



CREATIVE BRIEF

RURAL REVEAL

STORIES FROM EVERYDAY CHANGEMAKERS

A WELCOMING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF
PUBLIC TRANSFORMATION, VOICES FOR RURAL RESILIENCE, AND REGION FIVE DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSION WITH SUPPORT FROM THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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To contact the Creative Team please email:
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This project is made possible with support from
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DEPT OF PUBLIC
TRANSFORMATION

**VOICES
FOR RURAL
RESILIENCE**



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MEET

THE TEAM

AN INTRODUCTION

PROJECT PARTNERS

Region Five Development Commission is a high-performing, regionally focused partner committed to enhancing the vitality and quality of life in Region Five through resilient, collaborative, and inclusive approaches to regional community development, economic development, and transportation initiatives.

Voices for Rural Resilience facilitates the social change necessary to protect and heal our natural world by embracing deep stories and locally relevant knowledge, resources, and experiences to shift the way people think and feel about climate change and each other.

Department of Public Transformation is an artist-led organization that works locally and relationally to develop creative strategies for increased community connection, civic engagement, and equitable participation in rural places.

This project is made possible with support from the **McKnight Foundation**.

HERE IS

WHO WE ARE

THE TEAM & PLACE

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Local changemakers don't always make an appearance as "community leaders". They do however consistently challenge us, inspire others and build greater collective awareness for what is good and necessary to be better - better neighbors, better citizens, better people. The Rural Reveal was a year-long, artist-led effort to help deepen the understanding of what local residents are doing on a daily basis to advance equity and anti-racism work in their communities, and to learn what is needed to sustain the emotionally taxing work of being from, working within and living the change you wish to see in your community.

**TO ACCESS THE
RURAL REVEAL WEBSITE
CLICK [HERE](#)**

PROJECT CONTEXT

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The goal of The Rural Reveal is to amplify the voices of everyday changemakers in rural communities. To recognize and celebrate the deep community work that often goes unseen. To bring an authentic voice to what it feels like to do changemaking work where you live. To advance a Culture of Empathy in order to cultivate the sharing of stories – listening deeply, capturing nuance, complexifying the narrative and breaking down assumptions in order to connect across perceived distances.

This project prioritizes the stories, voices, and agency of everyday changemakers with the hope that – when we intentionally highlight and center their knowledge, work, and experiences – they can teach us how we can collectively build a better world. It examines the power of storytelling and working with artists and cultural workers to amplify the work of everyday changemakers in rural communities.

The contents in this Creative Brief come from a combination of interviews, story circles, and deep conversations with over 40 residents engaged in equity work across a five county area in North Central Minnesota. It captures the motivations, ambitions and lessons learned along the way. These

conversations were witnessed and observed by artists, who used their creative practice to translate the stories shared into creative responses.

The process was conceived and created as a collaboration between two individuals and organizations that lead with empathy, inquiry and informed action: Ashley Hanson from Department of Public Transformation and Anna Claussen from Voices for Rural Resilience. As facilitators with over a decade of experience facilitating conversations across statewide communities and systems, we have strong relationships of mutual trust in metropolitan, micropolitan, rural and Indigenous communities across the state of Minnesota. We are listeners. We have deep insight and experience with facilitating participatory approaches that spark curiosity, creativity and action – it is what we do and what we do well.

We are sharing this year-long artist-led process that we developed in collaboration with our partners, artists, and local residents, with hopes that other communities will consider the power of working with artists, the appetite for people to feel listened to, the potency of sharing stories of everyday changemakers, and the potential to cultivate a greater culture of empathy.

Region Five Development Commission's **WELCOMING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE**

The project is part of Region Five Development Commission's **Welcoming Communities Initiative**. The Initiative centers growth and evolution as they seek to create economic prosperity in the region, while weaving justice, equity, diversity and inclusion into their programs. [Learn More Here.](#)

Growth and Justice's **EQUITY ACTION GUIDE**

An additional component of this Initiative included the launch of an **Equity Action Guide for Rural Communities**, created by Growth and Justice. The Action Guide is an effort to foster equitable economic ecosystems for shared local and regional prosperity. [Download the Action Guide Here.](#)

PROJECT PARTNERS

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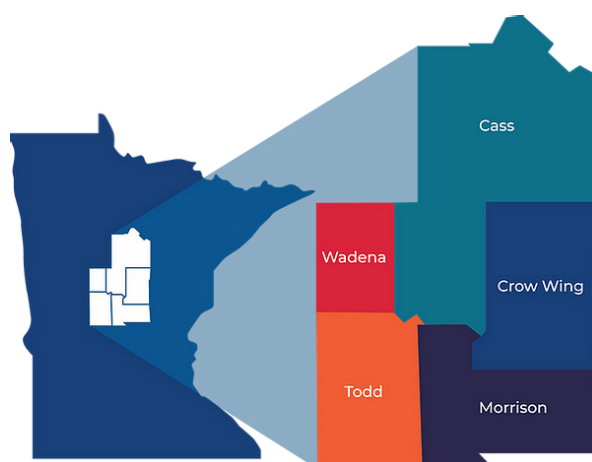
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Department of Public Transformation is an artist-led organization that works locally and relationally to develop creative strategies for increased community connection, civic engagement, and equitable participation in rural places.

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PROJECT LOCATION

The Rural Reveal project is focused on sharing stories from Region Five - an area that covers five counties in North Central Minnesota. These counties include Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd and Wadena. The region is designated rural with a total population of 162,000 in 69,194 households spread over an area of 3,996,051 acres. The five-county area has an abundance of business, industry, cultural and natural resources. Tourism is one of the major economic engines of the region, which is referred to as the Central Lakes Region due to the abundance of lakes.



VIEW OF THE REGION

In the words of some of our interviewees: "Regionally we"...

- » "have no land grant institute (lack the infusion of youth and curiosity that comes with this) but the region is steeped and rich in an understanding of their own cultures"
- » "tend to vote extremely conservative - more than any other region in the state"
- » "pay our employees less compared to other regions in the state"
- » "have highest population of veterans and disabled individuals"
- » "reside at the intersection of biomes - prairie, woodlands and lakes landscape"
- » "don't have the soils (as result of water and sand) to sustain production, large crop agriculture - therefore we have a lot more small farms than other parts of state with more diverse commodities"

OUR CREATIVE TEAM

The Rural Reveal was designed and facilitated by Ashley Hanson and Anna Claussen, in collaboration with multi-media artists: Cassie Williams, Heidi Jeub, Brian Laidlaw, Elizabeth Anderson, Amanda Anderson and Justin Sengly.

Ashley Hanson: Founder and Executive Director of the Department of Public Transformation - an artist-led non-profit based in Granite Falls, working locally on creative strategies for increased community connection and civic participation in rural communities; PlaceBase Productions - a theater company sharing history and stories of rural places; The YES! House - a radically welcoming rural community gathering space, SWMN Women's Empowerment Creative Action Network; Obama Fellow, Bush Fellow; Host of Off the Clock: Digital Happy Hour for Rural Arts and Culture Workers; artist, adventurer, mobilizer, and lover of rural places.

Anna Claussen: Founder of Voices for Rural Resilience - building smarter climate change policy and stronger civic minded communities across rural America through storytelling, investments in people and process and connection of unlikely allies; former Director of Rural Strategies at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy; Nathan Cummings Foundation Fellow; board service for Art of the Rural, Rural Generation and Resource Media; Alumni of MN Agriculture and Rural Leadership Program; trained as a landscape architect and community planner; farm advocate, artist, policy strategist, listener and mother.

