heights Junior/Senior High School,

located between the towns of Blue Rapids and Waterville, is literally “out in the country.” As you drive up our lane there is a corn field to the left and cows grazing to the right. Behind our school is a beautiful little pond, surrounded by trees and a bit more north is the Little Blue River. The view from our football stadium is picturesque with rolling hills and trees as far as the eye can see. Our district serves two communities: we have a primary school located in Waterville serving 146 students, an upper primary in Blue Rapids serving 128 students, and the junior/senior high school right in the middle of the two communities serving 186 students.

As for me, I was born in California and my family moved to Kansas when I was seven years old. I attended Valley Heights from 3rd grade to 12th, then went on to get my degree in studio art and graphic

design at Bethany College. I worked as a graphic designer for a couple of years and then decided to pursue art education and landed the job of the 7-12 art teacher at Valley Heights, where I have been since 2010.

Our district does a fantastic job providing a quality education for our students. The staff in our district is made up of amazing teachers, dedicated administration, and fantastic support staff. We do our very best to give our students learning opportunities that will prepare them for college, trade school, or going straight into the workforce. The Valley Heights district has a growth mindset—we are always asking ourselves what we can do better and are not afraid to try new techniques and programs. At our very core, we want to do what is best for students.

But I do not want to talk about the education we provide or the programs we have implemented. I want to talk about community. I want to talk about the Valley Heights family. For me, this is the most important aspect of teaching in a rural district. I know it’s cliché to say that in a small town, everyone knows everybody and everything, and it’s so true. However, when it comes to education that is a priceless commodity. We know our kids, we know their families, we know where they live, and most of the time we know when something traumatic has happened. In turn, they know us, they know where we live, and they know when something traumatic has happened to us.

Two years ago, in March, my husband and I lost our three year old son in a tragic accident. We were devastated. I was numb and my mind could not have been farther from teaching and finishing the school year. This is where my family—my Valley Heights family—stepped up and took care of everything. And when I say “everything”, I mean everything. I never

had to think about sub lesson plans, the huge league art contest I was supposed to host, my paycheck, or even the meals my family had to eat the next three months. My students were there as well; with hugs, kind words, gifts, and so much more. The entire community pitched in and made the worst experience of my life bearable. I remember sitting in awe while everyone around me fulfilled my responsibilities—realizing this is the most amazing part of belonging to a small community—belonging to the Valley Heights family.

As teachers, we see ourselves taking care of our students and providing a safe learning environment. However, I got to see it in reverse. My classroom became my safe place and my students were instrumental in my healing process. My co-workers were, and still are, there to support me and step up when I cannot. Everyone in my community knows what is going on with me and my family, and it’s a good thing! I do not need to explain when I am having a hard day or cannot participate in community or school events. They are just there to hold me up, pat me on the shoulder, or give me a compassionate look and smile, no explanations needed.

Most teachers never get to see or experience the benefits of their investments in each student that passes through their classroom. I was blessed, and continue to be blessed, to witness and experience my love resounding back through my students and co-workers in the way they take care of me and my family. I believe this experience is unique to a rural district and is a beautiful product of “everyone knowing everybody and everything.”

Our students may not have a wide variety of teachers, classmates, extra-curricular activities, or places to eat or shop. But they do have teachers and community members who value each one of your students and do their very best to provide a valuable education. No matter what their family looks like at home, they become a part of the Valley Heights family. 🌞

**“There is a
distinctiveness—
a richness—to the rural
setting. As a rural
educator, when you
make that connection,
you are family.”**

Dr. Nathan Hamblin

Twin Valley, Ohio

MAKING CONNECTIONS: A SENSE OF FAMILY



Dr. Nathan Hamblin, *Twin Valley, Ohio*



From a very young age, I loved school. I loved learning. I vividly remember in elementary school an assignment in which we traced our silhouette, decorating it to represent what we wanted to be when we grew up. I made myself a doctor. That's not what I thought I would be – it just made sense to my young mind. Throughout the years, many wonderful teachers impacted my path. Unbeknownst to me, these educators were placing me on a trajectory that would ultimately shape my career choice.

College was not a topic of discussion in my home growing up. My parents and grandparent had moved from rural Appalachia in southeast Kentucky to southwest Ohio to look for work. Dad had graduated with an 8th grade education. Mom did not finish elementary school. Like the typical rural family, the focus in our home was on work. Education was not looked down on, but the ultimate aim was to get a good job out of high school to support a family. With this mindset, my educational plans would take me to a vocational school to learn a trade. This would change by the end of my freshman year.

It was in high school that I began to have that tug. I knew there was more. It finally came junior year while sitting in Mr. Crain's math class. That tug was a calling—a calling that made me realize, "I want to be a teacher!" All those teachers over all those years had molded me for that moment. With that new-found calling, I pushed forward to become the only person in my family to go to college. The culmination of that educational journey was completed this past summer as I successfully defended my dissertation, earning an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership.

