



**The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast**

“Innovation is part of rural America’s DNA (part 2)”

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Episode Summary:

Innovation and entrepreneurship are fundamental to America’s national identity, yet they are commonly associated with big cities and areas like Silicon Valley. As we’ve encountered numerous times in past episodes, rural America is full of innovation and home to countless examples of ingenuity. In part two of our special innovators episode, rather than capture the story of a rural place, Tony Pipa hears from rural entrepreneurs who returned to revitalize their hometowns through the boundary-pushing use of agrovoltaics, a worker-owned approach to revitalizing the local textile industry, and business development fueled by narrative change, storytelling, and financing.

KOMINEK: My name is Byron Kominek, owner and manager of Jack's Solar Garden here in Boulder County, Colorado, and the director of the Colorado Agrivoltaic Learning Center.

CHESTER: My name is Sarah Chester, and I am one of two co-executive directors of the Industrial Commons.

HEMSTREET: And my name is Molly Hemstreet, and I am also a co-executive director of the Industrial Commons. And in my current role as the co-executive director of the Industrial Commons, I'm also a deputy CEO of the newly formed North Carolina Textile Innovation and Sustainability Engine.

LAMPKIN: My name is Dr. Tim Lampkin. I'm the founder and CEO of Higher Purpose Co.

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PIPA: Welcome to part two of this special innovators episode of *Reimagine Rural*. I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution, and your host for the podcast. As I explained earlier, in part one of this special episode, usually I focus on capturing the story of a rural *place* and the progress it is making. But during my travels this season I came across so many entrepreneurial people who are taking on urgent issues facing rural towns that we decided to give them their own episode. After all, ingenuity is just as much a part of the DNA of rural America as it is of our cities, and it's important that our country leverage this talent to the fullest extent.

In part one, I talked to innovators working to bring the digital economy, affordable housing, and urgently needed childcare to rural towns. Today you'll hear about innovations related to the clean energy transition, textiles, and business development in rural places.

We'll start in rural Colorado with Byron Kominek, who's at the cutting edge of helping farmers and rural communities learn about the advantages of agrovoltatics.

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Yeah, like I said, it's an episode about innovation. So, what the heck are agrovoltatics?

[2:08]

KOMINEK: Agrovoltatics is a term that was coined I think by some Germans back in the late '80s around how you integrate agriculture with solar array. So, agriculture, photovoltaics, smash it together, agrovoltatics. It's simply solar panels above and around where you have agricultural activities. We even throw in the word ecovoltatics that co-prioritizes ecosystem services or conservation initiatives within solar arrays.

So, inviting in farmers, ranchers, gardeners, permaculturalists, people that are interested in using the land and the microclimates underneath the solar panels is a divergence from traditional traditional solar development where we actually want to see different types of vegetation underneath the solar panels.

We want people in there making use of that land. We don't want the land to turn to dirt, which is dead soil. We want it to stay active and beneficial to society.

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PIPA: Byron grew up in Tennessee, and after getting a master's degree in environmental engineering, he served in the Peace Corps in Cameroon and worked in Africa for six years as a diplomat with the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, working on forestry and conservation in places such as Zambia and Mozambique. But he got tired of it and, after hiking the Appalachian Trail, found himself back in rural Colorado, where his mom grew up, working on land that his grandfather had purchased 50 years earlier. He turned that land into Jack's Solar Garden and established the Colorado Agrovoltaic Learning Center.

[3:48]

KOMINEK: Jack's Solar Garden is a 1.2-megawatt DC single axis tracking community solar garden that powers up to about 300 homes in our area. And at the time we were building our solar array, we thought that it would be wonderful to be able to provide educational opportunities to folks within our community to learn more about how you can integrate agricultural activities, conservation ideals, and solar all in the same space.

So, we started this nonprofit, we have a fiscal sponsor, and over the past four years, We've had more than 4,000 people come out to visit us at Jack's Solar Garden for tours and events to learn more about the microclimates created by the solar panels, what's possible within the solar array, and all the various impediments to rolling out improved land stewardship within solar arrays in our state and around the country.