THE ARTISTS

Cassie Williams: Cassie J. Williams is a writer, poet and educator. She is a Labor Educator at Labor Education Service in Carlson School of Business at the University of Minnesota. She has published her work in literary journals, performed and presented in slam competitions, schools, events and conferences. Being raised in St. Paul, MN, she spent 10 years of her life in rural Minnesota, where she became engaged in rural work focused on equity and inclusion, rural and urban partnerships and art. She is a board member for the Department of Public Transformation. She was also the recipient of the Southwest Minnesota Art Council (SMAC) Individual artist grant (2018). As a wife and mother of four children, Williams is currently sharing her journey of balancing (or not) being a writer, educator and mother on Instagram and Facebook under the name Poetess Unbound.

Brian Laidlaw: Brian Laidlaw is a poet-songwriter whose books include *The Stuntman* (Milkweed Editions, 2015) and *The Mirrmaker* (Milkweed Editions, 2018), as well as the forthcoming book-album *This Aster* (Fonograf Editions, 2021.) A recent recipient of a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Denver, Brian now mentors neurodivergent poets and songwriters through Unrestricted Interest, a company he co-founded with poet Chris Martin. He continues to make music with his band *The Family Trade*, and moonlights - often literally - as a rock climber. www.brianlaidlaw.com

Heidi Jeub: Heidi Jeub is a multidisciplinary visual artist living in Saint Joseph, Minnesota. She received a B.A. in Studio Art (1999) and a Masters of Professional Studies in Arts & Cultural Leadership (2017), both at the University of Minnesota. She is a teaching artist, both in person and online, featured on the rosters for COMPAS, Lifetime Arts, Central Minnesota Arts Board, and the Teaching Artist Project. She is a 2019 National Arts Strategies Fellow and a 2020 Creative Community Leadership Fellow. Her vision and hand-riveting skills built the Tiny School of Art & Design, a 14'L x 9'w portable studio that brings the foundations of art to communities with little to no access. Her art practice and insistence in doing it all, intertwines with her life with three children, a love for canning the fall harvest, and a much needed dependency on fancy coffee brewing methods. Heidijeub.com or tinyschoolartdesign.com

Amanda Anderson: Amanda Anderson moved to Montevideo from Minneapolis four years ago to be the digital media specialist at Pioneer PBS, a small PBS member station located in Granite Falls. Amanda graduated from Loyola University Chicago with degrees in journalism, international studies and photography. In addition to managing the station's social media and website, she has been the creator and producer of an experimental digital-first version of Pioneer PBS's news and public affairs program,

Compass (pioneer.org/compass). Her most exciting working days are when she gets to think about how to use new digital technologies and visual storytelling styles to be a more timely, responsive and data-driven storyteller and journalist. This work has led Amanda to be chosen as a 2021/2022 member of the PBS Digital Media Advisory Council. In her free time, she enjoys thrifting, gardening and going on runs with her dog, Ernie—as long as there are no squirrels around. (Amanda is also the older sister of Elizabeth Anderson who created the beautiful artwork for The Rural Reveal: Stories from Everyday Changemakers project.)

Elizabeth Anderson: Lizzie Anderson is an Illustrator and Americorps math tutor based in Minneapolis, MN. After graduating from the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) with a BA in Art and Scandinavian Studies, she studied handcraft at a folk high school in northern Sweden. Now she works primarily in digital mediums and likes to create bright and cheery scenes with fun and quirky characters. She is inspired by Scandinavian design, children's illustration and Japanese comic books. She is currently exploring the intersection of illustration and animation. She is so happy to have had the opportunity to work with the team at Voices for Rural Resilience. When she isn't drawing, she's scheming the next trap for her friends in their Dungeon and Dragon's campaign.

Justin Sengly: Justin Sengly is a Graphic Designer and Photographer currently based in Providence, Rhode Island. His work is focused in designing brand identities and photographing the beautiful and mundane moments of everyday life. Find him on the Internet.

A POEM

BY MEG WHEATLY

“TURNING TO ONE ANOTHER”

There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask “What is possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.
Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.
Talk to people you know.
Talk to people you don’t know.
Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.
Expect to be surprised.
Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.
Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.
Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.
Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

1 | **HERE'S** **HOW WE WORK** **OUR APPROACH AND PROCESS**

CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF EQUITY

For us, equity work starts with strengthening a Culture of Empathy - working towards a deep understanding of the unique, complex identities and realities of people and places. We are listeners, first - looking to the individuals we are collaborating with to share their knowledge and lived experience. In our facilitation, we focus on building empathy across cultures and geographies to understand what it “feels” like to do this work, celebrate and highlight what is working well in each region, and gain insight from regional approaches in order to impact statewide systems.

We also acknowledge that empathy alone is not sufficient to tip the scales of equity. Only when coupled with informed action, directed at systems and culture change, can the process of building a culture of empathy transform our communities into more welcoming and inclusive homes for all residents. For the Rural Reveal, we highlight the stories of individuals who strike the balance of building empathy and enacting everyday change in their fields, sectors, and communities.

OUR WORK IS GROUNDED IN FIVE AREAS THAT WE CONSIDER ESSENTIAL TO BUILDING A CULTURE OF EMPATHY IN PRACTICE:

1. Committed to rural-urban solidarity – driven by deep compassion to heal inequities and grounded in a strong grasp of the social/economic/political realities.
2. Skilled at creative and collaborative learning approaches to consensus building and synthesizing complex ideas into actionable plans – prioritizing empathy, compassion, inquiry and play.
3. Experienced at co-designing, engaging and facilitating with leaders from diverse perspectives and committed to creating inclusive environments where differences are valued and our complex identities, histories and stories are shared and celebrated.

4. Understanding of and deep connection to the Minnesota arts and culture ecosystem – including its major players, in-depth knowledge of local communities of practice and relationships with a multitude of networks across regions and sectors.
5. Demonstrated experience in managing complex, collaborative projects; logistics of planning and execution of meetings, programs, events and budgets.

“You obviously listened to me - I love this active listening thing - so few people do it and you obviously did by validating back to me what you heard.”

- Interview Participant

RELATIONAL & LOCALLY GROUNDED

As place-based practitioners, we understand that equity work looks and feels differently in each region, and that many of our regions, especially rural regions, lack recognizable financial and civic resources for DEI work and training. We also recognize that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work requires commitment and partnerships across geographies and sectors, and that often this work happens in alternative and informal formats. Therefore to deepen commitment and action around diversity, equity and inclusion, we recognize the need to work with and within each region's social capital - the formal and informal institutions, leadership structures, and relationships through which communities respond to opportunities and challenges.

Throughout the project, we relied on three pillars that are core values to us in this work; the belief in the power of invitation, deep listening + reflecting back, and working with artists to acknowledge, share, and strengthen the important work already happening. We believe that these three elements are especially important when working in and with rural communities. We know that successful rural changemakers know how to tap their assets - their personal and family relationships, the cultural cohesion, their connection to place, or their civic and religious infrastructure - in ways that create results. We also know they can overlook their own needs at the expense of others.

INVITATION MATTERS:

The courage and commitment it takes to do changemaking work in rural communities is often unappreciated and undervalued. There are fewer resources, trainings, tools, and, in many cases, other individuals doing changemaking work. Therefore, when reaching out to connect with changemakers to share their story, an invitation that they are seen and valued matters.