As beloved Kentucky author Jesse Stuart stated, "Teachers who don't have the calling aren't worth your good tax dollar – and I use the word 'calling' in the old-fashioned pulpit sense." Teaching is a calling—a calling of integrity, service, and humility. I did not choose teaching—I was called into it. It has now spent over two decades abiding this calling and pursuing this passion, pre-dominantly in the rural setting.

Teaching in a Rural Place

Rural school districts, and the communities they serve, all share unique characteristics that provide a distinctiveness from their urban/suburban counterparts (Burton, Brown, & Johnson, 2013; Fishman, 2015; Sundeen & Sundeen, 2013; Tiecken, 2014; White & Corbett, 2014). Rural schools are typically the centerpiece of the community in which they serve, an institution connecting generations of families. As Tiecken noted in her recent work, *Why Rural Schools Matter*, "[the rural school] is more than a job or an institution; it's an identity." It is due to this very thing—this rural identity—that I hold a deep commitment to teaching within its framework. I will continue to make visible contributions to and be a voice for its advocacy because, yea, #RuralMatters!

Unique Challenges

Some of the very things that make rural teaching so appealing also provides some of the hardest challenges. As one report indicates, "Engaging rurality is apparently not easy" (Howley, Howley, & Yahn, 2014). When an educator is considered an outsider, it takes time and dedication. The best means to engage the rurality is to build upon relationships, where the teacher demonstrates they are there for the rural folk. There is a rural identity. It is the responsibility of each rural educator to make that connection.

Beyond that, challenges have come from the economic discrepancies that come with the rural setting (i.e. lower pay which equates to lower recruitment/retention of teachers, technology – or lack thereof, etc).

Unique Opportunities as a Rural Teacher

The unique opportunities come when the teacher taps into that rural identity. There is a distinctiveness—a richness—to the rural setting. As an educator within the rural setting, when you make that connection you are family. You will be called-out at the local grocery, served dinner at the mom & pop diner, attend weddings, and (sadly) funerals. There is no "escape" within the rural setting.

To Future Educators

I would refer back to the words of Jesse Stuart – who was a rural educator himself. Teaching is a calling. To be a rural teacher is a special calling. As one famed teacher put it, "Make your calling and election sure." The people and places throughout rural America are special. You do not come to the rural schools for fame or fortune. You come because you are called. 🌞

“The biggest tradition is that many rural teachers teach their students as a way to serve others.”

Candace Cain
Burwell, Nebraska

COMMUNITY LEGACY IS BUILT THROUGH THE NEXT GENERATION

Candace Cain Burwell, Nebraska



Teaching in a rural community has many traditions embedded in the culture of the school and the community. As a teacher, I am in a very special place since I have the honor of teaching in a classroom where I was a student of the teacher who influenced my education greatly. Over half of the teachers in my building were former students of the school district. Some of the traditions of a rural school are very observable like homecoming and excelling in sports or activities. But a less visible tradition is that many rural teachers teach their students to find ways to serve others.

Teachers in a rural setting often wear many hats both in and outside of the classroom. We are the members of local churches. We are the volunteers who run community events. We are the ones sewing items to help with projects like making dresses for girls in Africa or masks for our neighbors during COVID-19. We are the ones who set up community Veterans Day and Memorial programs and serve as leaders in organizations like the local Legion Auxiliary and Daughters of the American Revolution. When teachers are rooted in making the rural community better, they are setting an example that speaks volumes to their students. This example lets them see that all learning does not take place in the classroom. As I was once told, small communities get things done because of volunteer power.

A teacher's role should not be to just "give students the world" through what we teach, instead we must give them the tools to find their place while having the confidence of knowing that where they came from is a place that gave them a special skill set. This is done through the experiences both in the traditional school day and through the various hands-on activities we offer as a part of the school setting. Students in small towns don't lack exposure to the world because of the global community we live in. Students need to know that the special skills and opportunities they have from rural education will make them leaders in whatever career path they choose.

It's fun seeing that public speaking student whose skills you helped develop become a Fulbright scholar, or that shy student in high school who found their confidence and success through activities like FCCLA and went on to study abroad in two different cultures. The public speaking skills I have the honor of teaching help students grow in state leadership organizations like FFA or FCCLA, and then become advocates to protect rural America. And that English as a Second Language student I taught during my first years of teaching is now running for political office to make a difference in a rural community. Each of these students is a part of the special tradition rural classrooms offer.

“We must give them the tools to find their place while having the confidence of knowing that where they came from gave them a special skill set.”

The greatest honor of my career is being able to call my former students fellow teachers and coaches. This is the special tradition of rural education. Each of these new teachers plant the seeds of pride in rural education that were planted in me so many years ago. This school year has been bittersweet for me as the last of the teachers I had when I was a student are retiring. On my desk sits a set of theatre masks that hung in my drama coach's classroom that I will now hang in the room that was left to me by my teacher-mentor in whose footsteps I have the honor of following.