[music]

PIPA: The solar array at Jack's Solar Garden is unusual.

KOMINEK: Our solar array covers just over four acres of land where all the solar panels are. We have different heights of panels. So, some that are flat when they're closer to eight feet, some that are flat when they're closer at six and a half feet.

Underneath our panels, we work with a variety of different partners from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Colorado State University, and the University of Arizona to study the microclimates created by the solar panels and how it impacts a variety of different types of vegetation.

We also work with a nonprofit farming organization called Sprout City Farms based out of Denver. They are out underneath our panels cultivating about two acres or so of vegetables that they create a CSA community supported agriculture and sell back into our community.

Last year was the very first time, as far as I've ever heard in the U.S., anybody having a CSA and selling vegetables from underneath solar panels to folks in the community. So, we would have people come out and pick up boxes of food on a weekly basis last year and they're doing the same thing this season.

We also work with the founder of Wish Garden Herbs, based out of Lewisville, I believe, and they are interested to see how we can grow different types of medicinal herbs underneath our panels that have some economic value. A lot of medicinal herbs that we consume in our country come from either China or Eastern Europe. And both of those are potentially politically difficult areas now and in the future. So, wouldn't it be interesting if we can use the space within solar arrays to grow the herbs that we consume in our own society?

PIPA: There are three keys to agrovoltaics.

[6:18]

KOMINEK: One, elevating the panels a little higher so that there's less risk of interaction between people, equipment, machinery, vegetation, and the solar panels or animals with the solar panels.

Two, improve your wire management, keep it flush tight, behind netting in conduit as much as possible so that, again, there's no interactions between any of those, any agricultural activities and those wires.

Lastly, we talk about not degrading the land. Some of the standard practices in certain parts of our country are to go in and grade all of a site. And we have utility scale systems that are well over a thousand acres in size. And you can imagine what happens when we grade that site. Just like if you were grading a back road or something, there's no vegetation that's ever going to grow there. The land is completely packed down. It's difficult to establish anything if you're trying to in the future. And it simply compacts the land down. Compaction is the enemy of the roots of any vegetation. There are folks that talk about that plants cannot grow in a compacted land that's over 300 PSI. And if you get that, then you just have dead dirt.

PIPA: Using these techniques and keeping the land viable has attracted a lot of attention.

[7:34]

KOMINEK: We have lots of folks that come out to visit us, from solar companies to different banks. The Sierra Club came out this weekend. The Nature Conservancy has come out a handful of times. And we have different farming organizations that are interested in what we're doing. American Farmland Trust has been out to our site. We have different state agencies that we invite out. We work with a variety of different schools. So, we have lots of folks that have come out.

And I can't say I've ever found somebody that was like, this was kind of boring. It's not something that you see anywhere else where there are herbs, there are vegetables, there's grassland. I'm moving some sheep out into the solar array this afternoon.

[music]

I have berry bushes underneath the panels. It's, it really, it puts the garden in solar garden, you know?

PIPA: Byron estimates that the additional steel for the elevated panels and extra attention from the construction workers, added about 5 percent to the cost when he did the installation at Jack's Solar Garden. I asked him whether that was par for the course.

[8:56]

KOMINEK: I've heard from folks in the solar industry that they, the ones that are pro agrivoltaics say that it's between 5 and 10 percent is what they're seeing as the potential increase in cost for a project. And the ones that are more anti agrivoltaic say that it will be 50 percent to doubling the price of a project, which I cannot understand how since, like a third of the price of everything is all your solar panels and you're not changing the number of solar panels that you have. And same with ... you have the same number of inverters, you have the same transformers, you have same all this other stuff other than different heights of steel I-beams.

