

## **The Flipside of Brain Drain** **McCook, Nebraska Gives Brain Drain New Meaning**

In community conversations held by the US Department of Agriculture four years ago, the top-ranked issue across the nation was the exodus of youth, and thus the erosion of people and talent, from rural communities. Often referred to as “brain drain” in the major media, young people in McCook, Nebraska have given this expression a new, healthier twist.

“When we talk about brain drain, we are referring to young people in focus groups downloading as many ideas as possible about how to improve the community, especially in relationship to youth interests,” explains Dan McCarville, one of the progenitors of the McCook Youth League. In fact, the Youth League was the result of three Brain Drains that McCarville convened as a student intern with the McCook Economic Development Corporation.

How did he get youth to come and talk? Dan used a medium that young people could relate to – Facebook. Two basic questions were posed on his Facebook page: What do you like about McCook? What don’t you like about McCook? This initial query to seven friends soon turned into eighty, as Facebook correspondents spread the word. Youth and young adults in McCook became interested in attending one of three focus groups to share their ideas on how to improve the community for young people.

Sue Shaner, the business coach with the McCook Economic Development Corporation feels the momentum for a Youth League was percolating for some years prior to the Facebook experience. She had helped several high schoolers interested in computers to form an organization which the McCook Community College (where she formerly worked as Dean of Economic Development and Training) supported with laptops and meeting space. A number of these youth went on to help form the League as it is structured today. Dan McCarville was part of that original interest group.

At about the same time as the computer group was forming, a number of youth surveys were being conducted as part of a [HomeTown Competitiveness \(HTC\)](#) assessment process, shares Craig Schroeder of the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship. A full 52% of youth respondents said that they would choose to remain in the McCook area if there were quality jobs available there. That was remarkable for a landscape that had long been agriculture-dependent and had witnessed severe outmigration since the Great Depression. These data along with the willingness of young people to work together in McCook has begun to

change the community's conversation, and most importantly, attract youthful, native talent back to the community.

### **More Than Ideas – Action!**

The Brain Drain sessions resulted in a host of ideas that the youth developed in answer to what would make McCook a better place for young people. A critical component of the sessions was to not just list ideas, but to figure out how to take action. When all of the ideas were tabulated and prioritized, number one on the list was the formation of an organization that would be developed *by youth for youth*. It was envisioned that such an organization could institutionalize the presence and engagement of youth in the community, as well as give them a voice.



The young people went on to form the McCook Youth League which has been on the move since the summer of 2008. For now, they have focused on developing activities that provide outlets for youth and young adults. Group members have ranged from people in high school to singles and young married couples in their mid-twenties. The group meets weekly and communicates primarily through texting on their cell phones. They have thrown a Halloween party, and hosted band concerts. This fall, they will provide activities such as a Big Wheel race for little kids and parade participants at the Heritage Days festival, a traditional McCook fête which has required coordination with its adult organizers. Plans are in the works for a non-alcoholic New Year's Eve celebration, according to McCook Youth League President, Shane Hilker, and they are working on the logistics of how to construct their own New Year's Eve ball drop. The event will be planned in cooperation with "adult" civic groups, like the Chamber.

## **A Work in Progress**

Shane, a construction worker in town, explains that working with the group has been rewarding, but he worries about keeping members focused and active. The core group is about ten members strong. “We’ve had people come and go,” he said. “Some head off to college, but we’ve also attracted new members.” He has discovered as the leader of the group that recruitment may be a chronic issue, but in the meantime, he asserts that, “It’s remarkable what our semi-controlled chaos can produce!”

Dan McCarville, now a senior studying political science at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, plans to return to McCook to live and work. He emphasized that vigilance is needed to cultivate new, lasting leadership for youth group efforts, which he feels is a challenge in any rural community. Solid, clear direction will hold the group together, he believes, as well as groom the future leaders of the community.

## **What the McCook Youth League Experience Has Meant**

While the McCook Youth League is still in its early growth period, there is universal agreement that its creation and purpose have been enormously important. Shane Hilker cites personal and group benefits from the experience. “For me, it has opened up a world of contacts. I’m on a first-name basis with the bank president, I serve on the Heritage Day Committee, and I’ve been able to meet a lot of our community’s most influential people and work with them. That’s helping get the work of the League done, and reflecting well on all of us. It’s a good symbiotic relationship,” he chuckles. Shane added that group members are learning new skills – event-planning, networking, advertising, social interfacing – he thinks that new skill set is leading to a change of mindset for the entire group.

Representing an adult’s point of view, Sue Shaner learned that building an early trust relationship between adults and young people is the way to open up channels of communication and begin work that involves youth and recognizes their contributions. That network of trust was what started the community on the path to the Youth League. Sue believes emphatically that, “You have got to listen to young people and support them in what they want to do because you can never tell where that initial contact may lead.”

Dan McCarville sums it up neatly with two “aha!” moments of his own. One is that he discovered “magnificent diversity” among the youth of the community, and that homogeneous labels or descriptions of them should be avoided. While it makes planning activities somewhat complex, there is an amazing amount to be learned from each other, and he underscores the value that diverse young people bring to a community. Secondly, Dan feels that the McCook Youth League has been incredibly valuable in creating a space where young people

can articulate their needs, and gain recognition for their contributions. “We have made them actors in their own community – and that will motivate a lot of people to come back or stay in their hometown.”

**To learn more about the McCook Youth League, contact Shane Hilker at [shanehilker@hotmail.com](mailto:shanehilker@hotmail.com).**

**To learn more about the Youth Engagement work of the Center, contact Craig Schroeder at [craig@e2mail.org](mailto:craig@e2mail.org).**

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August 2009*