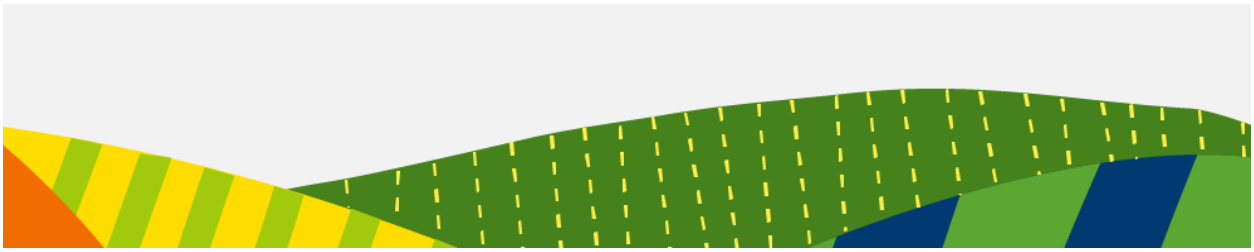

The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast

"Building on a legacy of community resilience in Sunflower County, Mississippi"

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Guests in Mississippi:

GLORIA DICKERSON, Founder and CEO, We2gether Creating Change

GEORGE HOLLAND, Mayor, Moorhead, Mississippi

DEE JONES, Vice President, Community & Economic Development, Hope Enterprise Corporation

ED SIVAK, Executive Vice President, Policy and Communications, Hope Credit Union

MELANIE TOWNSEND-BLACKMON, Mayor, Drew, Mississippi

Host:

TONY PIPA
Senior Fellow
Center for Sustainable Development, Global Economy and Development
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

In this episode, Tony Pipa visits Drew and Moorhead, two towns in Sunflower County, Mississippi, once home to cotton plantations, where the country's history of slavery and the civil rights movement set the context for these rural towns and their path to renewal today. Local leaders and homecomers describe their efforts to build communities where people want to live—and the role of beauty and leisure in achieving their visions.

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DICKERSON: We're thriving to people to look at this community and say, you know, that'd be a nice community to live in. You know, it has this going for it, I want to move there. And some of our retirees who left Drew are saying, we want to come back to Drew now, because it is a community that we can live in. We can get the things that we want in that community.

And so that's what we're doing—get the quality of life up so it'll be an attractive community, a thriving community, and a community where people will say, Oh, I love living in this particular community and I want to come back here. And then they bring their taxes or whatever with them and businesses come in as well.

PIPA: That's Gloria Dickerson, the founder and CEO of We2gether Creating Change, who herself has become a powerful catalyst for change in the town of Drew, Mississippi, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, about 100 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee, and 120 miles north of Jackson, Mississippi.

Gloria and her siblings were the first African Americans to integrate the public schools in Drew in the mid-1960s. At the heart of this episode of *Reimagine Rural* is a story of determination, a determination to fulfill the promise of the struggle for civil rights—not just for a person, or even a family, but for a community.

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I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution, and your host for *Reimagine Rural*, a podcast where I visit different places across rural America that are making progress on their efforts to thrive amid economic and social change. In this episode I visit Drew and Moorhead, another town in Sunflower County, Mississippi, a region where the country's history of slavery and the movement for civil rights set the context for these rural towns and their path to renewal today.

Before going on, however, I've been gratified to hear from many of you about your own town and the positive things happening there. For the rest of the listeners, feel free to send me your story of positive change at GlobalMedia at Brookings dot edu. I'd love to hear from you.

While we'll spend most of today's episode in Drew, I began my visit in Sunflower County in Moorhead, a town of about 1,500 people that is over 90% African-American. As Mayor George Holland tells me, Moorhead is where the "Southern cross the Yellow Dog." Now, those of you who know the history of the blues might know what that means. But for the rest of us, well, I'll let Mayor Holland explain:

HOLLAND: Welcome to Moorhead, where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog. Well, and what that means is during the during the turn of the century, there were two railroad that cross in Moorhead, and one was the Southern, which is still is still in operation. But

the Yellow Dog, that slogan come from the Yazoo Delta Railroad, “Y” “D.” And it was Y-A-L-L-O-W D-A-G. “Yallow Dag.” And that’s where that slogan come from. But they just I don’t know, but it’s right down the down the railroad track where we have a .... not a railroad track now, but we have a walking trail going going down there.