A teacher is only as good as the legacy they work to unearth in their students. I am thankful everyday for the rural classroom tradition I grew up in and work to pass on to my students. 🌞

“I want to acknowledge the smallness that students may feel, but I want them to know that it doesn’t limit them. Being from a small town doesn’t make you less of a person. Being from a small community can make you stronger.”

Haley Lancaster
Vincennes, Indiana

A UNIQUE HISTORY OF “FIRSTS” THE PRIDE OF THIS SMALL INDIANA TOWN



Haley Lancaster, Vincennes, Indiana



Too often, students in rural communities feel as though their place doesn't matter. Through the advent of the internet, students do have a more global perspective. They can learn from, speak, and virtually visit beyond their town boundaries. This is awesome, but I have also seen it make kids feel very small in their sense of place.

Vincennes, Indiana may be the county seat, but it's rural. Over half of the city school corporation's students are on free and reduced lunch. We are not remote, but we are an hour in either direction — north or south — from a large city, and two hours southwest of Indianapolis. Some of our students will never go to our own state capital. Viewing professional theater and sports are privileges few receive.

Because we're small, they feel their city doesn't matter. So it is my job, and the job of every other adult and educator in Vincennes, to celebrate our rural place. It's a city of firsts.

Founded in 1732, we existed before this nation did. When George Rogers Clark waded through the floodwaters of the Wabash in February 1779 and captured Fort Sackville here, he secured a body of land that doubled the size of the colonies.

We were the first territory capital. First college in Indiana? That was here. First brick home of the Indiana territory? That was here too, and still is. Indiana's first newspaper? Here.

All midwestern roads flow back to old post Vincennes on the banks of the Wabash. We helped make a nation.

“Teachers have the responsibility to make their community a place where people want to teach. The history of the midwest is that it was founded by people who came from elsewhere. Part of that tradition is bringing people in to help build that community we want to see.”

And this community helps create us, and we carry that identity wherever we go. While I acknowledge the smallness our students may feel, I want them to know that it doesn't limit them. Being from a small town doesn't make you less of a person. Being from a small community can make you stronger. Clark himself said, “Great things have been affected by a few men well conducted.” 🌞

The Future of Rural America

PHOTOS AND STORIES BY JULIA LEVINE

Teacher Features

“You get to be a huge impact in the kids’ lives, because you see them all the time. Even the ones that I don’t have in class, I see them in the hallway; I know them by name and last name, and I keep seeing them. It feels really good, and I believe that we do have a big impact in their lives, and in the community too.”

Joaly Ray, Missouri Ozarks





“You have these fun intergenerational opportunities between students and members of the community, and they can support each other. We have community members come through. That sort of opportunity happens all the time, whereas in cities there are a billion things community members may be distracted by.”

Johnathon Imhoff, Weaverville, CA

The I Am a Rural Teacher campaign proudly shared in-depth stories of four rural teachers who are making wonderful contributions to their respective schools and communities. These narratives provide a glimpse into how important public school teachers are to the future of rural America.



LIVINGSTON, ALABAMA



Embrace Place

Haley Richardson





For Haley Richardson, rural feels like “a family— small, warm, loving, home.” It’s why she’s chosen to stay in the same area that generations of her family have lived.

Haley grew up in the town of Reform, AL. Deep in the pines of western Alabama, Reform is a special place for Haley. Not only did she graduate from Pickens County High School, her mother was the first to integrate the school in the early 70’s. Now, her brother is the assistant principal.

It’s no wonder that when thinking of her home, she sees a place full of possibility. “Embrace the reason behind your place... Don’t look at what you don’t have, look at what you do have and the possibilities that you could bring,” says Haley.

Now, she brings these possibilities to the University Charter School (UCS), opened last year on the University of West Alabama (UWA) campus in Livingston, Alabama. The school is the first truly integrated school in Sumter County and has quickly become a point of pride for the community. “It’s allowing the students to learn from one another and embrace who they are,” says Haley.

For its part, the new school embraces its innovative role in the community. Serving around 300 students, Pre-K through 8th grade, UCS plans to add a grade level each year until becoming a K-12 school, so that eventually students can pursue their whole education at UCS. The location on UWA’s campus has allowed the students to access the wealth of resources that are available on the college campus. For music classes, UCS students walk across campus to the UWA music auditorium, where they learn directly from a UWA professor. The school also participates in Teton Science Schools’ Place Network, thereby integrating place-based curriculum that connects learners and communities.

Addressing Teacher Shortages

But UCS isn’t the only innovative educational effort in this small community. UWA’s College of Education is preparing students to become teacher-leaders for their communities through the Black Belt Teacher Corps “Teach for AL” program. The scholarship program aims to address teacher shortages in public schools of Alabama’s Black Belt region by offering tuition scholarships to students who commit to teaching in the region for three years.

