

# Why Go Rural? Lessons from Maine

## Keynote Remarks on Covering Rural Territory

Presented by:

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**F**irst let me say, I am delighted to be back in the fold of community foundations and to see so many familiar faces.

My challenge this morning is to make a case for why it is important to invest in rural communities. I suspect that I may be preaching to the choir but for those of you who may be new to covering rural communities, I will share some stories from my experience in Maine.

I have borrowed from David Letterman a bit to frame my stories around five reasons to go rural and five tips for when you do.

**One:**

**GO RURAL BECAUSE IT IS WHERE THE MONEY IS.**

When we started the Maine Community Foundation, we didn't have much money. In fact, our first fund was started with a gift of \$10. The founder of the foundation and I lived in rural Maine and neither of us wanted to drive more than 30 minutes to work, so we located the office in Ellsworth, Maine a small county-seat town on the north coast of the state. Interestingly, the early investors in the foundation all said that we could not successfully run a statewide foundation from a rural area that no one would give us any money. But, we proved them wrong.

In many ways, establishing ourselves in Ellsworth was the most strategic decision we made. Ellsworth had no negatives for most of the population except for the folks from the state's largest city, Portland, who thought that they should be the center of philanthropic activity. We ultimately accommodated them by setting up an Outreach Office in Portland.

However, Maine is a rural state and for those in the rural counties, establishing the foundation in Ellsworth, said "We are one of you" and it went a long way toward building our credibility.

In addition, we found that there was more untapped charitable money in rural Maine than in rural Maine than in the urban areas. Much of that wealth is invested in family farms or local grocery stores and it can be difficult to get a handle on but it is there. And the local attorneys, bankers and brokers know where it is there. Second home owners are also prevalent in rural areas, and may be more philanthropically committed to their rural communities.

As a result of focusing on rural areas and building our credibility there, the Maine Community Foundation ended up raising more money from the rural areas than from the major cities in the state and were — in fact, still are — a net provider of funds *from rural to urban*.

**Two:**

**GO RURAL BECAUSE A LITTLE MONEY CAN GO A LONG WAY.**

How many of you have had the experience of getting a report back at the end of \$2,000 grant with a enclosed check in the amount \$52.36 representing the unspent money? That happens all the time! Rural people are frugal, appreciative and spend money wisely. In fact, you can have the unusual problem with rural organizations: trying to get them to spend the money at all!

Maine Community Foundation was involved in another Ford Foundation funded initiative called the northern New England Sustainable Communities Program where we worked with two communities in Maine to help them become more economically and environmentally sustainable. As part of the grant, we had several hundred thousand dollars to give to each of our two sustainable communities. I decided to take a risk and give the money and control for spending it to each community *up front*. At the end of the grant period, one community had only spent \$40,000 of the \$200,000 allocated to them. In the process, however, they had leveraged over a million dollars in other funds and accomplished an incredible amount of volunteer and grassroots work.

**Three:**

**GO RURAL BECAUSE IT IS WHERE THE NEED IS.**

When we first moved to Maine, my husband and I spent one Saturday visiting a trash and treasure store called Ma's Barn in rural Washington County. The barn stood on a spectacular hill surrounded by blueberry barrens that rolled down to the ocean. The proprietress (Ma) was an elderly woman who had grown up in the house on the hill. My husband tried mightily to make pleasant conversation with Ma, but she would have nothing of the tourists from away. Finally, in an effort to gain her favor, my husband said: Well, you sure have a million dollar view from up here. Her curt response: Yeah, well, you can't eat the view.

I always thought if I were to write a book about rural Maine, I would call it: You Can't Eat the View. In that short phrase, Ma captured the irony of rural communities. They are often beautiful places that people love to visit, but they are also very difficult places to make a living. Rural residents are tough and proud and they often do not think of themselves as poor — and in a different economy, one which demands survival skills, they would not be poor at all. But, they can also be stubborn and averse to change and so their best quality can sometimes be their worst enemy as well.

**Four:**

**GO RURAL BECAUSE RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE GREAT LEARNING LABORATORIES.**

My first job out of college was as the editor of on-air promotion for ABC television. While I worked for a large media organization, I only saw a very small part of a large company and didn't learn much about much more than my particular cog in the wheel.

Later on, I was the feature writer for the *Bar Harbor Times*, a local weekly newspaper in Maine. I not only covered the news, but I also sold ads, pasted up copy and occasionally even delivered the newspapers. I got to understand how the newspaper business worked and how the whole community worked as well. Everything I learned writing features for the *Bar Harbor Times* about politics, education, healthcare, crime and *building community* I learned from observing one small community in action. And, everything I learned there is still valid, whether in other Maine communities or in my current hometown of Boston, Massachusetts. The only difference is that the issues and systems are easier to see and understand *and to address* at the rural community level.