And and that there’s a historic marker there for where Moorhead, where the Southern crossed the Yellow Dog. The founder of Moorhead actually built that railroad track, the Yazoo Delta Railroad, to haul his timber business. He had built a sawmill, started a timber business, built an oil mill here in Moorhead, built a leather factory here in Moorhead. He built that to haul his timber and and other business material out of in and out of out of Moorhead.

PIPA: According to the mayor, this intersection was so renowned that soldiers fighting overseas would use it to find others who came from Mississippi and the South—they would ask around “Does anyone know where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog?”

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It was memorialized by W.C. Handy, who was known as the Father of the Blues, in his 1915 song “Yellow Dog Rag,” later known as “Yellow Dog Blues.” Moorhead itself is on the Mississippi Blues Trail.

All of this provides an important touchstone for the town. Mayor Holland and I met in the historic train depot, a small wooden building that he was instrumental in turning into a visitors’ center filled with historic artifacts.

HOLLAND: And we just started raising money. Raise it ... Well, we got a grant. We got a grant for ... I forgot the amount. But it was enough to redo ... to restore the exterior of the building. And we had enough left over to put air conditioning in the building. So, from then on, we just went to work as a community raising money to put something on the inside of the building. And then we turned it into this this a small visitor center, maybe not much for a big, well I want to say big city folks, but for a small town, you know, it’s something that is something for us here.

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And and when I applied for that grant I called ... this was a kind of a hang out area up here where the club where the clubs used to be this place used to be loaded with clubs, man. You’d come up here on Friday, you know, when I was a kid, my dad would let us turn that corner because this was blues area down here, we were too young to hang out back there. But I mean, it was just lovely. This place was loaded with people and stores and businesses and especially nightclub, or what we call it back in those days, juke joints, you know. And it was it was full of those places.

PIPA: The street where that used to happen on a Friday night, what one writer likened to a weekly mini-Mardi Gras, no longer has that liveliness. Many of the empty buildings are in need of repair.

In addition to capturing that heritage in the visitor's center as the basis for the moving the town forward, Mayor Holland knows it will be important to attract investment. A key partner has been Hope, a community development organization and community development finance institution that focuses on building assets and strengthening communities in the Delta, covering five states. Hope worked with the city to open a branch of its regional credit union in Moorhead.

HOLLAND: Well for the year there was a bank here, and it's a good bank. I'm not saying it was a bad bank. But that banking system I guess we were too small for that, you know, for that large, that that bank.

And when I moved here and was talking with the bank and even something as small as putting in an ATM machine, we've had, you know, everybody got a ATM machine these days. But we don't even have one here. And so, I talked to the the bank, and they, well too expensive to put in an ATM machine, you know, all the work we got to do.

We couldn't go over here and make a loan. We had to drive to a place called Leland—you guys come through there. We had to drive to Leland if you want to do any banking business with them. And by this time, I don't know where Moorhead was in the olden in the older days, but by this time, if you wanted to do business with the bank, you had to drive to Leland.

And so, Hope come in and offered all everything we needed. They made a way for people who did not have the credit, they had a way to help you build your credit, supported people to build their credit to so that they could, you know, have have their own credit. I know a few people around town that has built their credit, through through Hope and have, you know, moved on, even bought a home.

PIPA: Mayor Holland is what rural experts call a "homecomer," someone who grew up in a place, moved away, and consciously returned back to their hometown. He was born on a sharecropper farm, and his father moved the family of 11 kids to Moorhead in the mid-'60s, right before he died. Once Mayor Holland grew older, he moved and spent his career living and working in St. Louis.

It was after he retired from the trucking industry that he felt a calling to return to Moorhead. He was drawn to help the town—and from his perspective, preserving its heritage, combined with improving the quality of life and investing in opportunities for its children, can help the town economically.