As a participant of the Black Belt Teacher Corps program, Haley felt well-equipped to transition to working as a lead classroom teacher. “I felt very good about where I was, with the skills and tactics I was taught at the University of West Alabama.”

Haley is now in her second year at University Charter School, teaching second grade. She is still getting used to the job.

“Teaching is very different than I thought it would be, a lot people think ‘Oh it’s just an 8 to 3 job, when you go home you’re done,’ but teaching can be very tiring. It’s a non-stop job. You’re working all day, every day, and even by the time you leave here you’re still constantly working at home, whether it’s grading papers, coming up with ideas for the next day, or thinking about your students at home, and what you do to make their experience at school better than it was today.”

But these challenges make the job meaningful too. Haley wants all her students to see her as someone who cares about them beyond the classroom. “If they don’t get anything else from me, I want them to know that I love them.”

“If they don’t get anything else from me, I want them to know that I love them.”



“Embracing where you live and inspiring your students to know that just because you come from a small town doesn’t mean you can’t be successful, or you don’t have always have to up and leave to find better, because bigger is not always better.”

Rural Schools, Rural Communities

In addition to teaching, Haley serves as a mentor and coach for the UWA cadet team and plans to coach the UCS softball team in the spring. Supporting students beyond the classroom makes sense for Haley as she sees rural schools and communities as intimately connected. “To me, the school is the center of your community; without a school, you have no community.”

Because of this, Haley encourages all community members to get involved with University Charter School, “whether you have a child that goes here or not”. Ultimately, she wants to see everyone in the community be supportive of the new school. “Yes, we’re a different school in our own district but our goal is to support all the kids, all the students in this district. Let us all be on one accord to make this one of the best communities.”

For Haley, teaching is a great way to make an impact on her community. Being a rural teacher means “embracing where you live and inspiring your students to know that just because you come from a small town doesn’t mean you can’t be successful, or you don’t have always have to up and leave to find better, because bigger is not always better.”

Part of her desire to make an impact in students lives comes from the many inspiring teachers that she had in school. “How I want to be remembered by my students is how my teachers were to me,” she reflects.

Her experience at college cemented this feeling. “If I had gone to the University of Alabama [a larger school in Tuscaloosa], I would have just been another number to them. Whereas at UWA, it’s in a rural town, rural area, and I’m not just a number, I know professors on a personal level, they actually care about what I do beyond graduation... That’s a plus about being in a rural area are those connections, bonds, and relationships.”

Now, she works hard to create those deep connections with her students. “If a student tells me at school ‘Ms. Richardson I’m playing a game tonight,’ I’m going to make sure that I go see them. That matters to me because I know it matters to them. I could have a thousand things to do,” she laughs. “And when they look up and see me during the game, that feels good cause I know I made their night by just showing up. Just showing up and being there, it really means a lot to the parents too.”



Haley helps direct cars after school.

Generations of Progress

The close relationships made in rural communities really do make a difference in student's lives, as exemplified by Haley's mother. When Lasonja Richard integrated Pickens County School, she was just six years old. The integration wasn't easy. Folks opposed to integration threw tires in her yard and she was prevented from joining the local Brownie troop. But her home economics teacher took her under her wing, and she made it through school safely. She's still close with the teacher and they celebrate holidays together.

Reflecting on this experience, Lasonja says, "Just because I don't look like you or act like you or talk like you or what have you, doesn't mean that I'm not important and that we can't learn something from each other. Everyone has a purpose, everybody has something to offer regardless of the color of your skin, everyone has something to offer because you are placed here for a reason. It's just you must reach out."

When thinking about the progress being made now in Sumter County with University Charter School she says, "I'm happy to see that the children have come together, the parents, the entire community has come together and I feel like they're going to do great things," she says. "I think that standing alone you can't accomplish very much, but working together you can accomplish much."

Moving forward, Lasonja would like to see even more cohesiveness in her community. She sees strength in togetherness, especially in rural areas. "If you're there you obviously have to have an interest in it or you wouldn't live there. There's many other places you can live." Therefore, "If you choose to live in a rural area, we don't have a whole lot but what we do have, we can make it be the best, make it be the top. We can pull together to explore new avenues and offer as much as we can to the youth in our community and in our area."

The Next Generation

It's this philosophy that Haley is carrying over in the next generation with the University Charter School. She finds it extremely important "for students to understand that this is our place. Let's love and embrace our place. The history behind our place."

For outsiders coming in to Livingston, she urges them to see all the different possibilities for her community. "There's a phrase, 'Take what you have to make what you need.' So in a rural town we may not have much, but what we do have, we use it to make what we need, and in turn we make successful students. You take what you have to make what you need and you in turn go out and be successful and you bring it back to your community." 🌱

“Take what you have to make what you need.”

Connecting
Across Cultures

Joaly Ray



Joaly Ray's laugh echoes through the hallways of Forsyth High School.