Now, elevated cost due to increased steel doesn't have to be a barrier in the future. We could as a society ask our engineers to work towards figuring out how can we build these solar arrays to still be durable, to be able to handle winds at elevated heights, and either use less steel, or do it in a different way, maybe using steel cable structures to hoist panels up higher, so you don't have people getting up over 7 feet, you're using steel cables to hoist panels up higher to reduce cost.

There are ways that we can do this to make it, less expensive. It's just that we need to put people towards doing it.

PIPA: The opportunity is huge.

[10:15]

KOMINEK: In Colorado over the past couple of decades, we've installed close to 10,000 acres of solar panels across our state, and the next year and a half I believe we're doubling that amount, and we'll probably be doubling that thereafter. I understand that the Colorado State Land Board has close to, 20,000 or so acres underneath contract or under contract with a solar company to build on their lands.

So, we have a lot of solar coming to Colorado. And we want solar. We just want the land to also be stewarded in a good way. I was listening to some folks at the Nature Conservancy that said, if we want to get closer to net zero, just in our 11 Western states—just in the 11 western states—we'll probably need 30 million acres of solar arrays if that's the route we go. Thirty million acres for your listeners is half of the state of Colorado, so you can imagine just drawing a line through the middle of the state, and one side has all solar panels on it and the other side doesn't.

PIPA: And what does he really have his eye on? Cattle ranches.

[11:13]

KOMINEK: My idea of the future for agrivoltaics revolves around, integrating cattle within the solar arrays. Over 25 percent of our nation's land is ranch land where cattle roam, and a lot of that is out here in the Western part of the U.S. where we

have a lot of sun, we have some of the best opportunities for producing, electricity from solar panels.

But what if we can put those panels up high enough to allow cattle out there? The benefits of shade on cattle are that as the, as the temperatures rise over 90 degrees, over a hundred degrees, these animals will always have space for shade. If you drive by a farm, first thing in the morning, all the cows are out eating and grazing because it's nice and cool out, and by the time it gets to 11 o'clock where it starts to get really hot, they're all underneath that one tree on that farm, just tearing up the land, fighting for whatever shade they could possibly get.

And the animals that are on the outside, they have the potential of getting heat exhaustion. Heat exhaustion can lead to disease, or it could lead to death. And that is money lost, by having an animal die.

Researchers from Colorado State University have found that animals that have shade eat more, because when you eat your digestive system starts making you tired because it's using more energy and that also increases your internal temperatures.

PIPA: One of the keys is education, and changing people's mindset, helping them see the advantages of keeping the land productive when a solar array is installed. Shifts in policy could help too.

[12:42]

KOMINEK: So, when I was bidding into Excel Energy to build my community solar garden, I believe I recall that the evaluation criteria was 40 percent on price, 30 percent was, have you done a project before? Twenty percent was do you have the money to do this/ And 10 percent was do you have access to land?

Nothing in there about land stewardship. So, everybody can just basically check the box on those bottom three. And then on the price one, that's where all the competition is. And that's just driving one drives the price of electricity down, which is interesting. And that's what we want to see. But also, it means we negate any other factors, anything that could possibly make this more expensive we get rid of, even if it could be helpful to our communities, we want to get rid of it cause it'll just provide cheaper prices.

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So, if we could have within the evaluation criteria and these RFPs that are going up around the country, put in a substantive value, like 10 to 20 percent related to land stewardship.

PIPA: As we heard in multiple episodes this season, the transition to cleaner energy is a huge economic opportunity for many rural communities. Byron Kominek and the folks at Jack's Solar Garden have a vision for getting the most out of that transition by making sure communities leverage another significant rural asset at the same time: their productive land. An innovator indeed.

We're going to go east from mountainous Colorado to the mountains of western North Carolina, where Sara Chester and Molly Hemstreet, through an organization called The Industrial Commons, are revitalizing an industry that has historic roots in the region: textiles.

[14:38]

CHESTER: Molly and I are both from, Morganton, North Carolina, and that is where The Industrial Commons is located, which is in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Appalachia. We both love this community. We both grew up here and call it home. We both left for a while for college and we're lucky to be able to come back to our rural community and we're fortunate to, to find work.