HOLLAND: My hope for Moorhead is always growth, always ... you know, I don't I can't I don't see and don't think we will ever be a place we're gonna where we're going to draw big chain stores or industry. I don't I don't I don't believe that. But I believe Moorhead is a great place for retiring people and to raise, for families who are raising children. Because I'm saying that because our larger towns like Greenwood and Cleveland and Greenville, you know, you know, you're talking 20 miles and 30 miles away, which is not a long way to drive, or Indianola, even next door to here, it's not a

long, you know, it's not like you got to in some of your larger towns where you got an hour commute to work. It's still it's still close.

So, I look I look at Moorhead, maybe if we can't attract the larger industry, larger businesses, we can we can we can make a great place, a great place to live in.

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I'm optimistic that the town can still thrive just by being a good place to live and work in other place if need be. But but I ... my biggest hope in in things that I would like to see is the community itself working together to try to build.

PIPA: I then traced the old Yellow Dog line 25 miles north to Drew, Mississippi. Gloria Dickerson is also a homecomer who was born on a sharecropper's farm. In fact, cotton was so prevalent in the area, it is said that at one point Drew had the most cotton gins in operation in the entire country. Gloria's and the town's history are inextricably linked: she is both a protagonist in and a product of the movement to secure the civil rights for African-Americans in Mississippi and the country.

DICKERSON: I was born about five miles outside in the rural areas of Drew. And we lived out there until I was about 12 years old. And then when I was 12 years old, we had to move to Drew because my family got kicked off the plantation, got harassed, got all kinds of things happened to us in a negative way because we had integrated the school, me and my seven sisters and brothers, integrated schools in Drew, Mississippi. And so the plantation owner didn't like it, the creditors didn't like it, where we got our food didn't like it. And they told us we had to move. Okay, after they did all kinds of shooting in the house and trying to kill us and those kinds of things then we actually moved here, but we still was able to stay in the school, in Drew High School.

PIPA: Mississippi was ostensibly complying with the recently passed Civil Rights Act of 1964 in its schools through something called "freedom of choice" plans. While Black citizens could choose to send their children to all-white schools, local residents figured that they could prevent them from doing so through intimidation and even violence. Gloria's parents were the only ones in Drew to stand up to that intimidation and send their kids, including Gloria, to the all-white school.

DICKERSON: So, eventually, we as a family decided to sue the Drew public school district. And we sued the Drew school district because they had given us this plan—they'd give everybody in the plan a "freedom of choice" plan where you were able to choose whichever school you want to go to. They put that out there thinking that Black people would be too afraid and too intimidated to choose to go to an all-white school. And it happens that we were the only ones who decided to do that, my family was.

PIPA: A young NAACP lawyer named Marian Wright Edelman took up that court case, which they won in 1969. Gloria eventually graduated from the now-integrated high school, but even that was marred—many of the white students were fleeing to a new private school, North Sunflower Academy,—

[music]

—and on Gloria's graduation night, one of her classmates, Joetha Collier, was killed in what many suspect was a response to the integration. It was an echo of the killing of Emmett Till, who had been tortured and killed behind a seed barn about five miles outside of town in 1955.

Gloria was eager to leave Drew and leave all of that behind. After graduating from the University of Mississippi, she worked in other areas of the state, then ultimately ended up in Michigan as the comptroller for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a grant giving charitable foundation. Ultimately, though, she felt the pull to be more hands-on, and so she found herself back in the Delta working for the foundation, overseeing its program there.

DICKERSON: I said I don't want to do this anymore after I'd been there about three years, I want to be back out in the field, working with the people, helping them to, you know, lift themselves up. And so reluctantly, they allowed me to come back to Jackson and had an office there where I was a program officer.

And then I retired from there when they suddenly and abruptly decided to end the program. And one of the reasons that that the funders were saying they were not going to invest in Mississippi anymore or in the Delta or in the rural areas anymore—because we had three deltas, Delta of Arkansas and Mississippi and Louisiana at that time—because they said we're not getting any impact. We're not getting any progress. Things are not changing that we just keep putting our money there.