With each student she passes, she connects with a joke or a smile.

"It's like that here; it's a big family. It's so small, and you get to have [students] for four years. How are you not gonna love them?" grins Joaly.

For the past ten years, Joaly has shared her infectious joy with the community of Forsyth, Missouri as the high school's Spanish teacher. Prior, she grew up in Maracaibo, Venezuela and moved to Atlanta in 2006, where she met her husband Brad. Now, Brad and Joaly raise their family in Brad's hometown of Forsyth.

Becoming a Spanish teacher was not always the plan. While working with her husband at Boys and Girls Towns of MO, Joaly noticed how much she enjoyed working with high schoolers. Soon after, Forsyth lost their Spanish teacher in the middle of the year, so Joaly applied as a full-time substitute. She's been there ever since.



Pursuing Higher Education

Since starting, Joaly has worked hard to give her students the best education possible. The year she began teaching, she started her Master's in Education. This past December, she finished her second Masters, this time in Second Language Acquisition. "I want to be the very best for my students," Joaly reflects.

While getting her Masters at Missouri State University, Joaly participated in the Ozarks Teacher Corps program. The Ozarks Teacher Corps, a project of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, is a two-year scholarship program available to teacher education candidates willing to make a commitment to teach in a rural Ozarks school for at least three years after graduation. Corps members receive an annual scholarship and participate in a wide range of seminars, where they learn about Place-Based Education and other rural matters. The overarching goal of the program is to develop teacher-leaders who can in turn impact their rural communities. For Joaly, the Ozarks Teacher Corps provides a new perspective on the importance of strengthening rural areas.

"I think that a lot of my students just want to leave town, especially the brightest ones. And when we go to the rural teacher trainings [from the Ozarks Teacher Corps], it can make us think more about how those kids can improve town, and use what they learn here in their hometown: because they love their hometown!"

Rural as Family

Joaly isn't from a rural area, her hometown of Maracaibo is a city of 3 million, but she delights in the opportunities that her small town brings.

"It's like family, my former students bring me their babies. You get to know everyone. There's four siblings, you have them all. You go to their weddings, meet their kids, they are excited to come tell you their accomplishments."

Not only has Joaly formed close relationships with students and their families, but her students have had the opportunity to become part of her family. Her husband, Brad Ray, works at Forsyth High as a chemistry teacher. Often students will have both Brad and Joaly in their time at Forsyth High. They connect with the students in different ways and share advice when a student is struggling.

"Culture makes them be a little more open-minded. Whenever they start seeing stuff as different and not weird, that's really hopeful."

"We want to improve the community; we care for the same kids," says Joaly. Joaly and Brad's own children, Nicholas and Joanna, attend the elementary school next door. Plus, whenever her Venezuelan family visits Forsyth, she brings them to her Spanish class so that the students can get to know them and practice Spanish. These familial relationships create a sense of connectedness for Joaly's family and the students.

Talking about her students, Joaly shares, "They all know my family, either through Skype or FaceTime, they have all talked to my mom, my sisters, they ask them questions, and my nephew spent a semester here as an exchange student. Every time I go to Venezuela, I buy candy and bring it. They know a lot about my culture, and my family."

“Everything I’m doing is for the kids here. I want them to know I care; that’s it. If they know that, that’s success.”

Sharing Culture

Part of the reason she gets to know her students so well is due to the nature of teaching a foreign language.

“You can’t teach language without teaching culture,” says Joaly. Some of the material requires students to share about themselves—their interests or stories from their lives. Other parts highlight the diverse cultures in which Spanish is spoken.

For Joaly, it’s exciting to share her culture with the students, as it really can provide them with a new perspective.