PIPA: As Sara recounts, the draw of family and beauty were powerful motivators in bringing them home.

CHESTER: The beauty of the area and the mountains, and I think that's also kind of what called Molly and I back home in addition to family and wanting to be back amongst the people that we we love and hold dearly, is the beauty of the region and being near the mountains. And there's a lot of tourism and a lot of people coming, to be able to get out in the mountains and out in nature, and hike, and canoe, and kayak, and camp and be able to get out on the trails on the weekends and enjoy the beauty of the area that we call home.

PIPA: Yet Morganton and the surrounding area had also hit on hard times, as Molly describes.

[15:52]

HEMSTREET: As Sarah was saying, we both grew up here and I grew up a little before Sarah but was really ... we grew up in a community that had lost an incredible amount of jobs. So, we had one of the highest, job loss rates in the entire country, over 40,000 jobs in our region were lost. So, there was this question of, like how, for me, fundamentally—I might not have said it to my 20-year-old self—but how do we regrow economic viability into a community that really keeps the planet and people and communities at the forefront.

That was really ultimately the problem that we were trying to solve is how do we bring and revitalize economies and rural communities that can keep people and the planet at the center.

PIPA: It was a place built on textiles.

HEMSTREET: Yeah, so the history of the place is we are still, I mean, we were and are still a textile hub. And when we say textiles, we also mean furniture—textiles and furniture. They're kind of the sister industries.

PIPA: So that's where they decided to focus their attention, on revitalizing those industries, but in a way that strengthens the economic resilience and power of the workers themselves.

[17:09]

HEMSTREET: We knew from the beginning there were several values we wanted to hold close. One of those was really understanding how we root wealth. And so, encountering and living out the model of employee ownership. So, the first project I did is I actually started an employee-owned company that was focusing on sustainable textiles. And that has grown and become kind of a, a model for us to say, yes, in a rural community we can organize people.

Employee ownership is a really interesting model to root wealth locally. So, that was kind of a guidepost along our pathway.

PIPA: As Sara explains, that grew into a range of different things that The Industrial Commons does.

[17:52]

CHESTER: At the Industrial Commons, we have a few different ways that we bring innovation to the factory floor in terms of how work is organized. The first way that we do that is that we grow quality jobs and create quality jobs in our community. So, we have several community-owned and worker-owned enterprises that we've created in our community. We've created a total of 85 jobs in our community, which we're really proud of. Those enterprises, they're in different forms of worker or community ownership based on the size of the enterprise or their scale, or where they're at in terms of their profitability and size.

And, then we also connect workers to existing other quality jobs in the community. So, we have really robust internship and mentorship programs where we're working with around 100 young people, 18 to 24 years old every year that we're connecting to other quality jobs in the community and getting them on a really good pathway to career advancement.

PIPA: That focus on youth? That's an important element to Sara and Molly.

[19:03]

CHESTER: And I think early on in our work, one of our focuses was around how do we create economic opportunity, particularly for young people because, like a lot of rural areas, we saw this brain drain of young people wanting to leave.

And Molly and I, we're one of those people that we grew up in our community being told, you know, the best option for you is to get out and to leave. And so, we were one of the few, honestly, that chose to come back.

[music]

And we wanted to change that narrative. We wanted to be sure that Morganton and the surrounding region of western North Carolina was a place where young people chose to stay and that they wanted to stay and that they could have a thriving life if they chose to stay here in our community.

PIPA: Through the internship and mentorship programs that Sara mentions, they've been able to reduce the number of youth between 16 and 24 years of age who are not in school and not working by 4 percent over the past two years.

[20:11]

CHESTER: So, we're finding those young people that are not engaged in school or engaged in jobs and getting them connected to good jobs and to some kind of economic opportunity. So, we're really proud of that work that we're doing. It's slow work. But I think something that Molly referenced early on in this conversation is, is the advantage of being place based. And I think when you're in a place, the advantage is having a long-haul mentality and being able to have a long haul-mentality to your work.