PIPA: Drew's population of more than 2,300 in 2020 was just a little less than it had been when the schools integrated in 1970, and the poverty rate has also stayed constant, hovering above 40%. The racial demographics, however, had flipped from 53% white and 46% Black in 1970, to 10% white, about 85% Black, and 5% multiracial in the current day.

PIPA: Gloria asked colleagues at Kellogg and other grant giving foundations who were frustrated with their progress what they thought the barriers were.

DICKERSON: So, I asked them, I said, What is the major problem? What do you think is the issue? Why aren't we making any progress? And what they said to me, and I heard this from several funders, not just one funder, is that until the people of the Delta in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana change the way they think and change their mindset, things are not going to change. They're going to stay the same.

So, my question was, well, who's working on that? If that's the root cause, somebody should be working on the root cause. And their response was, That's just too hard. So, I said, okay, you know what, I'm going to do it? So, that's when I decided after the end of the initiative that I was going to work on the way people think, how much hope they have, how much ambition they have, whether they think about possibilities.

And so, I opened an organization with that in mind and came back to Drew, Mississippi, and said, I'm going to work with them and talk to them.

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And what I found when I got back was that a lot of people were, kind of like, apathy, apathetic, and that some of them didn't have any hope, and they say things have always been this way, they'll probably stay this way. So, what's the use in trying to go to school? What's the use in trying to go to college? As long as we've known it, things have been this way.

PIPA: Listening to Gloria, it struck me how similar her description matches those of the leaders I met in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, the town I visited in our first episode. Now don't get me wrong, this is a wholly different context and history, but the struggles of creating change when a town gets so down on itself and doesn't believe in a better future sound eerily familiar.

When Gloria started We2gether Creating Change, she focused her energy on working with kids, helping them see possibility for themselves and opportunities that they might not have imagined. She led hands-on classes and tutoring. She became known for taking about 100 kids each year to Florida during spring break, conducting classes in a hotel so they could experience the world outside their own neighborhood.

Amazingly, she self-financed all this, with her donations matched two to one by the Kellogg Foundation, which was a benefit of her being a retiree of the Foundation. After about 8 years, Gloria had spent about half million of her own dollars, and other grantmakers began to support her as well.

DICKERSON: So, I started having adult classes. And finally the adults came to me and said, We see what you're doing for our kids. We do want to be in your classes, but we also want to do some other things in this community. We don't just want to come to classes. We want to improve this town. So, they started coming in and telling me about what Drew didn't have: We didn't have we don't have a grocery store anymore. We don't have any recreation for our kids anymore. Our roads are torn up.

And so I said, so let's stop talking about what it is that you don't have in this community, and what do you want in the community. So, we changed that conversation around, and they started to say, we need better school, we need better streets, we need food, access to food, we need access to health care—all kinds of things that they wanted. And I said, okay, well, if that's what you want, we can do that. That's all y'all want? We can do that.

[music]

So they said, Well, I said we can't do it alone. We're going to have to help somebody come in and help us get this done. But I call on some people to help us get this done. So, that that's when we started the we started the Drew Collaborative. And that was

something that the community came around, we organized the community and the Drew Collaborative came into existence.

PIPA: The Drew Collaborative included key members of the community: business people, librarians, but also organizations such as Hope, Delta Housing, and the South Sunflower County Economic Development District. The group began by doing a strategic plan and identifying their priorities. Here is Dee Jones, the vice president of community and economic development at Hope, describing the process.

JONES: We had a strategic planning process and we were able to invite the whole community in, just hear, listening, what is it that you want to see take place in your community? And for Drew, it was a grocery store because they didn't have one. So, we were able to identify resources to fund marketing studies to see what the feasibility of having a grocery store would be. And after two studies, we determined that it wasn't possible. We even looked at two different models. And that's where my colleague, Kevin Coogan, who heads up our Healthy Food Initiative, working with the community came up with the idea of an online grocery store. And, it's working and we will be expanding it. We're in the process of expanding it into this community of Shaw right now.

PIPA: It was important, Dee stressed to me, to be rigorous and find a solution that fit the specificities of the situation, rather than just forge ahead and try to put a grocery store in place because of the community's desire. Combining business acumen with an understanding of a community's history is crucial in these cases.