The power of invitation comes when appreciating the hard work being done in places where humility reigns and scarcity permeates the community

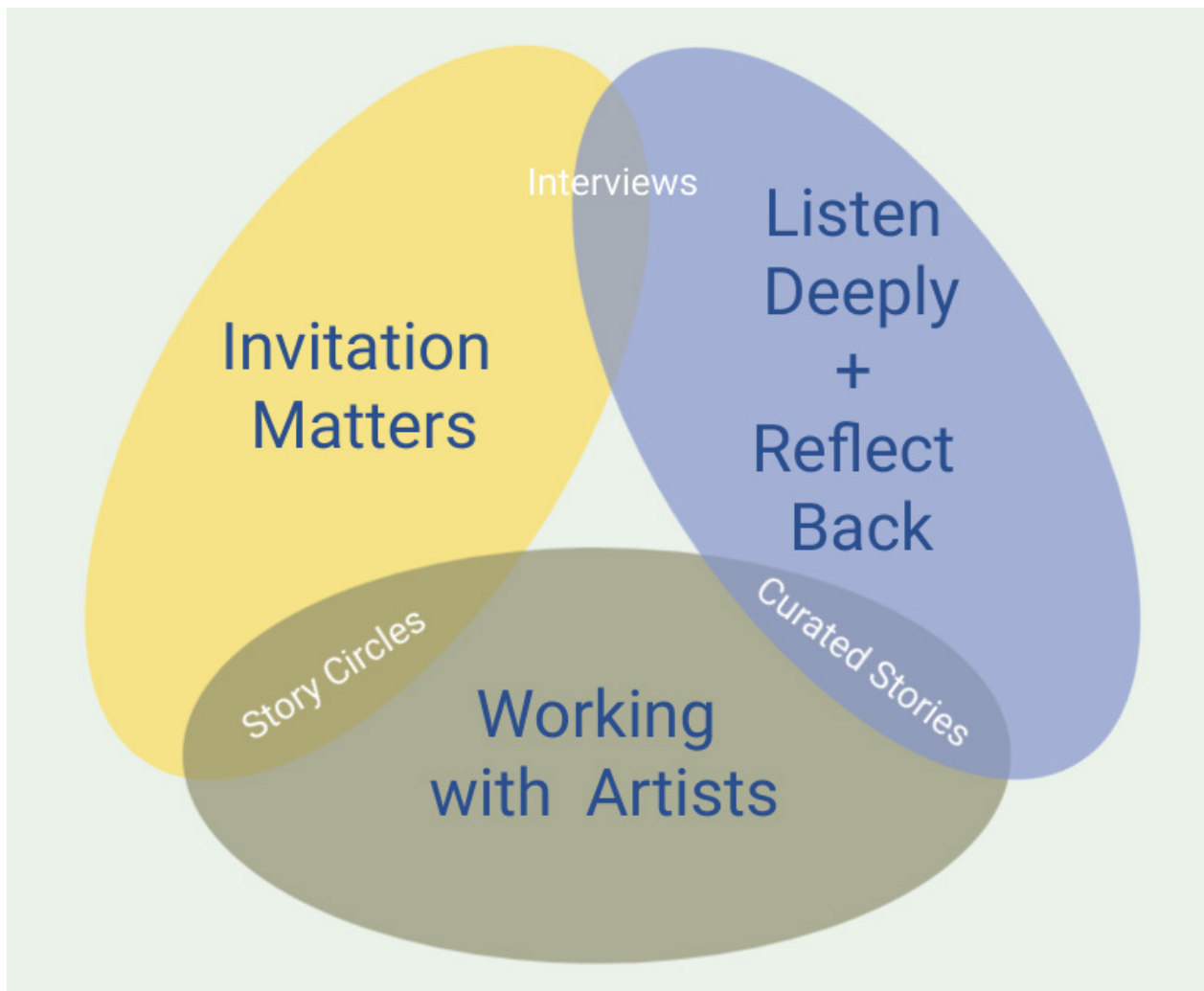
narrative. Invitation matters because if you applied conventional search filters to give voice to influencers you may not find these stories - stories worth sharing to the world as they help us more wholeheartedly understand and appreciate our nation's diverse display of courage exercised to build more inclusive communities. When individual leaders feel seen and appreciated in the invitation, they are more likely to share openly and honestly, their story.

DEEP LISTENING + REFLECTING BACK:

With intention, we craft questions and spaces that allow for deep listening, to help us understand what individual leaders need to ensure we add value for where they are at on their leadership journey - professionally, personally and wholeheartedly. Our changemakers all have strong opinions on issues that are core to our nation's safety, health, and success; but they also all have something to lose in sharing their stories.

When standing up against injustice, there is a risk of being alienated - in rural places this matters differently. Your sense of social cohesion, self-worth and agency for change can be implicated. You

rely on your neighbors. You need them. It requires great courage to risk the feeling of not belonging to a place and people that matter and are meaningful to you. These everyday acts of courage deserve recognition. For us, this comes in the form of reflecting back the value of these acts to the individual and the community. Our hope in sharing these stories is to help rural changemakers feel less alone by connecting the people doing the work with each other and the resources they need to sustain their everyday acts of courage. And at it's best, the stories and changemakers give others courage to speak up, stand up and make a difference too.



WORKING WITH ARTISTS:

Any hard work worth doing is often underscored with physical, emotional and spiritual harm and conflict. There is a need for healing and transformation - this healing is personal as well as communal. In rural communities there is often a settling of, what one of our interviewees defined as, "cultural inertia" that has to be overcome in this work. There is a pervasive sentiment that this is the way it has always been done and why do we have to change. This cultural inertia is best met with creative, imaginative, and innovative strategies for change. This is why we believe working with artists to cultivate the community creativity necessary for reimagining a just and equitable future is crucial to equity work. In this context, artists operate as careful observers, listeners, translators, and documenters of the work. They are able to utilize their creative practice to identify, synthesize

and share back the hopes, dreams, and needs that exist in community work. They are the storytellers. They help us see ourselves in the work, encouraging more individuals to step into the shoes of leadership and join their neighbors in the courageous act of everyday change.

Art and people together have the power to give dignity. Alongside our basic human needs of being fed, clothed and sheltered is a human need to understand and be understood. The human desire for dignity. Art has a universal ability to transform us. Art has the power to let us tell our story, but also the power to help share it - to transport and translate our story to others. As people we have the power to listen, connect and see each other wholeheartedly.

We focus on building empathy across cultures and geographies to understand what it “feels” like to do this work. Our approach gives the permission to value the thinking and the feeling, alongside the doing. And art gives us a vehicle for expressing what we hold in our head and heart.

A

POEM

BY DAVID WHYTE

"EVERYTHING IS WAITING FOR YOU"

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the
conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

2 | **HERE'S** **WHAT WE DID** **& HOW YOU CAN DO IT TOO**

ACCEPTING AN INVITATION

We were approached by Dawn Espe and Cheryal Lee Hills at Region Five Development Commission to begin a year-long project as a part of their Welcoming Communities Initiative focused on sharing stories from the Region - an area that covers five counties in North Central Minnesota. We met with and heard from over 40 residents in a combination of dozens of interviews, industry-specific story circles, which included focused conversations around Food Access, Health Care, and Infrastructure, and worked closely with five individuals to craft personal short stories. We worked with an amazing creative team of artists to translate these stories into a multimedia website.

What made this project particularly appealing and successful was the invitation from established leaders in the region to plug into a multi-year effort and the liberty and trust extended to us as artists and creators. The outcomes and deliverables were not pre-determined. Rather, our partners at Region Five believed in our process and approach and gave us ample ability to be iterative, adaptive and creative throughout the entire process. Initiated with an invitation and followed with dozens more - this project leans hard and proudly on the power of invitation.

Following is a step-by-step look at how we moved and carried ourselves through this work.