**Five:**

**GO RURAL BECAUSE YOU'LL NEVER FIND BETTER PEOPLE OR MAKE BETTER FRIENDS .ALTHOUGH PATIENCE AND A THICK SKIN ARE IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES.**

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When we started the Maine Community Foundation's County Fund Program, our board members were often the greatest skeptics. I remember one rural lawyer who listened politely to my pitch about the importance of creating an endowed county fund for his county and at the end of the discussion, he effectively told me that the county did not need the community foundations and we might as well pack up our things and go home. Ten years later, with a million-dollar permanent endowment fund for his county in the bank, he was our greatest supporter. But, it took at least 5 years and a lot of hard work to convince him that we were serious and to eventually, bring him around.

*Now, my five tips on how to survive and thrive while serving rural communities:*

**One:**

**LOOK AT THE COMMUNITY THROUGH LOCAL EYES. FIND CONNECTORS AND TRANSLATORS — PEOPLE WHO KNOW THE COMMUNITY AND HOW TO RELATE TO IT.**

Aroostook County is the northernmost county in Maine. It is the largest county area-wise and the most remote and to the unskilled eye, might appear to be the home of just a lot of poor potato farmers. But do not be fooled: Aroostook is in fact one of the most sophisticated counties in the state. All those potato farmers are actually commodity brokers and they can wheel and deal with the best of Chicago or Wall Street. But, fundraising there has its own idiosyncrasies.

The first time I ever tried to raise funds in Aroostook County, I went to a lot of local business people with a board member who was also the wife of one of the successful potato farmers. She and I talked to 4 or 5 farmers that day and they all listed politely, but none of them would give us any financial commitment. Later that evening, we sat at her kitchen table commiserating and bemoaning our lack of success. Her husband sat and listened to our pathetic story for a while and then retrieved his hat and left in his car. An hour later, he returned with checks from all the businessmen and farmers whom we had visited that day. The lesson, no matter how painful, is that in Aroostook County, men will listen politely to women, but men give money to men. That board member's husband knew the community and used that knowledge to get things done.

**Two:**

**TALK THE TALK**

Wicked is a familiar word in the rural Maine vernacular. Something that is really good is wicked good or just wicked. But philanthropic remainder trusts and the finer points of charitable giving are not as current or as familiar to rural residents. What is familiar to rural people are stories. When you want to connect with rural communities, tell a story. Don't spend your precious time explaining charitable remainder trusts tell the story of what impact an endowed fund has had on a community or, better still, a family or group of people.

**Three:**

**USE THE RIGHT TOOLS**

When we moved to Maine from California, we brought with us the hand-push lawn mower we had used on our flat 1/8 acre of manicured lawn back in the San Francisco Bay area. The man who unloaded our moving van pushed that hand-mower right off the truck and into the front lawn, where a trash heap was quickly mounting. You won't be using this here, he laughed as he surveyed our 5 acres of overgrown fields and orchards.

The same applied for any work you do in rural communities. You need the right tools and what worked for you in the city just may not cut the grass in rural. The Montana Community Foundation and its affiliate the Blackfeet Community Foundation has been brilliant at uncovering the local tools for accomplishing their rural mission. To raise endowment, the community foundation focused on the

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strengths and assets already in place: an annual harvest festival. The harvest festival was reinvented as a gala fundraising event appealing to the high-end resort community and celebrating native culture and experience. In other parts of Montana, local high school alumni reunions were tapped as existing community gatherings that could be turned toward community endowment building events drawing upon the love of community that already existed and directing it toward building permanent charitable assets.

The tools are there, you just need to figure out what they are and be ready to work with them!

**Four:**

**BE PATIENT, PERSISTENT AND SHOW YOU ARE THERE FOR THE LONG HAUL.**

Rural communities because of their extractive industries have a long history of being loved and left. Consequently, they are slow to love (or be loved) again.

When we worked on the Northern New England Sustainable Communities project, we partnered with a small group of rural communities around Cobscook Bay on the northern coast of Maine. That region is the home of the wise use movement as well as a landowners rights group and any project with the word sustainable in it was immediately held suspect and moreover, was a target for sabotage. The first meeting we held was packed with wise use sympathizers who tried repeatedly to kill the project. They stormed out of meetings, disrupted the proceedings, they investigated us and even went so far as to contact our program officer at the Ford Foundation to ask whether the Maine Community Foundation could be cut out of the project so they could get the funding directly. We were battered and bruised again and again, but we kept going back to the meetings and holding everyone at the table and accountable to one another including ourselves. It was a year of endless and sometimes seemingly unproductive meetings, but by the end of the project, the antagonists from the wise use movement were the leading advocates for the program. We stayed the course, stayed true to our word and together, we were able to accomplish incredibly good work. But, it was not always easy.

**Five:**

**AND FINALLY, APPRECIATE THAT YOU HAVE THE BEST JOB AROUND.**

It is a rare privilege to have an excuse to explore all the nooks and crannies of rural America, to meet people who struggle to care and to make a difference with their hands and hearts. Never have I found such a strong sense of community or such a depth of friendship than in rural Maine. Now that I am living in Boston, I appreciate these things even more. As Kathleen Norris said in her book, *Dakota*, rural American is the geography of hope. Especially at this time in our lives and in this country's experience, this hope is the lifeblood of America. As community foundations that are committed to serving rural areas, it is our responsibility and a great opportunity to help nourish that hope. There is no better work around!

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