JONES: You know, for instance, in one community, a lot of these communities people come in and they make promises to the to them and then they leave. But having the credit union presence there, the thing that I tell them or told them, especially in the initial phases of our relationship, is that we have a physical structure here. We're not going anywhere.

And you have to build trust with these communities because, again, quite often they've been hurt. You know, promises have been made and not delivered upon. And we're able to do that. We're able to not overpromise, but we just become a part of that community. And that's what our community and economic development team does.

PIPA: What did it take to create the online grocery? Gloria explains.

DICKERSON: The United States armory was in town and it was vacant, and the city owned it. So, we said, well, we could set up something at the armory, but the armory needed some repairs. Therefore Hope and I got, Hope and the Collaborative got together, as part of the Collaborative got together, and decided we were going to apply for a grant from the Delta Regional Authority to rehab the armory, put a new roof on the Armory, fix the fix the parking lot, put some offices in there. And we got that grant from the Delta Region Authority to do that. And then we needed freezers, we needed a truck, we needed refrigerators. And then we got money from the Kellogg Foundation to help with that.

So, we went out there looking for funding and we did get the funding. And then we opened about almost two years ago, no a year and a half ago, the online grocery. So, now a lot of people in the community now have access to food, the one's that can't get out because they elderly, or they're disabled, or they don't have transportation.

PIPA: Now, for those who don't know about it, the Delta Regional Authority that supported the online grocery is a federally-chartered regional commission that covers eight states, and is funded with federal funds and governed by state leaders.

Creating this online grocery has been a creative way to ensure Drew's residents have convenient access to healthy food. But it wasn't just a grocery that the community identified as a priority. And the Drew Collaborative was also not the only group to get organized—you also had Drew United for Progress. And of course the city itself is involved. Gloria lists what else is underway.

DICKERSON: Now, in addition to that, the Drew Collaborative had done so much more than just the online grocery store. We did get a grant working with Hope and one of their interns to tear down some houses. So, between that grant and my own investment, we have torn down about 40 houses here, dilapidated houses. We've torn those down, and we're getting ready to clear them out. And we're working with another member of the Collaborative on Delta housing to get houses built in that on those spots. So, we're doing that right now, getting the houses torn down.

And the city's also getting ready to get a home grant where they going to build at least five houses I think in the next year in some of those spots where we have torn down those houses that were here that were looking horrible in this community. I mean, this community looked horrible and we just had to get those dilapidated houses out of the community.

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We also had with the Robert Wood Johnson's money, we went … and the library was in was in danger of shutting down because it needed a roof. So, the money that we get for them because of our award, we took that money and put the roof on the library and our library is now functioning as well.

PIPA: Some of the money to take care of that dilapidated housing came through a blight elimination program funded by the state of Mississippi, other money came from CenterPoint Energy, and Gloria also funded some of it herself. The money from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation came from a Culture of Health prize awarded to the town, in recognition of its holistic approach to improving the community's well-being. Gloria's social capital has proved invaluable, along with her personal philanthropy.

In addition to a refurbished library, the community has also focused on creating space where people can gather. Here's Dee Jones from Hope.

JONES: But just giving the community that feedback so that they can see that things are happening. You know, Drew wanted a playground, so now they have a playground. Things like that. They wanted a place to meet. They just recently had their annual festival or their homecoming. They wanted a place. Prior to the strategic planning process they were trying to find a flatbed trailer to use as a stage for the band during their Drew Day. And so, we were able to locate resources and build a pavilion right downtown.

Now they have this permanent gathering space that they can rent out. And it was truly a partnership. The land was leased to the city, and the city does the upkeep. They can have outdoor classrooms in that space. [music]

So, and Hope funded the the construction of it. But it's there and then it's beautiful, right there in downtown Drew.

PIPA: As Mayor Melanie Townsend-Blackmon puts it, the city is trying to do its part, making its first move in decades to strengthen its tax base.