PIPA: For Sara, it's given a whole different meaning to the definition of "innovation."

CHESTER: And so, how can the idea of innovation not just be about research and development or technology? But how can innovation be about how we organize work and how we organize workers, and how workers show up every day on the factory floor, and how they engage with their workplace, and how they have a voice at work?

And we were doing a lot of interesting engagement with young people around internships and apprenticeships and asking them what they wanted in the workplace. And really what they wanted was more voice and more agency and to feel, you know, that they had the ability to show up as a human in the workplace.

And so much of our work in rural communities is manufacturing work, and it's jobs that can often leave people feeling like a cog in the wheel.

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And so, how do we give people an opportunity to feel seen in the workplace? And I think that's what we see as the future of work.

PIPA: Now, the results they've produced in jobs created and youth reached are impressive for any organization. But for Sara and Molly, that's just been a starting point. Their vision is growing to encompass the entire region. As Molly recounts, along the way to building the Industrial Commons, they had started something called the Carolina Textile District.

[22:13]

HEMSTREET: Sara and I also built out the Carolina Textile District in partnership with some allies from our community colleges, which I think is a really important voice to lift into this conversation. And we put together the Carolina Textile District, which is a network of mills with this real idea of, like, being big by being small together. So, aggregating and coming together with a vision, but also having a lot of interdependence, but independence as well.

PIPA: That experience affirmed the power of building networks across their rural region. And led to recognizing the infrastructure not just in Morganton, but across

western North Carolina, upstate South Carolina, east Tennessee, and Virginia, and helped expand their vision to encompass that whole region.

HEMSTREET: So, we've gone beyond our little community now as we look at kind of what we consider a sectoral and a geographic kind of strategy and region. So, that is, like, our heritage. The industry, the heritage industries where we're working. And so, despite the job loss, the infrastructure and the knowledge is still here.

And so, what we're really interested in doing is saying we don't have to throw all that out. There's actually incredible knowledge infrastructure for building kind of the renaissance of what that industry can look like. And that's why I think we're so excited about what the circular economy and the sustainable textile economy has to offer, because we can still use that infrastructure with some retraining of our workforce to create something that's really catalytic and needed not only for our region, but for the whole U.S. as well.

PIPA: That eventually led to becoming one of only 10 recipients out of hundreds of applications from across the nation to serve as a Regional Innovation Engine, funded by the National Science Foundation.

[24:06]

HEMSTREET: We're organizing the industry and really helping an industry come together. Sometimes we talk about it is "coopetition." So, people you might be actually competing with, you're actually cooperating with because it's to the benefit of everyone that an industry and a region has an industry identity that when people think, oh, where do we go get something made? Or where do we need a new fiber? It's like, oh, those folks in North Carolina. That's what we need to do is come into the Carolina. So, the organizing of the industry is very important.

Our focus is on building out through our region of service, which is not just North Carolina, but includes South Carolina, east Tennessee, and Virginia, a regional hub around, textile innovation, sustainability, and circularity.

PIPA: Now, to outsiders, this may seem very different than the work that Industrial Commons is doing in Morganton itself, but for Sara and Molly, it's all been a natural evolution—and one guided by their rural identity.

[25:05]

HEMSTREET: Our mission has never changed. Like, we have always from the very beginning known, like, we are about rebuilding a diverse working class based on locally rooted wealth. And while, you know, how we've gotten there is I think we've been focused on that but been flexible on how we grow the vision of what that means.

And we've been able to create and add layers of, like, sophistication to that as we've learned more, quite honestly, about how do we do that. And to the point where we are now, you're exactly right. Like, we are building an industry cluster that is well organized, it's interdependent, but independent.