A Bird's-Eye View

Amplifying the Voices of Everyday Changemakers

There will be no one way to do this work, but it should still be deeply intentional. Throughout the project, we relied on three pillars that are core values to us in this work: the belief in the power of invitation, deep listening + reflecting back, and working with artists.



Engage More Artists



Involve Artists

Invite artists to join you to witness, listen deeply and produce a creative reflection of what they hear in a Story Circle.

Enlist artists to help us heal and transform - personally as well as communally - by elevating our deep personal stories.



Rabbit Trail

Begin with relationships and partners to point you in the direction of who to speak with first.



Public Invitation

Curate an environment that fosters vulnerability and authenticity with an invitation that sparks joy and curiosity.



Personal Invitation

Acknowledge and appreciate the hard work being done in places by extending a sincere and personal invitation that is specific and descriptive.



Questions for Shared Learning

Facilitate an atmosphere of care and connection while also finding ways to expect more from people we think we know and more ways to embrace and support our own complex identities.



Questions for Deep Listening

Craft compassionate and thoughtful interview questions that get to the core of "how it feels" rather than "what it is". Then bring your whole self to the table.



Coach & Empower

Nurture, elevate and validate voices that have been routinely dismissed by serving as their sounding board and confidant



Share Back

Don't forget that how we gather, tell and share these deep personal stories matters immensely - it has the power to transform us.



Public Event

1

RABBIT TRAIL:

Begin with relationships and partners to point you in the direction of who to speak with first.

We start by relying on our partners who are deeply embedded in this work and place, to point us in the direction of where we should start and who we should be building relationships with, to best learn from and connect with. Then, with each person we meet with, we ask the important question – “who else should we be talking to?” Relying on our newly formed relationships to help open the doors of the hearts of more individuals that are doing this work. And, then, we begin. With phone calls, emails, and carefully crafted invitations to join us on this journey.

2

PERSONAL INVITATION

Acknowledge and appreciate the hard work being done in places by extending a sincere and personal invitation that is specific and descriptive.

In a time of overwhelming email and screen time, it can be difficult to stand out when reaching out “cold” with no previous relationship to set your email apart. But just because you don’t (yet) know them personally, doesn’t mean you can’t find ways to be sincere, authentic and direct. We advise:

- » Get clear about what you are asking of them and make it as easy as possible for them to commit (calendar tools for selecting time to meet, etc)
- » Be descriptive about why their work matters to you, the community or the person who put you in contact with them. Lift up what your client has shared with you and name it as something that is appreciated.
- » Tell them who you are, but don’t lead with yourself. Rather connect who you are to their work or passion.

SAMPLE EMAIL INVITATION:

Jodi,

Your commitment to listening and standing-up for the overlooked in your community, your great efforts to become the second female mayor in Long Prairie and the way you lead with radical love inspires us! We are thrilled to invite you to be one of the core-storytellers – to further highlight, connect, and amplify the important role you are playing as a changemaker in your region. We would like to work with you to help you articulate a 7 minute story – to inspire us, challenge us, make us laugh, make us aware – and to create a dynamic way to share your story with the world. We see you and your fellow changemakers as models for the nation in how we mend and strengthen the social and civic fabric of our country.

We will provide support for you – modest financial support and personal messaging support to help you curate your story and deliver your best self. We hope you humbly accept how important you are as an inspiration and guiding post for others and we hope you say yes! Specific next steps are linked below.

Best,
Anna Claussen & Ashley Hanson

3

QUESTIONS FOR DEEP LISTENING:

Craft compassionate and thoughtful interview questions that get to the core of “how it feels” rather than “what it is”. Then bring your whole self to the table.

Crafting compassionate and thoughtful interview questions is crucial to the success of accessing the deeper story. For us, generating the questions help set us up for the kind of deep listening that inspires the authentic, relational work we are hoping to achieve. We seek to get below the surface answers, moving from a place of “what is the work you are doing” into a place of “how does it feel to do this work.” We have found that working towards the core of how it feels to do the work, gets at the bigger challenges and gaps in the resources and support available for the folks doing the actual on the ground work.

Below are a sample of the kinds of questions that we used to guide our one-on-one conversations with Region Five residents.

- » How do you define the community that you live in or work with?
- » What challenges do you think your community faces uniquely?
- » What problems or conflicts are most important to address, and why?
- » Where have you felt supported/understood?
- » What drains you?
- » How are you showing up in your community as an agent for change?
 - What does it feel like?
 - What does it look like?
- » Who else should we be talking to?

INTERVIEWS

Our first step was to work with our project partners to identify a group of residents to interview one-on-one, using a series of questions referenced above. These questions were developed with the goal of understanding: 1) what’s working (both within the individual’s work and the region as a whole); 2) what it “feels” like to do this work, and; 3) what support is needed to grow and sustain DEI work in their community. We scheduled 45-minute interviews with each individual and recorded the conversations. Following the interviews, we compiled our notes into key themes which are included in the “What We Heard” section to follow.

4

INVOLVE ARTISTS:

Invite artists to join you to witness, listen deeply and produce a creative reflection of what they hear in a Story Circle.

In story circle formats, conversations usually become layered and complex. Richness emerges as themes are explored through multidimensional lenses. Therefore a traditional form of note-taking or reporting back rarely captures the essence of the conversation adequately. But with the power of artists we can capture the deep feelings, emotions and personal accounts shared with the group. We identified three artists, each with a different medium, to join us for the Story Circles. Their role was to witness: to listen deeply to what was being said, and what was underneath the surface of what was being said. They were then asked to produce a creative reflection, using their medium, based on what was heard in the Story Circles.

5

QUESTIONS FOR SHARED LEARNING:

Facilitate an atmosphere of care and connection while also finding ways to expect more from people we think we know and more ways to embrace and support our own complex identities.

To set the tone for the sharing spaces, we often begin with a grounding poem, music, or breath, to unite participants in the space. We then move into reflecting on and sharing the complexities of our identities with an exercise that allows for an easy entry into identity reflection, while helping folks get below the surface - moving us into a deeper space of sharing. We acknowledge that everyone in the room is a complex being. And, that holding a complex identity is not easy. Societal and cultural tendencies work against us. To discover our blindspots, we have to be in-relationship (continuously) with people who don't think like us or live like us. But furthermore, we have to find ways to expect more from people we think we know and more ways to embrace and support our own complex identities. We often think of identity first as gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, or political party - but it also includes values, qualities, beliefs, expressions, personalities, goals and situational/environmental influences. To that end, we ask participants to answer the question: What are the identities or monikers that resonate for you? For example -- mother, baker, midwesterner, community builder, rural advocate, cook book enthusiast, defender of introverts, born of the Pacific Ocean, etc.

Examples of the kinds of questions we asked in our Story Circles are included here:

- » Who are you? Who are your people? What is your role in your community?
- » Where at the intersection of your community, your work and your identity do you feel tension? How do you value the perspective that tension gives you or how does that tension make you feel isolated?
- » Mending and strengthening the social and civic fabric of our communities takes courage - Please share a story about a time you have been courageous in this work? Or tell us a story about where you've witnessed someone be courageous in your community?



STORY CIRCLES

Part of the Welcoming Communities Initiative is working with specific sectors, or industry clusters, to examine ways that each sector is and is not employing equitable practices. Following our round of interviews, we determined that there were three sectors that we would like to dig in a little deeper with: Equity in Agriculture and Food Access; Equity in Health Care and Services; Equity in Civic Infrastructure.