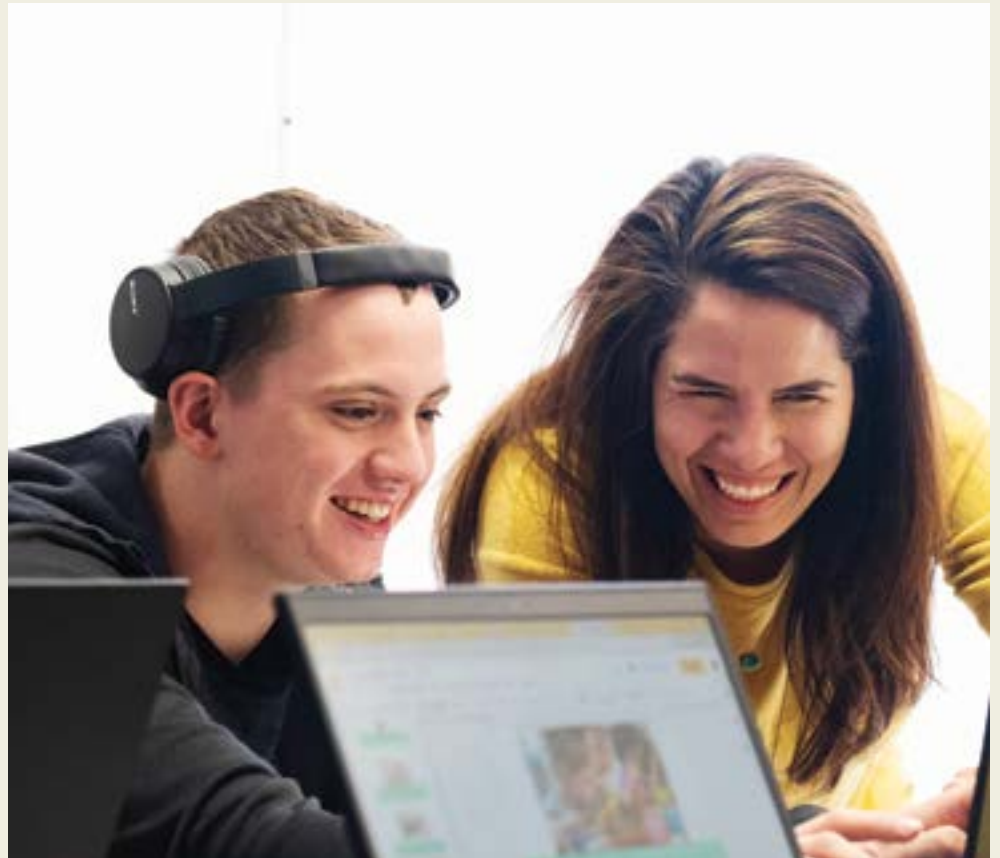
Outside of her classroom, Joaly brings these new perspectives to Forsyth High through the Spanish Club. The club is made up of 30-40 students who meet a few times a year to cook lunch and partake in a cultural activity. Once a year, some of the club members go to St. Louis to see the Hispanic Flamenco Ballet. Joaly says this is great experience for the students.

“It’s rural, it’s a small town, not a lot of kids get to go around. They get to see the city, and appreciate what they have, appreciate the quiet, and also see that they have cities nearby. I take them to a Peruvian restaurant, a Nicaraguan restaurant, so they see, ‘Oh wait it’s not all Mexican?’” she laughs.

But the culture-sharing goes both ways. Some of her students have come over to help build a chicken coop at her house. They’ve invited her to play football. “As I share my culture with them, they are also excited and proud to share theirs with me. And because of being small, and because of feeling like family, I feel they are more open to share than they would be if it was big and I just see them one class.”

Close Relationships with Students

In addition to sharing culture, the familial aspect of rural teaching has allowed Joaly to develop close relationships with students. Often, she is the first person who students will talk to when something has happened in their life. “When my students are going through rough stuff, it’s very hard on me. I’m kind of like sentimental, I mother them.”



Joaly laughs while working with a high school student.

She recounts one story of a student she got to know as his mother got sick. “He was a really quiet student, and I would go and ask him, ‘Hey how you doing?’ and he suddenly started talking to me, and his mom had cancer, and I would ask, ‘How’s your mom doing?’ And he would tell me about plans for when mom would get better, but then his mom died and that was rough. He came in crying and hugging me, and I was crying and he was crying.”

For Joaly, these hard moments make teaching at Forsyth High School so important.

It’s these crucial acts of caring for each other that are part of what it means to be a rural teacher. Joaly sees this every day at Forsyth High.

“If something happens to one of us, you see a big response, because we all love each other, and we care for each other. You get to be a huge impact in the kids’ lives, because you see them all the time. Even the ones who I don’t have in class, I see them in the hallway; I know them by name and last name, and I keep seeing them. It feels really good, and I believe that we do have a big impact in their lives, and in the community too.” 🌱



“I want to be the very best for my students.”

Getting in the Groove

Johnathon Imhoff



Johnathan Imhoff knew he wanted to be a music teacher from his freshman year of high school.

“I went to a jazz camp. I went with a perfectly naive thought, like ‘Oh, I’ll just get by with my basic ability to read notes’. But I just had a culture shock. And there was a really crazy sense of shame at the time... From that point on, I was like— I’m going to be a music teacher, and I’m going to make sure this doesn’t happen to anyone else.”

Integrating into Rural Life

Johnathan’s first year as a teacher wasn’t easy, but it improved the more he got involved with the community.

“As a rural teacher, you just gotta start finding organizations in your town that you can invest in, and that’s how you meet people. If you invest in the community you end up having a more rewarding experience.”

He started with a trail-cleaning group, hiking around the many beautiful trails around Weaverville. Then he joined the community band and even played a role in a local theater production of *Mary Poppins*.

“That’s the thing, rural towns allow you to do things you wouldn’t necessarily be able to do in bigger places.”

Sometimes, getting involved just meant having coffee with his colleagues or saying hello to the parents of a student.