And so, I do think it was that building the assets of our community and saying, like, rural communities have assets, and they have assets that often people label as maybe old and in the way, but they do have these assets that with some envisioning and some skill can really be turned to the good of not just their communities, but for other people. I think that kind of sense of grit and vision is almost kind of a rural ... it's a rural value.

So, we went from, like, building a company, to building a network, to building programs for workers, to collectively having other wins of joint fundraising. Because the people that we put together for the NSF Engines Grants, we all knew each other. We'd all been working on other projects.

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So, it was just the next logical right step that we kind of draw a line around it and say, hey, we are and have this regional identity.

PIPA: A key element to their success? Well, we hear it often on the podcast, and Sara says it again: trust.

[26:49]

CHESTER: I think we have built a lot of trust amongst not just the people who have been here in our community for a long time, but the folks who are new to the community as well. And certainly, part of that comes from the fact that Molly and I grew up here and have a history here in the community and our families have histories here in the community.

But I think a lot of our ability to build trust in the community has come from the fact that we have delivered on what we have said that we were going to do, we have followed through. And so, when we have partnered with organizations or people in the community and we've said that we were going to do something, we have followed through on what we've said.

And we learned this framework very early on from one of our mentors that we've used a lot over the years called "Build, Buy, and Leverage." And in a rural community you often have to think along those lines. And we have at The Industrial Commons, what do we need to build? What does our community not have that we need to build new? What is something that we might need to buy or resource, particularly maybe from the outside?

And then what can we leverage? And so, a lot of what we've leveraged are the institutions that are here.

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And that's how we've looked at trust in a lot of ways is building relationships with the institutions that are here and leveraging the institutions that are here.

PIPA: It's an approach that is not uniquely rural, but it is necessary in rural places. And it's also an approach that shows why rural places themselves should think of themselves as incubators of innovation. Molly Hemstreet sums it up.

[28:39]

HEMSTREET: Rural communities often being smaller, I do think we're the proving ground for really transformational ideas that are very big and can impact many, many people.

So, it's often in these smaller spaces where you can figure things out. And then once we can do that, there's a lot of transferability and scalability on ideas that are tested in rural communities.

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And I think we need to remember that we're a lot bigger than just the boundaries of our own small communities where some of these ideas take seed and are born.

PIPA: The drive by Sara and Molly to revitalize an entire regional industry while reshaping it in a way that enables its rural places to retain its value and assets puts their efforts on the cutting edge of rural community and economic development.

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Let's move now from the Smokies and go further south, to the birthplace of the Blues: Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Tim Lampkin, the founder and CEO of Higher Purpose Co., is pursuing his own innovative path to transform local economies.

[30:01]

LAMPKIN: My background is rooted in the Mississippi Delta, based in Clarksdale, Mississippi. My family has been here for over five decades, and that has been truly part of my foundation. And understanding the context of Mississippi, particularly the Delta, has been really entrenched in the work that I do on a daily basis.

And so, I would say my start actually was really rooted in my family. I'm thinking all the way back to my great-grandfather having a community garden, to my grandparents having a car washing business and working with several other businesses in the area. And I started to see how local economies get shaped by just local people.

PIPA: Clarksdale is a place important not only to Tim, but to American culture.

[30:57]

LAMPKIN: One of the things that I love about Clarksdale is the rich culture. When we think about food and music and history, there's a massive amount of all three of those things that's wrapped up into just the daily life. And when we think about places in United States and really across the world, we think about how Clarksdale within itself has shaped American music, food, and culture. So, it has really been a part of what I would consider the DNA of America, is really rooted in Clarksdale.

PIPA: At the same time, like other rural places in America, Clarksdale has experienced headwinds.

[31:43]

LAMPKIN: Some of the challenges with any particular rural town is really trying to figure out their identity, and figuring out the strengths, that allow people to be present and engaged in the local economies. And so, we've had several challenges with job loss of manufacturing moving out and then having to really wrestle with what is the identity of Clarksdale? How do we want to show up?