TOWNSEND-BLACKMON: I just love it because I'm a part of the organization as well, Drew United for Progress, and we like to see changes being made in Drew. We assist Ms. Gloria Dickerson where she needed it with her organization. Hope Credit Unions—we are there to assist whenever needed. So, you do have people that they have a heart for Drew and want to see Drew, like I said, rise again.

And we can't do it, we can't be successful if we're not working together. Because one thing I can say, we are better together when we collaborate and we put all of our ideas together and we can just build from from from each other.

Because what what part of the problem is with small community like Drew, we don't have that matching dollar. It's a struggle because we haven't had a tax increase. This is actually the first tax increase that we had in approximately over a little over 20 some odd years. So, we're crawling right now before we actually start walking.

So, the Board and I have to get together and we have to ... just have a lot of work sessions. And one thing we found out that we haven't had a tax increase in the town of Drew in over a little over 20 years. So, that's going to help us with our increasing our millage rate. And you just can't imagine, we can't function, this city can't function if you haven't had a tax increase in over since 1990, and this is 2023 now.

PIPA: But even as the city works to modernize its finances, you can hear the mayor's acknowledgement that having enough funds to meet the matching requirements to get state or federal funds becomes critical. Gloria Dickerson explains.

DICKERSON: It's challenging because we've been trying to get some things like, for example, the streets. I mean, they are horrible, but we can't find—we haven't been able to, I don't like the word "can't"—we haven't been able to access funding to fix those. Because if you apply to the feds for federal grant, there's usually a match, and the city

doesn't have enough money to make, hardly make payroll. They don't have money to match. When your going to give me 500,000, you tell me I need 20% to get the 500,000, then I gotta come up with $100,000 that I don't have. And I'm like, why is that? If you go give me 500,000, but I have to have a match of a hundred, why don't you just reduce that to four hundred and give me the four hundred? I don't I don't understand why you requiring this match. I mean why are you requiring that they don't have they don't have it. So, the people who have money can get money.

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You know, some of ... it's a stuggle. Like right now we trying to figure, now where are we going to get that match? But we think we may be getting some money for the street, but where are we going to get the match? We don't know. We don't know where we're going to raise it, how we're going to get it.

PIPA: This is not a small problem, nor is it just a problem just for Drew. According to Ed Sivak, the executive vice president of policy and communications at Hope Credit Union, it's one of the key barriers that rural communities routinely face when seeking to attract investment. It's one of the things that cuts communities off from capital.

SIVAK: When we look at what kind of scale of investment, what kind of structure of investment we should be thinking about when when particularly looking at how we use federal dollars in rural communities, we need to make sure programs are structured right and that they get the incentives right.

Structure means everything when you're looking at how we get resources into rural communities. Matching requirements, reimbursement requirements, particularly in our most distressed communities, particularly communities facing the traumatizing effects of outmigration and the deterioration of public services—they can be incredibly harmful.

PIPA: It's one of several barriers that places like Drew face that can be especially consequential. Ed continues.

SIVAK: I think the first thing is that in our part of the country, we really need to look at the way money flows. Often money comes from the federal government to the state government, and the state government makes decisions about where dollars should flow, particularly in in rural communities.

And in a place like Mississippi, we need to recognize that the economy of our state, particularly in our rural communities, is really built on a plantation economy. And much of that mindset remains pervasive today. In states like Mississippi or Alabama or Louisiana, places where you have large populations of people of color living in rural communities, the states have never really had the best interest of all of their people in mind when making decisions about strategic resourcing.

And you really don't need to look any further than the Emergency Rental Assistance program to see this pattern manifest itself. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta did a

really compelling analysis of the Emergency Rental Assistance program. They actually looked at the expenditure ratios by both state governments in its footprint and local government in its footprint. And and what they found was that, you know, local governments markedly, were markedly better in getting the dollars out the door, not just at the outset of the program, but throughout its duration.

And it shouldn't be lost on any of us that the states that lag the local governments, you know, often have leadership that do not have a single person of color making decisions, certainly not at the level of the governor or the state legislature. However, when you look at local governments, they're often led by a person of color, a Black mayor, and who is representing majority Black communities.