“I know it’s hard, especially when you’re first starting; you’re treading water, there’s paperwork and all these other things, and it’s like, ‘Oh now I’m gonna go volunteer.’ It’s probably like the literal last thing you want to do, but your life will improve if you do. My life improved a lot doing community band.”

Now, Johnathan is the director and conductor of the community band. He’s been able to meet many friends and mentors through the local choir and band.



Jonathon participates in the community choir group.

“There’s no way to do this program successfully if you can’t build relationships. You have to be invested in these kid’s lives. You’re one of a few role models in their lives.”

“There’s a small-town pride in Weaverville. We’re gonna take care of this place.”

The Opportunities of a Rural School

When Johnathan started at the Weaverville schools, the music program was in dire straits. Over the past five years Johnathan has dedicated himself to resurrecting the program.

“The opportunity [to re-start the music program], it’s kind of like soul-affirming. I get to provide this thing that wasn’t really offered before. I remember my first year there was a senior who was really thankful, they wrote a letter afterwards like, ‘You know I had real doubts whether or not they were ever gonna get the music program back, so thank you.’”

But connecting with students is about more than just teaching the fundamentals of music.

“There’s no way to do this program successfully if you can’t build relationships. You have to be invested in these kid’s lives. You’re one of a few role models in their lives.”

For Johnathan, it’s the rural school that offers this opportunity to develop meaningful and lasting connections with students.

“You can really build a relationship that you can’t really in an urban school. You get to build that rapport with that kid over the years.”

There are also opportunities for the students to connect with the broader community in ways that might not happen in larger cities. For instance, some of the students in Johnathan’s band class also play with him in the community band.

“You have these fun intergenerational opportunities between students and members of the community, and they can support each other. We have community members come through. They’ll come in and sit in the pep bands. That sort of opportunity happens all the time, whereas in cities there are a billion things community members may be distracted by.”

Overcoming the Challenges of Rural Schools

Teaching in a rural school comes with its fair share of challenges too. The main two that have struck Johnathan are lack of capital and long commute times for students.

“There’s just not a lot of money and capital that flows through here. That leaves a lot of people in sort of less than optimal situations. There’s a lot of adverse conditions for a lot of these kids.”

The adverse conditions that kids face put Johnathan in the position to be more than just a passing face for students.

“You’re working as a counselor as well as teacher. You’re trying to help kids through very difficult things... I want them to know, yeah, I care about you as a musician, but I also care about you as a person.” 🌱



“You’re working as a counselor as well as teacher. You’re trying to help kids through very difficult things... I want them to know, yeah, I care about you as a musician, but I also care about you as a person.”





Teaching in a
Time of Change

Kylee Payne



For Kylee Payne, the past 8 months have been filled with new experiences.

She started her first year teaching, helped to implement a new curriculum, and now she's finishing up the school year virtually.

"It's definitely a day-to-day process," says Kylee.

Throughout this monumental year, Kylee has learned the tremendous role that schools play in the small community of Monmouth, IL.

Surrounded by a vast expanse of midwestern cornfields, Monmouth hosts a small, but incredibly diverse population. At Central Intermediate, where Kylee teaches sixth grade, nineteen languages are spoken. Through the local meatpacking plant hundreds of families have immigrated to the town. Meanwhile, Monmouth College, the small liberal arts school where Kylee received her education degree, brings in young folks from around the region.



First-Year Teaching in a Pandemic

The challenges of the coronavirus have hit Monmouth hard. Warren County, where Monmouth is located, has one of the highest rates of COVID-19 in IL. The meatpacking plant has experienced a temporary shut-down and an employee strike.

Throughout this time, Kylee says, "the district is constantly coming up with ways to make sure that the community is in good spirits and good health."

They're providing free lunch, hosting car caravans to pass student homes, and checking in on families individually.

Kylee isn't surprised at these efforts, as she says, "to be a rural teacher, you definitely need to... have a good sense of community."

A Sense of Place

On top of COVID-19, the past year has been one of change for Central Intermediate. They are currently implementing a Place-Based Education model through Teton Science Schools' Place Network to replace the traditional science and history curriculums for their sixth grade class. The Place-Based Education model utilizes the surrounding community as a primary resource in students' learning.

"The district is constantly coming up with ways to make sure that the community is in good spirits and good health."

For the sixth graders at Central Intermediate, the place-based curriculum provided an opportunity to take control over their learning. During one quarter, when the students were focused on the water cycle, they noticed that whenever it rained the drains outside the school flooded. They then decided that they would study the drainage system in Monmouth and write a proposal for the city on why the school drains should be fixed.

“There’s not too much in the community for kids to do, and even adults to do. But I would say that can become an opportunity for creativity.”

Kylee has found a lot of inspiration from her students. She advocates that “we really need to listen to the kids, with what they notice. They have some wonderful ideas, and such open and creative minds.”

Implementing this new curriculum has not been easy. An entirely new program, the curriculum is being created and tweaked week-by-week. And since it’s only been implemented for the sixth grade, there’s a question of how this style of learning can continue into middle and high school.

