

# SUNDAY PERSPECTIVE

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## In rural America, you can find answers

GUEST  
COLUMN
**BENJAMIN  
WADDELL**

I recently watched “Hillbilly Elegy,” which is based on J.D. Vance’s 2016 memoir. Vance grew up in an Ohio steel town but traces his roots back to rural Kentucky. Growing up, he bounced from one home to another as his mother struggled with

drug addiction, mental health issues and unemployment.

Because I was born in Telluride and raised in Norwood, the movie resonated with my own lived experience as a first-generation student as well as my research as a professor in rural America. The film reveals a nation in which working-class people have been left behind by brain drain, city-centric politics and the historic shift of manufacturing abroad. These factors have contributed to a polarized country, where political power is wielded by elites in cities that generally don’t understand the lived experiences of working-class Americans.

Although the film is situated in the Rust Belt, it captures the deep sense of despair that is sweeping through working-class America. It also sheds light on the rise of Donald Trump, who, despite losing the 2020 election by roughly 7 million votes, captured more popular votes than any previous presidential candidate including Barack Obama. Like Trump, Vance’s ability to relate to the broader working-class psyche is what made his story, and the subsequent movie, so powerful. After the film ended, I laid in bed until 3 a.m. thinking about all the people I grew up with who could have played leading roles in the movie.

Take Karen LaQuey, who ran Norwood’s most successful breakfast joint for decades. The walls of her restaurant were lined with black-and-white photos of patrons — a who’s who of locals — that spurred guests to sip their coffee with a solid dose of gossip. In between flipping pancakes and slinging hash, Karen kept customers in check with a steady flow of witty retorts. Her husband, Keith, was a former college football player turned blacksmith who had a voracious appetite for Karen’s food and classic



Dawn breaks over a tractor path next to a field of ripening corn July 1, 2016, outside Manzanola in Otero County. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

authors. Melville, Plato, Tolstoy — and perhaps the most impressive collection of books on the Civil War west of the Mississippi — adorned the shelves of their eclectic Victorian home.

At times, Karen could be contemptuous, even scornful, but she maintained a rigid value system that began and ended with putting in an honest day’s work. Washing dishes at Karen’s was a rite of passage in Norwood. My first day on the job, she taught me the delicate art of scrubbing plates.

“It’s simple,” she said. “We wash both sides of the plate here. And we don’t do anything half-assed.”

“I wash both sides at home, too,” I responded with a guarded dose of adolescence smug.

“We’ll that doesn’t mean you do it right,” she belted back from the griddle. “Now get to work.”

Karen’s daughter, Kirsten, was as keen as her father, and as witty as her mother. Unfortunately, Kirsten lost an extended battle with addiction in 2013. Keith and Karen raised their grandson, Chris, as if he were their own son. Under the tutelage of his grandfather, who once flirted with the idea of becoming a college professor, Chris went on to graduate from Harvard.

Figures like Keith and Karen are why “Hillbilly Elegy” resonated with me. For, despite its shortcomings — such as never addressing racial segregation and ignoring the macroeconomic shifts that have contributed to the downfall of the working class — the film helped me understand how people I grew up with, and genuinely care for, have come to align themselves with a political movement that I struggle to understand on even the most basic level.

The Karen I knew never would have supported Donald Trump. Still, as her grandson pointed out, when it came time to actually vote, Keith and Karen would have struggled due to the transformation of the modern Democratic Party and their inability to compromise on the Second Amendment.

“They probably would have voted Libertarian or abstained completely given their general dislike and frustration with national politics,” Chris added.

Norwood is the only place I’ve ever spent long enough to call home. In the 1970s, my parents, then wandering hippies from Iowa and Arkansas who met in Hawaii, moved to Telluride in an old Ford van. They divorced in

the early 80s, and my mom moved to Norwood after the price of living in recently “discovered” Telluride outpaced what she could earn cleaning homes and framing pictures.

Norwood, population 619, is only 33 miles away from Telluride, but in the late 1980s, it felt like a different planet. For years, I was an outcast amongst Norwood’s gritty working-class kids, but success in sports and a knack for putting my nose to the grindstone eventually earned me their respect.

My best friends growing up were the sons of ranchers — Spors, Snyders, Alexanders and Andrews — many of whom could trace their family roots back to the region’s first homesteads. To me, their lives were picturesque, for although they lacked material wealth, they had family, land and stability. And with it came a sense of belonging that I envied.

I didn’t know it at the time, but Norwood was on the verge of a deep social transformation. Just like J.D. Vance’s family, who inherited an industrial America that was no longer viable, many of my friends were the heirs of small family ranches that have quickly

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## PERSPECTIVE

## VANCE

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become less and less sustainable. Undercut by global markets, many have maintained their way of life by selling off their land to wealthy newcomers who were raised in suburbia, made their fortunes in tech companies and have a misplaced nostalgia for an American countryside that they've only seen in movies.

Today, many families in Norwood depend on work in Telluride to make ends meet. This fact is reaffirmed each morning as hundreds of cars set off down the Norwood Hill before sunrise on their way to Telluride, where wealthy transplants in North Face jackets hire them to build their mansions and maintain their homes. These wealthy new comers, along with their bold progressive ideals and unbridled spending habits, are the only real connection the area has to urban America. Since arriving, they have encouraged stronger EPA regulations as well as the closure of Tri-State's coal power plant, which is in the west end of the county.