This is something we need to keep in mind. It showed that when the monies went to local governments, that money got to the people. We need to look at ways to get the money into the hands of the people closest to the ground.

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PIPA: From someone who's been trying to make a difference in her community, Gloria Dickerson agrees. She became animated describing a recent visit to the region by Vice President Kamala Harris.

DICKERSON: And then we had, for example, we had the vice president come to Greenville and she was talking about all the things they've done. They put this much money here and they put that much money there, and I'm like that money is not hitting the ground, particularly if you're giving it to the state of Mississippi. The money doesn't hit the ground. They can't put it directly on the ground. That's the tough part. You can't put it directly where the people need it. It's get blocked at the state level. It gets jammed at the state level and never come, it never trickles down. It never comes down.

So, there needs to be a way where the communities, if they're small, poor, or low-income communities, ought to be able to get some money directly on the ground where they can see the results of it, of what's happening, rather than sending it to the state. The states give it to the people who already have money.

PIPA: And that, says Ed Sivak, is the heart of the matter. The rural communities in the region that Hope covers need access to the kinds of capital and tools that fit their unique characteristics.

SIVAK: When looking at what it takes and how we move communities, it's communities that move communities. No one knows better what a community needs than the people who live in that community themselves.

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You know, people in the Deep South, our CEO, Bill Bynum, he says, you know, people in the Deep South are incredibly resilient and can do anything if they have the tools. And I think that's the place we need to focus this conversation.

For far too long, people in the Deep South, in rural communities, in rural Black communities have been denied access to the tools, have been denied access to resources. And that is where we need to keep the focus of the conversation, is on how we overcome systemic barriers that have been put in place through public policy by design to keep one group of people down, to prop one group of people up.

And until we basically make the decisions through advocacy, through organizing, through sheer will to change the systems and structures that have created the conditions that make this conversation necessary, then we're not going to get the change that we all seek. It's it's as much about people in local communities standing up and doing this work as it is about a broader commitment to changing the systems that created these conditions in the first place.

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PIPA: What that suggests is that work needs to continue in state capitols and even at the federal level to ensure a level playing field for these places. So, I asked these partners, where does Drew go from here? How do they build on this momentum—the innovation of the online grocery, the reduction of blight, the new playground and pavilion, the refurbished library—and also increase economic activity? In Dee Jones's experience, small businesses are what will drive this. And creating beauty, and a vibrant community life, will help attract and enable them.

JONES: Economically, I think that communities, these small communities, entrepreneurship is going to play a key role in them in raising the standards for them. And, you know, that's one of the things that I I'm grateful that Hope in addition to working, you know, with elected and grassroot people, we also work with small business owners or people who are desiring to become small business owners. We engage with organizations that provide technical assistance and we provide some as well ourselves. But just helping people to have a passion.

There are a lot of innovative people here in the Delta, people who are probably selling plate lunches out of their homes and things like that. But how do we transfer that into a viable business for that person? Homeownership opportunities? Locating resources to provide down payment assistance?

I think that having the aesthetics does matter in especially in small towns. And I think that people are looking for places that are less hectic to move to. And if we can create an environment and have, you know, the basics, you know, walking trails, good streets, you know, good infrastructure in place, I think that we will attract small businesses, people wanting to live, people retiring, wanting to come back.

I think that … I mean, having lived somewhere else and, you know, and visiting other places, you know, I'm always happy to come back home. You know? So. And I wouldn't trade it for all of that traffic.

[music]

You know, I wouldn't do it. But yeah, I think that we we have to create space and place for people to want to come and live, work, and play in the Mississippi Delta.

PIPA: Mayor Townsend sees outside investment starting to perk up. Similar to Gloria Dickerson, she's focusing energy on fixing up the roads, especially with the opportunities available through the bipartisan infrastructure law.

TOWNSEND-BLACKMON: So, I see once people see that we're moving in the right direction and we are getting our street fixed—because that's really, really bad in our area; we really don't have the income to even really get our street fixed. So, we are hard working on it. So, once the people see that we're moving in the right direction, I do believe that they will come on back to this area.