But for Kylee, these challenges are worth the reward of a learner-centered curriculum.

“I’m preparing my kids for a future that they are in control of. A lot of times kids grow up and believe that they aren’t in control of their lives and they don’t have much say, but I want them to feel like they have control,” says Kylee.

Support From Community

Throughout this challenging first year, Kylee has found support in her education community. In May 2019, she graduated from the Educational Studies Department at Monmouth College. While there, she participated in the TARTANS (Teachers Allied with Rural Towns and Neighborhood Schools) program. Through the program, she was able to connect with a broad community of teachers, all with the focus on rural education.

“I have had so many teachers and administrators help me through getting through my first year. Any questions I’ve had with this process, everybody has been so open to help me out.”

This sense of camaraderie is what makes teaching rurally so special. Teaching in a small community has enabled Kylee to know her students’ families in different contexts, providing a “different level” of personal connection with her students. Plus, the school itself plays a large role in pulling the Monmouth community together.

“There’s not too much in the community for kids to do, and even adults to do. But I would say that can become an opportunity for creativity. [In November] we had a Girls Night at the school. All the sixth grade girls got to come from 5-8 p.m., there was dinner, we did hair and makeup, tie-dye t-shirts, kindness crafts, and all types of really fun stuff. Even with us not having as much in this community, people find fun ways to make up for that,” Kylee shares.

Kylee is always looking for ways to make a positive connection with her students. Before COVID-19, Kylee helped to run the yoga club on Wednesdays after school. Students pulled out mats in the darkened gym, and then followed the instructions from a yoga video on the projector. Some students follow along intently, others just lay there for a quiet moment.

For Kylee the yoga club is important because it shows kids “that there’s other ways to wind down from a crazy day. Some kids don’t know how to take their emotions and do something constructive with them, some kids will resort to fighting, some kids will resort to just totally shutting down. We opened up this club to show kids that mindfulness is extremely important. It’s a great way for me to wind down from the day too.”

It’s also a reminder to stay kind and compassionate, with yourself, and your friends.

“I feel like a lot of things are portrayed for kids to act out, against adults or their peers or just be mean to each other, so I want to be that person in their life just to say, ‘Hey it’s ok to be a nice person, maybe others may think that you’re soft, but it’s okay to be that person because it means that you have a heart, it means you’re compassionate about other people.’”

She works hard to bring that positive message to every student she interacts with.



“I’m inspired to teach because there are kids out there that don’t have any type of positive role model in their life; I just really wanna be that person for them. I feel like I can teach the kids a lot, not only about their math but how to be a decent person.”

Maintaining Connections

During the quarantine, it’s been hard to connect with students in the same way.

“Some kids may have some trust issues or some personal issues in their lives, so getting over that boundary, even just trying to connect with every kid. Some kids I connected with in like the first week, other kids I’m still trying to figure out how to have that connection with them.”

Though there have been many changes and challenges facing Kylee in her first year of teaching, she feels optimistic about her impact in the community.

“I would like my students to remember me as someone that they could look up to. Someone who they can talk to if they have any type of problem... It takes time, but I hope to be a positive person in every kid’s life.” 🌱

Challenges Present Opportunities



RURAL SCHOOLS
COLLABORATIVE

The I Am a Rural Teacher national advocacy campaign gives voice to rural teachers from across the country. The initiative is based on the premise that a sustainable American future must include a thriving rural landscape, which will require strong and well-funded public schools.

As rural educators have shared their perspectives, it has become apparent that our diverse rural regions face common and unprecedented challenges. But challenges present opportunities, and it has been heartening to observe the creativity, enthusiasm, and commitment that has been brought to bear in so many small towns and rural places. COVID-19 has illuminated the ingenuity of rural school teachers and leaders, and the crisis has shown how significant public schools are to our rural communities.

These revelations and responses suggest that we should consider the following questions:

How does our nation address the rural teacher shortage and recruit, prepare, and place outstanding rural teacher-leaders?

This will not happen by accident; higher education, policy makers, and rural advocates must work together in intentional and collaborative ways.

How can we strengthen the connections between place and school?

This is not just about internet connectivity, although that is important. Access to place should be a rural advantage, and rural public schools must design and implement place-based and project-based strategies that engage the community and build toward the public good.

Finally, how can we frame universal broadband as a national imperative?

Interestingly, broadband access not only addresses educational equity and opportunity, but it supports rural economic development and is a necessary step toward carbon neutrality. This should be a bi-partisan effort that brings people together.

We believe rural America has the potential to lead the way in educational innovation. However, teachers must be at the forefront of that effort, and their informed voices and opinions will need to be valued and considered.

Gary Funk

Rural Schools Collaborative
Project Director



We believe rural America has the potential to lead the way in educational innovation.

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P.O. Box 154 Cambridge, WI 53523 · iamaruralteacher.org