For our deeper dive, we chose to utilize and adapt the Story Circle approach. (Explore [here](#) for resources and background on Story Circles) To complete the Story Circles, we scheduled a 1.5 hour digital Story Circle. In addition to working with our project partners on the outreach component of the Story Circles, we also contracted with three of our Interviewees (local residents) who had connections to the different sectors to be our outreach partners. Each of these outreach partners helped encourage folks that they know locally who would bring a broad range of perspectives to the Story Circle, to attend. For the purposes of these Story Circles, we kept the numbers small (less than 10) in each group, so that we could really dive a bit deeper with the folks in attendance. We also compensated and honored all participants for their time with a \$25 gift card and a hand-written thank you note.

For the Digital Story Circles, we focused on creating an atmosphere of comfort, care, and connection. Even though we were operating in a digital space, we wanted to do our best to ensure that the participants felt supported. We began with a grounding, and a check-in with each participant. And, then, we moved into a series of carefully crafted questions for each participant to respond to. Following the conversation, we invited our “artist observer” to reflect back a bit in real time on what they heard. The artist then took the information gathered and each created a new work - poetry, visual art, and music. For the three Story Circles, we invited three different artists to act as observers and reflectors - providing a creative response to what they witnessed at the event. These creative pieces were then shared back with the participants of the Story Circle afterward, and used as a tool for deeper conversation into the hopes and needs that each sector articulated during our time together.

STORY CIRCLE
HEALTH EQUITY

Paintings and Images created by Heidi Jeub, www.heidijeub.com

With generosity and vulnerability, we shared space with a powerful group of nurses, social workers, advocates and counselors who are advancing health equity in their communities. Heidi Jeub, local artist and teacher, joined us and reflected back what she heard in these illustrations.

[CLICK HERE FOR THE ILLUSTRATIONS](#)

6

ENGAGE MORE ARTISTS:

Enlist artists to help us heal and transform – personally as well as communally – by elevating our deep personal stories.

At this point in our process we knew that because of the Pandemic we would not be planning an in-person event or conference for our storytellers to take the stage, but we still wanted to utilize the power of storytelling to help them feel heard and for others to hear and see them. To do right by someone, we have to have them on our mind. To see them. To truly hear them, so they can hear others. To listen to their story, and share ours in return. This is the power of art. Art has the power to let us tell our story, but also the power to help share it – to transport and translate our story to others – in order to build a more inclusive and equitable society where we all feel seen, heard, and known for who we are.

STORY CIRCLE
INFRASTRUCTURE

We gathered to center voices in the region who are committed to advancing access and equity in infrastructure and systems that lead to greater equity in economic development. This poetry was inspired from the attendees and created by poet Cassie Williams.

CLICK [HERE](#) FOR
THE AUDIO FILE OF
THE POEM

We long to exist in shared spaces
doing the work of connecting
childcare provider to child
students to graduation
veterans to stability
all forced to slow down
even if the buildings that distance us
urgently needs repair

Hope is a resource
muffled behind masks and desktop screens
we wipe tears through phone lines
of falling businesses and the unemployed
extended hands that reach out to help
can only type emailed instructions of
patience with open-ended deadlines

Although void of hand shakes and coffee conversation
a pandemic is not the sole source of division between us
unity continues to echo in the distance
lost in between piles of plans with no plans
or sat on shelves of empty offices right next
to welcoming "the other"
the unknown
the uncomfortable

The possibilities of our future is what drives us
to meet over video calls
endure long waits for answers
and prolonged solution while in makeshift offices
at breakfast tables and front porches
sitting next to children who simply want to go to school

Some of our efforts may seem to go unnoticed
sunken in between cracked concrete
faded ink in defunded small town newspapers
broken signals in areas unreachable
we continue the pursuit to remain connected
uplifted during a time of waiting and a push for self preservation
We continue to try to move forward together.

FOOD ACCESS

We sat down with farmers, food shelf directors, and local food advocates to talk about equity and access in food and agriculture. We were joined by musician poet, Brian Laidlaw, who as an active artist observer synthesized what he heard into song.

[CLICK HERE FOR THE AUDIO FILE OF THE SONG](#)

SILO

if I could stockpile masks and money
if I could stockpile my seed
I would do it for my family,
give 'em all the things they need,
and if there's one thing I know
I'd have plenty in my silo

I don't want my problems
to travel with my name
but the way I hear 'em whisper
it's shot me full of shame
and I'm just a little shy, so
I stay here in my silo

the first thing that I learned here
was not to speak my mind
but never being mean
is not the same as being kind
it doesn't hurt to try, though
instead of staying in your silo

*from the meadow to the mightiest of skies
there's a recipe and a surplus of supplies
don't let it rot where it lay,
what I got, I just got
to give away*

some folks only show up
when it's time to rage and rant
they won't tend a garden,
or plot the tender plant,
they just want to watch it die slow
and then hunker in their silo

both you and your neighbor
picked a wild place to dwell
half the year it's heaven,
half the year it's hell,
all hot sun and high snow,
so won't you share what's in your silo

fruit and seed and water,
as I understand,
are meant to cycle through our bodies
and cycle through the land

as the corn and the rye go
out to the world from the silo

*from the meadow to the mightiest of skies
there's a recipe and a surplus of supplies
don't let it rot where it lay,
what you got, you just got
to give away*

7

COACH AND EMPOWER:

Nurture, elevate and validate voices that have been routinely dismissed by serving as their sounding board and confidant

In many places – not just rural – people have sidelined their own health and dismissed their own needs by accepting a narrative that they are lesser. This has not come without physical, spiritual and emotional harm and the act of dismissing their own personal stories has turned from anger to resentment. There is a need to give them a stage and audience that respects their lived experiences – that changes the narrative. And it requires more than a megaphone or a phone call from a reporter. There is a need for healing and transformation – and this asks for someone to nurture them – to coach and coax – to give them back the confidence and to validate – the worthiness of the work, the needs of their community, and the impact their courage is having. Advice we shared with our changemakers as they crafted their story:

» **Be unapologetically you.**

» **Personal story is Queen.** Rather than speaking to a specific sector, focus on a story of self and community (can be story of success or challenge/frustration/perseverance). If you are looking for more framework around this model you can dive deeper into the Public Narrative Model.

» **Tap your senses.** When telling stories, it's tempting to go abstract to allow them to apply to all those watching. But I advise to go in the opposite direction – be highly specific and sensory. Give the smell, the taste, the feelings, the textures, and people will transpire their own experiences onto that.

» **Don't do it all, do one thing well.** You have 7 minutes! What's most important is that you allow the audience to know you personally and feel connected. The good news is that it's more than possible to reach people in 7 minutes.

» **Be the (vulnerable) hero.** People don't want to hear about the perfect person. They DO want to come with you on your journey – one that they can relate to that may be riddled with flaws, wounds and even failures.



The Changemakers

CURATED STORIES

When it comes to changemakers, there are rebels and radicals, yielding big voices filled with big passion. There are also commonplace movers and shakers, listening deeply and planting seeds for transformation. They work within and against cultural inertia. And while they may not all make appearances as “community leaders”, they do consistently challenge us, inspire others, and build greater collective awareness for what is good and necessary to be better - better neighbors, better citizens, better people. These are the stories that we wanted to lift up in *The Rural Reveal*, in order to help other folks in see themselves in this work.

One of the challenges we heard repeated in our interviews, was that there was a need for more people doing changemaking work. By featuring the stories of “everyday” changemakers, who are integrating welcoming and equity practices into their daily life and work, our intention was to help other individuals, who do not necessarily identify as leaders, see that they, too, can make a difference through everyday acts. The five Storytellers that we chose to work with for the Seven-Minute Stories, each brought a different style, perspective, sector, and approach to the work. By curating a selection of stories that share different ways of approaching changemaking work, our hope was to provide a wide range of access points for other individuals to be inspired to step into their own leadership.