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And so, I think over the years we have seen some massive wins in terms of Blues tourism and just tourism in general that has been a draw for people to come from all across the country and across the world.

What we have noticed in the last couple of years is there's been a desire to get even more deeply connected to all the history and the culture of here in Clarksdale and the Mississippi Delta. And that is where I feel like some of the challenge and also the opportunity lies, particularly around wrestling with Civil Rights history and the racial equity and some of the injustices that have happened here in Clarksdale and the Mississippi Delta.

So, I think we are in an interesting time where we are thinking about ways to, again, reemerge with a new identity as we are faced with shifts in local economies, technology, you name it in terms of everything that is vastly changing across the community and across the Delta.

PIPA: As Tim mentioned earlier, his experience growing up in a family with their own businesses made him interested in small businesses and financing. He started out working for a local community development finance institution, or CDFI, when he developed the idea for Higher Purpose.

[33:34]

LAMPKIN: The idea was really rooted in how can we build local economies better to create wraparound services, particularly I was noticing at the time Black-owned businesses were not surviving past the three-year mark, right? They were not really getting access to the capital and the resources that they needed.

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And so, how can our organization, Higher Purpose Co., step in to be that support system? So, that was the initial kind of focus, and we did that for quite some time here in Clarksdale.

PIPA: It was difficult and took courage to leave the stability of a job at an established organization and strike out on his own. And after three years of working primarily in Clarksdale, his early success attracted additional philanthropic investment just as the pandemic hit. This combination of circumstances led the organization to expand.

[34:38]

LAMPKIN: And eventually we expanded in the pandemic to become a statewide organization. And since then, our work has evolved into a couple different areas. So, one being business ownership. I talked about that in terms of helping businesses get education, technical assistance, and access to capital.

We also do work around arts and culture, food justice, workforce development, and public policy. And our ultimate goal is really to create economic opportunity.

The other part of this is that our work has very much so evolved into being intergenerational because of the uniqueness of our organization and how we're able to meet the needs of the community.

PIPA: Similar to what we just heard from Sara and Molly, Tim wants to ensure that the younger generation has the tools they need to be successful in rural places, and he's been intentional about programming that makes sense to them.

LAMPKIN: We have seen an influx of young people engaged with our work over the last two years, and we have really created space to make sure that they're also tapping into the different programs and services that we offer. I think the other unique part of our organization as well is that we utilize what we describe as our three tools and those tools being community education, digital storytelling, and participatory grant making.

PIPA: And you can hear it in the strategies that Higher Purpose Co. is using. Yes, they provide business education and even financial resources—we'll hear a bit more about that later—but digital storytelling?

[36:20]

LAMPKIN: Narrative change, in my opinion, is one of the most powerful tools that any community can really invest in. What we have seen in our work, and I talked about one of our tools being digital storytelling, that is very much so in that same vein of narrative change.

What we realized a long time ago is that we had to first tell a different story to ourselves, right? And when you talked about that mindset shift, it required us to say, who are we and what is the story that we want people to know versus what is the story that people are hearing? And I think for us that allow us to be a little bit of, like, tunnel vision around this almost radical vision to create change in our community, our region, and across the state.

Also, I see this as an opportunity, particularly in communities that have told themselves that no one cares about their assets, no one cares about their culture or their history. And for most communities that have kind of operated in this notion that the good days are gone. And what I truly believe is that anytime a community is faced with that kind of mindset, it is an opportunity to really make sure that you dive deeper, like what's happening under the surface.

Because if we look around in our communities, there are so many different assets that allow us to still be hopeful, still to have that drive and ambition. But oftentimes

the challenge is we allow someone else to tell our story. And then when that happens, we start to actually believe it. And we agree with it. And so, there's no challenging of what the narrative is. It's almost people become complacent and accept that this is how things are just going to be.

[music]

PIPA: Yet Tim sees a real opportunity, especially among a younger generation of leaders and residents, to change that mindset, to change that narrative.