And it is just an honor to lead this city, and actually to be the first female to lead this city. Not to discredit the men or anything, but it was just changes that needed to be made. And Drew is .... and sometimes it just takes the women to come together to make those necessary changes because, you know, we women, we are not afraid to act. So, you know, you can tell us yes or no, but they're still not going to stop us. And we're going to continue to strive to make Drew a better and safer place if we continue to work work together.

PIPA: For Gloria, it's also about embracing the town's history as a portal to its future, to preserve that past as a reminder of obstacles overcome, and to fulfill the promise of opportunities yet to come. We2gether Creating Change has developed a program that she calls the Emmett Till Academy to take the youth of Drew to different sites and learn about this history.

DICKERSON: And our point is that we want our children to understand that fighting during the civil rights movement was not just a Rosa Parks and a Martin Luther King, Jr. It was the local people that got together and they organized and they decided that they wanted to try to register people to vote and all those kinds of things. And that's often overlooked, that the local people did so much during the civil rights movement. So, we we we work with that program to help them do that.

PIPA: And at the same time, it's about using it to create a community spirit, a community that can celebrate together.

DICKERSON: All these things have happened since we've been here working with the community to get these things done. And we do the fun things. Like I said, we plan a Drew Day every year. We plan Juneteenth every year so that people can get out and enjoy music and come together and just really have some fun together.

[music]

So, I believe that you have you not only go to work and come home, but there'll be some leisure time and there should be some leisure places that you can go within your town. So, we're trying to create that as well.

PIPA: Mayor Townsend agrees.

TOWNSEND-BLACKMON: We have to learn how to be strong for one another. We have, despite our limitations, sacrifice in the sense that what we are willing to to do and give up for greater success for tomorrow in the City of Drew. Because I know that I want to feel a sense of pride in appearance, in attracting business, and providing jobs, and create a safe environment as we embark upon the changes that need to be made in Drew.

PIPA: As I said earlier, I'm struck by what these local leaders in Drew share with those in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, despite their exceptionally different histories. They're focused on preserving the town's heritage as a path to its future, shifting the community's mindset, creating innovative solutions, working hard to pull in outside investment, partnering with a key outside organization that provides expertise and experience. And an important component to all of this? Restoring beauty.

DICKERSON: My dream is, first of all, I like to live in an environment that looks beautiful: clean, flowers, nice street—you get on the road and you just ride and enjoy yourself. So, just cleaning up the environment. We got a lot of dilapidated houses still here that needs to be moved from this community. We have kids who have seen when they walk down the street, they see snakes rolling out of the dilapidated houses and stuff because the houses have been there and they they're afraid to walk to school and things like that.

[music]

I want that to change. I want it to be a place that I'm so proud to look at when I go out, I say, This is a nice looking town.

Then also my vision is that the people will become very excited and very inspired about how things can change. They can see that things can change, and they get excited about getting their education. And, the education system has gotten better since I've been here, too. They moved from an F school to an A school here in Drew, Mississippi.

And so, the kids get excited about that, and they decide that they they they see where the things that we've been saying in the community—my myself as a leader, but I also need the followers—to let these kids know there is some hope for you. You can learn. You can be proud of yourself. You can go off and you can be more than a football player or a basketball player. You can be anything that you want to be.

And I guess because I overcame so much as a child and I went through so much pain and I overcame it and I just got to, whew, went on up and I know it can be done. And so I want them to understand that it can be done and then we can work together to get it done. That's what I that's what I want for the community.

PIPA: Yes, Drew is not too far off the Mississippi Blues Trail. But it is determined not to let the blues define it.

Thanks for joining me where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog, and listening to the story of what's happening in Moorhead and Drew in the Mississippi Delta. In our next episode, I'll travel west through the Delta to DeWitt, Arkansas. I look forward to you joining me there.

And remember, I'd love to hear about your story of positive change in rural America. Email me at GlobalMedia at Brookings dot edu.

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You can find episodes of "Reimagine Rural" wherever you like to get podcasts, and learn more about the show on our website at Brookings dot edu slash Reimagine Rural Podcast. You'll also find my work on rural policy on the Brookings website.

I'm Tony Pipa, and this is "Reimagine Rural."