CHARLES BLACK LANCE

BAXTER, MN

Drawing upon lessons from both his indigenous roots and the agricultural community around him, Charles has learned to embrace complexity. With his experience of living in two cultures, he is cultivating an educational environment that allows BIPOC students to thrive in predominantly white institutions.



CARMEN URBINA OBERTON

RANDALL, MN

Carmen never expected to find herself in rural Minnesota, from Mexico, let alone find a sense of community or purpose in this new place. It takes great courage and risk to take root and bloom where you are planted, but Carmen has blossomed into a leader in her community as both a language and cultural translator, creating fertile ground for others to bloom too.

JODI DIXON

LONG PRAIRIE, MN

As a relative newbie to the community with no political experience, Jodi may have been an unlikely candidate for mayor. But she is a well-liked mayor. With openness, passion and transparency, she walks the walk. She cares for the people first and believes everyone is equal, regardless of their age, ethnicity or immigration status.



CLICK [HERE](#) FOR
THE VIDEO STORIES

CHRIS LINDHOLM

PEQUOT LAKES, MN

He's strategic, calculated, maybe even quiet; yet Chris Lindholm is anything but passive when it comes to addressing inequities inside our schools. He is empowering a stronger voice of compassion and empathy within the leadership circles of the public school system to stomp out racism and prejudice



THERESE KUNZ

OUTING, MN

With her strong belief in the power of the arts to uplift rural communities out of their grief, fear of others, or fear of change, Therese Kunz uses storytelling to open hearts and have conversations that matter. She has learned that you have to love, really love, those you wish to teach, direct, change, and impact. Though this is not easy. As a theater artist, she is shifting cultural inertia.

8

SHARE BACK:

Don't forget that how we gather, tell and share these deep personal stories matters immensely - it has the power to transform us.

The artists that we worked with on the project created powerful pieces of creative reflection based on the stories that were shared in interviews, story circles and seven minute stories. These pieces were shared with everyone who contributed to the project. The artwork shined light on the stories in a way that made the participants feel seen and heard,

acknowledged and supported, cared for and connected, in what can often feel like isolating and challenging work. The artwork was made available to the participants to share with their communities, with the hope of helping to tell their story and inspire more people to get involved. The goal of the shareback is not only to share the narrative of what was, and what is, but most importantly, what wants to be. Enter the storytellers. They help us see ourselves in the work, encouraging more individuals to step into the shoes of leadership, and join their neighbors in the courageous act of everyday change. Here, we are creating a space for neighbors to hear each other's story, in order to cultivate and nourish a culture of empathy. But not stopping there, because empathy alone is not enough to tip the scales of injustice. But, an entry point to move into informed action. We shareback to celebrate and acknowledge the hard work that has been done, we applaud and encourage each other, so that we have the fuel we need to keep moving forward.

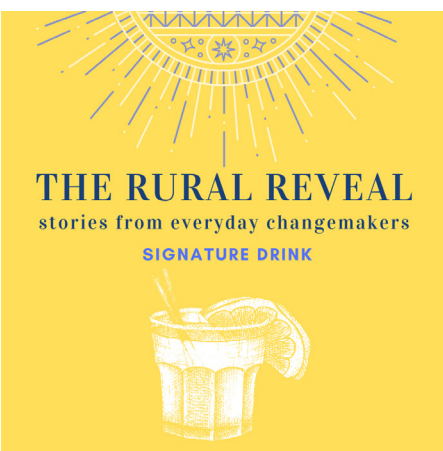
9

PUBLIC INVITATION

Curate an environment that fosters vulnerability and authenticity with an invitation that sparks joy and curiosity.

In addition to sharing the stories back in the community where the changemakers live and work, another goal with this project was to help expand and shift the narrative of what equity work looks and feels like in rural spaces. We designed a public, digital event to celebrate the work of the changemakers and highlight the work of the artists who created work for the project. The goal was to acknowledge the stories shared, invite more people into the conversation, and continue to build the movement. For this event, we wanted to not only reach a region wide rural audience, but also an audience that included urban dwellers, other networks of changemakers, and potential funders. It was important to us that attendees were invited to examine their understanding of rural equity work and to highlight the challenges and gaps that exist, with the hopes of drawing more attention and resources to the area.

In the same way that we did our best to create relational spaces for our interviewees and storytellers to share in open and informal ways, the public invitation for the event set a tone of celebration and curiosity. We planted seeds of inspiration by sharing snippets of the changemakers stories in colorful promotional pieces, made personal asks of our network to join us in the space, and we invited attendees to join us for a toast with a signature cocktail / mocktail for the event! While the work can be heavy and overwhelming, we wanted to create an atmosphere of love and light, to lift up the good and the hard work happening in Region Five.





**PUBLIC
EVENT**

How we gather, tell and share these deep personal stories matters immensely - it matters to our identity, our narratives and our deep desire to belong. If we stop short of elevating these stories we miss out on important conduits to understanding the complexity of all lived realities and opinions. We fail to deepen and accelerate the impact that can be found in the sharing of deep personal experience. We miss the opportunity to amplify our agency.

The Region Five Rural Reveal project culminated in a public, digital event that included over 120 attendees from across the country. The event started with a poem, and ended with a song. We acknowledged the land, the pandemic, the complex realities that we all enter the space with. We shared our process, the stories of the changemakers, and the artwork created. We had space for dialogue and processing. And, we raised our glasses in celebration of the good work that is happening and made commitments to the hard work ahead. We were united in the fact that this work takes all of us, working together across geographic divides, in order to make lasting change.

**CLICK [HERE](#) TO
WATCH A RECORDING
OF THE EVENT**



VOICES FOR RURAL RESILIENCE
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC TRANSFORMATION
REGION FIVE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

THE RURAL REVEAL

stories from everyday changemakers

Join us for an online exhibition where artists will share stories from local changemakers who are inspiring others and building greater collective awareness in their communities.

FEB 19, 2021 | 3:00-4:30 PM

A

POEM

BY MAGGIE SMITH

"GOOD BONES"

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

3 | **HERE'S** **WHAT WE HEARD**

THE LEARNINGS

THE TAKE-AWAYS

We conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with individuals that spend their days working to make Region Five a more welcoming place to live and work. Below is a high-level sampling of some of the key themes that emerged from the interviews. Our hope is that, by sharing these themes, we can shine a light on the hopes, feelings and challenges faced by those doing this work in rural Central Minnesota. And, to provide insight for those who are in the position of providing resources and connections, to have a better understanding of where the greatest needs are and where everyday changemakers based in these rural communities are feeling the most tension in their work.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR PLACE

DIVERSITY IN OUR REGION

It was shared in many interviews that it is important to note that diversity takes different forms in each community. And, as such, each community's needs vary in terms of training, resources, and access for all residents. Racial diversity and changing demographics is a significant consideration in equity work, but not all communities in this region are experiencing demographic changes at the same pace. In many of the communities, changemakers are also looking to increase access and inclusivity for those at an economic disadvantage, as this region has the lowest median wage in the state. One area of industry that was repeatedly noted was that this is a highly agricultural area, and the closing of many small family farms over the past few decades has had a huge impact on the make-up of the community.

"We are always making sure that people who are in the cycle of poverty are empowered even more. It's a constant struggle and nothing new; there is a lot of hurt there. We need to make sure that they are a part of the conversation, that they are at the table, that they are included."

Changemakers are also working to make their communities more welcoming to all ages and abilities, as it was noted that Region Five has the highest number of folks with veteran status and people living with disabilities in the state.