[38:42]

LAMPKIN: There are a lot of folks like me and others that are in this, like, millennial generation that are considered innovators. And a lot of us are coming home, thinking about all the homecomers that are thinking about ways that they can invest in their community.

We're coming back, not necessarily to be disruptive on purpose, but we're coming back because we believe that there is a bigger calling and vision for the communities that we call home. And I think that particular narrative is not elevated enough. And when we think about what we see in national media, it is oftentimes the negative stories.

So, how do we combat that with things like what we're doing and really focusing more on solution based journalism? Lifting that up as a way that we can let people know everything that's happening, not just the bad things, but also what's the progress, what are the opportunities, and how do we invite people to be a part of that change as we continue to do the work on the ground ourselves.

PIPA: That shift manifests itself throughout the work of Higher Purpose Co., including the financial resources it's been making available as well as the trainings and support for businesses and workforce.

[40:11]

LAMPKIN: One of the biggest things that we have been driving is making sure that we're providing direct funding to nonprofits, businesses, farmers, and artists. And so, that has resulted in us providing over \$1.5 million in grants.

We've also have seen an increase in job creation. And so, since we've been tracking our job creation from 2021, we've created and retained over 400 jobs across the state, as well as we have provided over 3,000 people business education through our summits and webinars and convenings.

We've also been really making sure that we plug more into the storytelling work. And so, we have funded and trained over six filmmakers to create social impact documentaries. And we see that work expanding. And as we continue to look at all the parts of our work in terms of our model, we are really hopeful that we'll have a deeper impact, particularly as we're putting more resources into our learning and evaluation going forward.

PIPA: A culmination of this vision that will put all of these activities on full display is the planned Higher Purpose Hub, a place where Tim envisions bringing all of this together in Clarksdale.

[41:41]

[music]

LAMPKIN: The Higher Purpose Hub is a 14,000 square foot space that we are revitalizing in downtown Clarksdale. It is situated in the arts and culture district. We have been focusing on really making sure that it has a host of amenities and services. And so, the hub will focus in on financial, cultural, and physical wellbeing. And we'll be having several different things housed inside the hub, such as a food hall and market, we'll have a learning lab, a public art gallery, as well as a gift shop and bookstore, multi-purpose theater, as well as the North Mississippi Civil Rights Museum will be housed inside the Higher Purpose Hub.

And so, this is a \$3 million adaptive reuse project that we are making sure that we pour back into Clarksdale, the Mississippi Delta. And it's the first of its kind that is being led by a local organization here in the Mississippi Delta. And so, we're really excited about it.

It is a labor of love, and we believe that it is going to be really transformational.

PIPA: Transformation. It's what these rural innovators are after. Not long after we talked, Tim received word that a partnership between the Delta Regional Authority and the Economic Development Administration awarded a \$2.2 million investment in the Higher Purpose Hub to establish it as a regional economic opportunity hub in Mississippi. It's an important step in continuing to build the momentum in Clarksdale.

It strikes me that all of the innovators that we've profiled in these two bonus episodes are uniquely rural. Pride of place is fundamental to their work, and their adaptations are grounded in the realities of the rural communities and groups that they're serving. They all share a mindset of their rural places as incubators that Molly Hemstreet articulates well.

[43:53]

HEMSTREET: And I would just add that I think the change we've hoped to create is not just waiting for someone from the outside to bring us an idea, but to have confidence in our own ideas as being transformational, because it's really the people that are closest to the problem that will stick with it to solve it.

And so, I think what we've been able to do is say, hey, we have the tools we need to create a future that we all feel really good about.

[music]

And so, I think it's just a few people stepping out to say, let's rely on ourselves and let's rely on each other and not just wait on the next big company that's going to come in and create work for us.

PIPA: As I said at the outset, innovation *is* part of rural America's DNA. I can't think of a better rationale than Molly's for why it's important for us to surface and invest in it. It's about creating a future that those communities and the country can feel really good about. Thanks for listening.

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