Still, while largely liberal elites may dictate the terms of local policies, the people I grew up with have the ultimate say over their vote. In 2020, 88% of voters in Telluride cast their ballot for Joe Biden, but like other rural areas in the country, Donald Trump won Norwood, and nearby Montrose County, handily.

"Hillbilly Elegy" has many shortcomings. For example, the film largely ignores the role that racial discrimination has played in the movement of minorities out of rural America. The same politics that drove J.D. Vance's family to the city also displaced people of color. But unlike white migrants such as those depicted in the opening scenes of the film, minorities living in rural America were forced to deal with slavery, ethnic cleansing, lynchings and systemic discrimination that made social mobility impossible. Put simply, in leaving for cities, white people like myself and J.D. Vance escaped economic collapse in rural America, whereas most people of color fled for their lives.

In life, and film, shortcomings have a curious way of revealing reality, and that is certainly the case in "Hillbilly Elegy." Vance's writing, as well as Ron Howard's film, glosses over the realities facing minorities in the U.S. so blatantly that it feels purposeful. And it may well be because when you grow up in a town like Norwood, where 94% of the town is non-Hispanic White, it's hard to imagine another America even if you live and work alongside it. In Telluride, for example, immigrant



The LaQuey family, taken in the 1970s.

COURTESY PHOTO

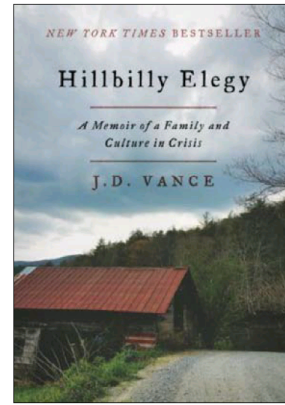
labor subsidizes the cost of living in one of the most beautiful places in the world, giving excessively wealthy white patrons the illusion that they alone deserve to live in such privileged spaces. The majority of these immigrants are from Latin America, and they live in highly segregated neighborhoods in towns like Delta, Ridgeway and Montrose.

Still, although the diversity of urban America has crept into the countryside in recent decades, at 78% white, rural America remains largely unchanged. But what has changed is the ability of rural Americans to make a living, and in the face of rising inequality, many rural residents have begun to experience deep emotional despair.

Psychologically, relative deprivation tends to lead to extreme outcomes. This is why inequality, more so than absolute poverty, best explains increases in crime, drug addiction, suicide and highly polarized political systems. And in my mind, this is the most redeeming feature of "Hillbilly Elegy"; that is, it reveals the cultural nuances underpinning our nation's hyper political polarization. The fact that the film does this without discussing politics at all is what makes its message so important. And while historic trends grinding against rural and industrial America don't excuse racism and xenophobia, they do shed light on a viable path forward.

I don't really know how Keith and Karen LaQuey would have voted in 2020, but I do know that they bridged my community's political divide in unique and important ways. Keith worked in the mine in Telluride, was deputized by the sheriff, coached shot put in Norwood, wrote for the local paper and, from what I'm told, occasionally partied like an outlaw. All the while, Karen provided a common table for wealthy trust funders and fifth-generation ranchers alike. The LaQueys didn't seem to care how people voted, but they certainly cared about one's personal character. Today, the absence of figures like the LaQueys is palpable in rural America. They inhabited an important middle ground between urban America and everyone else. But they have parted from this world and, so it seems, have many others who were willing to place reason ahead of party.

Norwood has long been my guiding compass. Everywhere I go, I look back to my hometown to try and make sense of what I see in front of me. And as I look out across our divided nation, I'm reminded of the lessons I learned growing up. Foremost amongst them was the notion that nothing is handed to you, and you must fight for what is yours. But also, the people I grew up with believed firmly in education, community and getting paid a fair wage for an honest day's work.



COURTESY OF HARPERCOLLINS

J.D. Vance is the author of "Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis," which has been on The New York Times Best Sellers list for four weeks.

Working-class Americans from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are not molded by the same history, but they do share many of the same barriers to social mobility. For example, just like the public school I attended growing up in Norwood, African American and Latino children in inner cities are forced to attend underfunded schools where teachers and staff are poorly paid and overworked. Similarly, inner cities lack access to quality health care, and where it exists, the providers are working insanely long hours so that they can complete their residencies and move on to higher-paying jobs in the suburbs. And just like my parents, working-class minorities get up early, go to bed late and have a hard time staying out of debt.

These three issues — public education, accessible health care and fair pay — are the keys to overcoming our current political and social polarization. And as I reflect on the lessons of my own roots, I sense that the divisive polarization impacting our country is unlikely to subside until elites from both sides of the political spectrum divest in identity politics in favor of investing in broad, class-based programs that support meaningful opportunities in way of education, health care and living wages for working-class Americans in rural and urban settings.

Our nation is extremely segregated, highly unequal and in the process of democratic decay. But hidden in rural America, there are answers to our problems; the question is whether or not we're willing to take a closer look.

Benjamin Waddell is an associate professor at Fort Lewis College in Durango.

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