While there are many individuals working on anti-racism efforts and bridging cultural divides, it was also noted that there is a major need for bridging divides based on politics, religion, and long-term versus newcomer or visitor status in many communities. This was especially true of the Brainerd Lakes area, where many homeowners are part-time or vacation only residents.

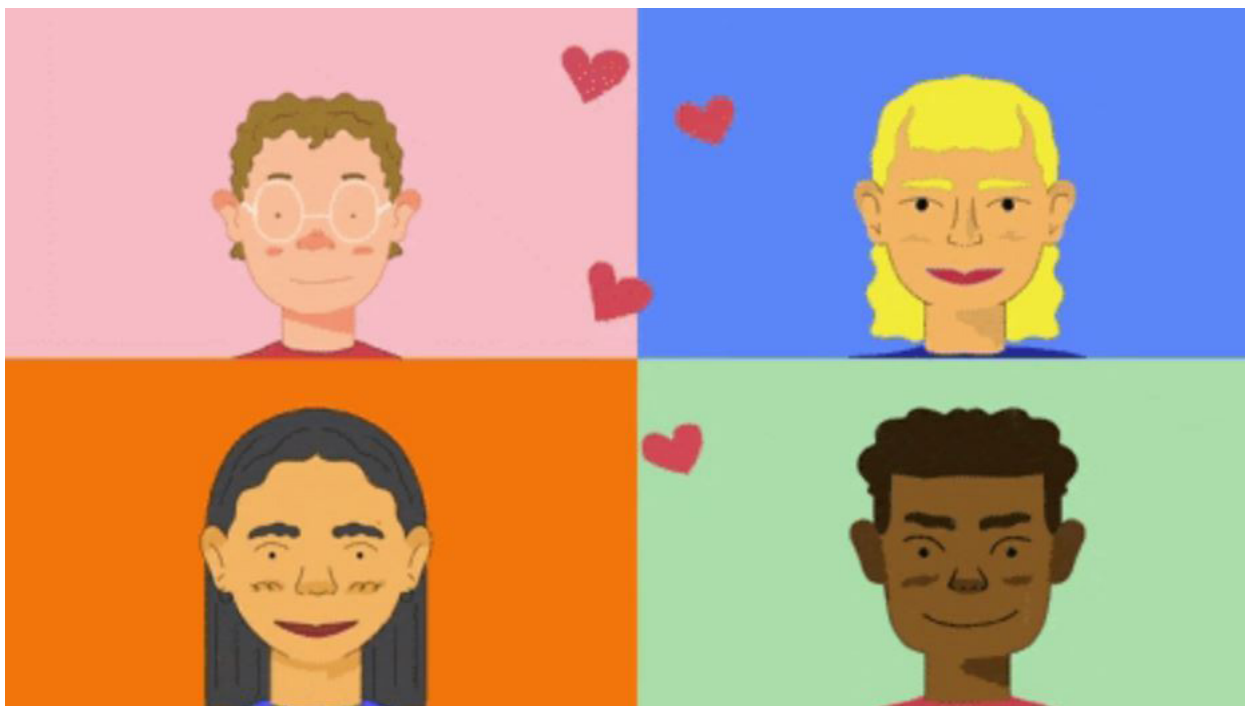
VISIBILITY: OR BEING SEEN

Many interviewees used statements like "we are invisible," "unimportant," "undeserving" of notice from funders or support that gets allocated to other areas. One poignant quote from an interviewee got to the heart of it with the sentiment:

"We fall through the cracks - we are not diverse enough, poor enough, or big enough to garner the kind of attention or support other communities have. We are not culturally interesting or sexy enough to receive resources."

This sentiment was shared in various ways by interviewees, sharing that they did not feel qualified to receive support or training because they lacked the kind of diversity that was appealing to funders or those doing equity work on the statewide level.





TELL US ABOUT YOUR PEOPLE

IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

"We always have a coffee pot going and and are willing to listen to anyone express what they need and find ways to help."

Nearly everyone we spoke with mentioned the power of the personal, one-on-one relationship when doing changemaking work; that the power was in the "little moments of connection," like "being thanked in Spanish at the grocery store" that are challenging to quantify outside of the moment.

It was also noted that there is a lot of power in being a newcomer to an area, that you have the opportunity to make real change, because you are not yet entrenched in old ways of operating.

Many interviewees also mentioned that it is mostly women doing this work - not all, but most. And, that even without training, the women gather using their "intuition to move forward with a whole lot of

intention and thinking about the next step as best we can." Although this is making substantial change, they would like to know how to get more training and get more people involved.

One interviewee noted that one of the reasons there is difficulty with expanding a welcoming perspective is from residents having "not had much experience of the world" outside of the region. And, that there are less people moving back to the region, bringing new perspectives with them. It was also noted that there are very few opportunities to experience liberal arts education, without a university presence in the region.

TELL US ABOUT THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE:

Below is a list of the most common challenges that we heard from interviewees regarding equity work in Region Five, supported by anonymous quotes or statements from the interviews.

CULTURAL INERTIA.

There is a lack of want or desire to change.

"There is a general sentiment that "this is the way it's always been, why do we need to change it."

"There is push back against anything advocacy or activism related. It is seen as crazy, not courageous, when you stand-up with a perspective or opinion that rocks the boat."

"We are usually reactive to culture change, not proactive...What I am trying to do is get people to see the positives and pros of folks moving to town. Our work force isn't going to be enough, we need to enjoy the cultural diversity that comes... What I am interested in at a macro level is try to make our colleges and communities more welcoming beforehand. To have services ready for new residents before they come, and that can help them feel more welcomed."

*"There is a feeling that "that stuff" is not important. Most people focus on church, outdoor recreation, sports - not arts or community connection as much."
"Our culture is changing; as anglos, they don't want to admit that. The culture has changed and they don't want to allow space for that, and they don't show up."*

"In places like Region Five, when we fester in our whiteness, it becomes stronger. "

"We need to invest in changing the people who were already here... if you want to change you need to be ready for a new culture"

IT'S EXHAUSTING.

To continue to fight for justice in your work and personal life takes a lot of time and energy.

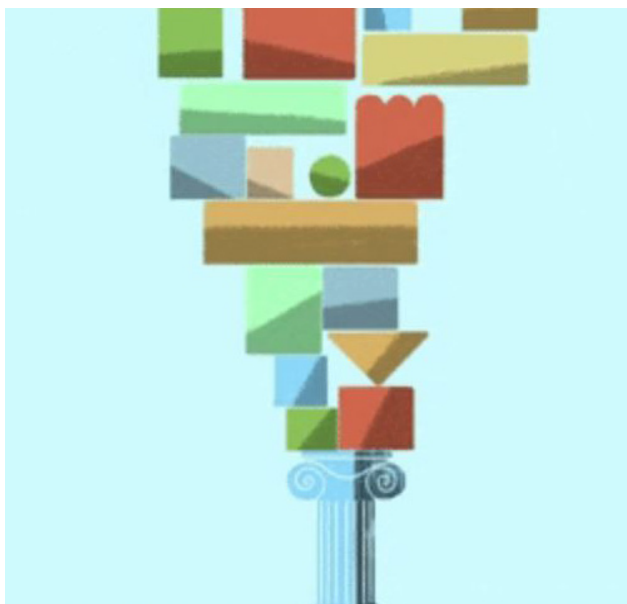
"This is pretty all consuming for me; I work seven days a week, 12 hours a day when grant writing. I keep saying "this year, I'm going to get a life"

"It is exhausting how money oriented this work is; we can only do what we have dollars to do and we don't know what dollars we are going to get; that's exhausting knowing that."

"I have friends from a lot of political backgrounds, I used to enjoy that, and now those conversations seem soul sucking."

"It's horrible in our fears how we bypass people who are marginalized; that is draining. It is so draining to work in an environment where people show their lack of empathy through complete ignorance"





UNDERFUNDED AND UNDER-RESOURCED.

Many interviewees expressed challenges getting access to funds, tools and resources to do equity work.

"We have \$4000 left and I can't write one more funding grant."

"I'm not sure we have the tools we need to do this difficult work; I'm worried about my staff"

"We don't have extra capital in this region to address major economic and community development issues"

IT'S A BALANCING ACT.

Meeting people where they are and pushing the conversation forward, can be challenging in small communities.

"The community is tricky that way - to navigate without being a touchpoint for controversy."

"No one wants to rock the boat, so we are just tiptoeing toward inclusion."

PRESSURE TO ALWAYS DO NEW, NOT INVEST IN TRIED AND TRUE.

Frustration with funding streams always looking for new programming, rather than supporting what is already working and understanding that this work takes a lot of time.

"Why do funders constantly want something new? What is wrong with improving what is working well."

"I feel obsolete because of my age or what I am doing is not flashy enough."



OVERCOMING FEAR AND SCARCITY MENTALITY; THE POLITICS OF PLACE.

There is so much division on a political level that it makes it difficult to move welcoming initiatives forward in conservative communities.

"Fear coupled with Guns: The pushback really drains me - there is a big push to be a second amendment protection county - the side that is for it is way stronger than the side that's against it. That issue is so raw, and to have that many people don't see that gun laws are important... It puts all of us in such danger. And that makes me have fear. I wanted to go to support my side, but I'm scared to go where there are angry people with guns. That kind of mentality is affecting our policy. One side can't show up because it's too scary."

"It's challenging to even talk about social justice when it comes to renewable energy; it seems like we can only get traction when talking about economics or workforce training."

"What I've noticed is the political divide has finally reached City Council level. It seemed like a federal thing, that was distant from us - but, that has changed a lot. And, it's sad. What I am trying to bring to the community is projects where that political divide doesn't play a part in it. I'm still considered an outsider here - I've been here 20 years."

"Even the food movement has been divisive; there's this idea that it originated on the coast and in urban places. It should be unifying, but it's divisive and political."

DEEP PERSONAL GROWTH, COURAGE, AND SACRIFICE.

When doing this work in a small community, without access to a network of support, it takes a lot of courage and a lot of commitment.

"It feels like an awareness of my privilege and the gifts I've been given. It feels pretty scary. Insecure. Pride. A sense of awesome responsibility. When you walk in the room as an agent of change you know people are going to listen to you - it comes with a mixed bag of good and bad... I'm not a traditional leader... sometimes you have to check your values at the door to do this work in these communities."

"Sometimes I am afraid I'm not the best person to do this work - I'm a white, privileged, male - but, I have gone on a personal journey to do this work."

"When you face public opposition in a small town, it's hard to not take things personally."

IT'S GOOD WORK, BUT IT'S SLOW.

Tension between being slow and strategic and being faced with the reality that there is also urgency in this work.

"It's been strategic, calculated and quiet - there are not a lot of people in the community that have the time, strategic thinking or training to make progress."

"It's like a stew... my elected officials come in and out, onboarding new people every year who don't see things the way we do."

"You don't change a culture overnight, and that's what we are doing. It's a tenant of global health - you do what you can do and nick away at it."

DISMISSIVE MENTALITY OR FEELING DISMISSED.

This sentiment rang true both within the changemakers' own community, and on a statewide level.

"...one of the hurtful things I was told was that Governor Walz once said outstate MN is nothing but cows and rocks. There is more to us than cows and rocks; we are people, too. We should not be dismissed just because we have a small population."

"I really wish there was more involvement from the community and what takes place in it. My first thought is - nobody ever shows up to a council meeting unless it affects them personally. They only come in when they have a request or complaint. I wish there were more people that took part in running the community. I would love to see our city council filled. I wish that people took more interest in their town. To improve our life here. It's a small community, let's make it pleasant and look after each other."

"So many people say, 'Why us?' or 'I'm 'just' ____' and so they think they can't do these types of things. But, it doesn't have to be the Mayor stepping up to make change, you have power within your community."

"Some days I'd like to scream or yell or cry - there are people in our community that aren't getting treated like they should be."

DATA, COMMUNICATION, AND CONNECTION.

Many folks expressed a need for more data to be collected about the work happening in the region and the existing needs, to communicate better with the residents and funders, and to help connect changemakers with each other.

"No one trusts me without data, but the data has to be locally derived... we are hungry for the data in order to do the work."

"There are a lot of initiatives, but lack of connection and communication around who is doing what and how to do it together - we are fighting for mutual goals with different ways to get them."

IT'S LONELY AND SCRAPPY.

Many interviewees felt they were completely alone, and wished to be connected to other people doing what they are doing.

"What I would caution other small town artists that want to start their own organization - I would tell them to get more partners, I would tell them to get some revenue... I almost killed myself doing the work and nobody came and nobody cared."

"I was doing it all and just can't do it anymore"

"I get defeated when I do all of this planning for a community event and no one shows up - they are not prioritizing community"

COVID WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON THIS WORK.

We must acknowledge that these interviews took place during the pandemic, with increased barriers and isolation. Many expressed the fear that the impacts of COVID would have a long-term effect on their ability to do changemaking work.

"I worry that we won't be personal with each other again. The fear will drive not only where we put our bodies but where we put our hearts, manifesting from physical to emotional state that is hard to heal or overcome. That it will lead to more walls, more barriers, and people will hunker down more... survival at the cost of a society that is good to each other... If we hunker down and just survive and not interact with others it will be catastrophically dangerous for our economy and the health and wellness of our people."

"It's an ideal time to reimagine and rethink your culture - this shared trauma provides an opportunity for more empathy; to reevaluate old models that aren't working and reinvent our culture."



TELL US WHAT YOU NEED:

This section focuses on what changemakers expressed that they need more of in order to do their work. The key themes pulled out emerged in multiple interviews.

- *MORE TIME.*
- *More listening.*
- *More empathy and caring.*
- *More ways to capture and share the intangible.*
- *To be acknowledged.*
- *More resources.*
- *More space for stories that are not heard.*
- *More love.*

"If you love your neighbors and love human beings things will happen for the better. I wish there was no hate. If there wasn't I know this community could really flourish."

- *More meetings in person.*
- *More partners and collaboration.*
- *More connections to others doing the work.*

"It would be great to have a rural network of people doing the organizing work on a higher level in rural communities."

- *More people doing this work who are from here.*

"It's sustainable if built from within. Not an outsider doing equity training with us, but us getting trained and teaching each other."

- *More opportunities for dialogue.*

"It's less about toolkits and more about dialogue. We need to talk about why we hold these thoughts and what's causing these inequities. We need to have more discussions on how to sustain inclusivity throughout our businesses and daily lives."

- *More people doing the work.*

"It's the same people showing up and doing the work; we are getting fatigued... We keep drawing from the same well and it's getting dry - throughout our businesses and daily lives."

We share these high level needs with the hopes that they will inspire others to help fill the gaps articulated through additional support, networks, training and resources. Each of these needs are attainable. And, we attempted to address as many as we could with The Rural Reveal. We need all of us doing the work, from all angles. We hope this inspires you to take a step in the direction of change.

FOR THE FULL STORY VISIT:

[HTTPS://VOICESFORRURAL.ORG/EVERYDAYCHANGEMAKERS](https://voicesforrural.org/everydaychangemakers)

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CREATIVE BRIEF

The Rural Reveal:

Stories from Everyday Changemakers
