



Dreams, Small Can Transform Farms, Rural Areas

Print Page

By Jane Fyksen, Crops Editor

Could your rural community use a renaissance? Is it harder to find volunteers these days for community functions? Are there too many vacant buildings along "Main Street" in your small town? Is neighborliness becoming a thing of the past in farming neighborhoods, where no one shares equipment and labor anymore, and spouses are busy with off-farm jobs?

All is not lost, assure Jack Ricchiuto and June Holley, presenters at Wisconsin Rural Summit 6 in Stevens Point last month. Small steps lead to big changes and a little entrepreneurship can go a long way, they contend, sharing how collaboration, networking and entrepreneurial thinking can revitalize rural communities and local farm economies.

Ricchiuto and Holley are both from Ohio. Ricchiuto (<http://www.designinglife.com>) coaches leaders in all walks of life, organizations and communities in building their capacity for change. An author of numerous books and conference speaker, he also does leadership and "team" coaching, organizational and community development and professional development workshops. Holley (<http://www.networkweaving.com/blog>) "weaves" economic and community networks. Also a keynote speaker, workshop presenter and networking "mentor"/consultant, she was instrumental in helping local folks in the rural Appalachian region of Ohio start up businesses, innovate and work together to reinvent their town.

Innovation is what's needed today on individual farms and within Wisconsin's rural communities. Ricchiuto defines innovation as "surprising the imagination of the market." What do Kleenex, Post-It Notes, ATMs, Fax machines, iPhones and potato chips have in common? They "surprised" the marketplace; no one asked for any of those innovations, though today, most folks couldn't live without them. And, stresses Ricchiuto, they all started as somebody's zany idea n someone who had a dream and acted on it.

The more resistance you encounter, the likely the bigger your innovation or idea for change, he warns.

Innovation, he notes, rarely happens in isolation. People who want to shake things up need to build community. He's developed an "intentional model" for building community that involves steps he refers to as: Dream space conversations, invitation conversations, gifts conversations and small acts conversations.

A "dream space conversation" is where innovation starts. It's not about "problems" but "possibilities." It's not a discussion of "What's wrong that needs to be fixed?" but "What would delight us n 20 years from now?" Ricchiuto says "the problem with problems" is that while they can bring people to the table to talk, they don't get people to innovate. Farms, organizations and communities that are "stuck" only have "problem conversations," he contends. "It's 'possibility' conversations that move things forward."

As a farm couple, group or community body, ask what would delight you 20 years from now, or "What would you love to see possible (that you think is impossible now)? What calls your heart?"

You go out 20 years because that's "visioning," not just planning, remarks Ricchiuto, noting that every generation creates something that the previous one thought impossible. It's important to start change-conversations in "dream space" because the "depth of passion" that happens within an organization or community is "equal to the length of your vision," he stresses. Vision and passion transcends problems. There's no room for naysayer roadblocks like:

Where are the funds going to come from?



Coupled with the “dream space conversation” is an “invitation conversation.” In other words, “Who else would have value to bring to this conversation?” as opposed to “Who’s not here who we can blame?”

Another component of building community and making things happen are “gifts conversations.” These, too, have a positive thrust. It’s asking, “What talents and resources do we have at the table?” versus “What don’t we have and are lacking?” Focus on existing resources and talents (i.e. gifts) versus deficiencies.

The fourth important conversation to have when trying to build community and innovate is the “small acts conversation.” This deals with “What small experiments could help us realize any part of our dream?” It’s not about seeking “consensus,” and asking “What can we all agree on?” Consensus, Ricchiuto contends, is a barrier to building community; it’s really tough to get everyone to agree.

“Small acts” are small steps that can propel you forward immediately toward achieving your dream. Say the dream is seeing a grocery store return to your small town. A “small act” might be to start with a farmer’s market this summer with vendors who have some extra produce from their gardens to sell. Don’t obsess over the scale/size of your vision, or getting there fast. “Everything big thing starts with small acts,” Ricchiuto notes.

Holley shares how 10 “small acts” transformed Nelsonville, Ohio, a small town she helped revitalize. Nelsonville had old Victorian-style building around a town square n “good bones,” notes Holley n but only a couple of the store fronts were occupied. That was before a local artist realized Nelsonville’s brick sidewalks had decorative stars on them and started making things with the Nelsonville star-brick theme.

Small Act 1 was a coffee shop that followed, with tables inside and out on the sidewalk. There, people gathered and those community-building “dream space conversations” that Ricchiuto explained started happening, as people started visioning about the possibilities for their town.

Small Act 2 was bringing “entertainment” back to Nelsonville. One of the people who hung out at the coffee shop was well-connected in the music world. A second-story opera house was opened, where local musicians could showcase their talents. Next came children’s theater and adult community theater.

Small Act 3 was a restaurant, so people frequently the opera house had someplace to eat and could make an evening of it. A local culinary school decided to open the restaurant so students could get real-life experience. They decided to use local produce from area farmers.

Small Act 4: Shops now started opening in the downtown area, as a local wealthy patron started subsidizing rents to encourage revitalization of the square. Eventually, notes Holley, 30 shops would come in, from quilts to handmade paper, and a pottery shop where people could make their own mugs.

Small Act 5 was “Final Fridays.” Held the last Friday of every month, vendors of all types were allowed to gather on the square to sell whatever they made or produced in their gardens. Some did so well that they opened stores.

Small Act 6: With an eclectic/artsy town square, it was time to bring in experts, like Holley, to get help with marketing and economic development. A “learning cluster” of successful business-owners was established (i.e. a peer group), and the city council was invited to the sessions to get city leaders fired up. Eventually an “arts district” was established.

Small Act 7 was an “innovation fund” that gave away little grants for all sorts of ideas people had for new ventures.

Small Act 8 was a “walking tour” brochure for tourism purposes.

Small Act 9 was workshops on how to start a Bed and Breakfast, as tourists had no place to stay. Local people began opening up B&Bs.

Small Act 10? Two large business/employers decided to stay in the small town of Nelsonville because their employees loved living there.

She says all of this revitalization happened in five years in Nelsonville, a town with less than 5,000 people, with no major thoroughfare, and 1 1/2 hours away from the closest big population center, which is Columbus, Ohio.

A “small act” engages assets that a farm, organization or community currently posses, even during a recession. That’s why those “gifts conversations” are so important. The opposite of “gifts” or assets are “needs” and deficiencies. Don’t talk about what you lack or what your weaknesses are; instead capitalize on existing strengths and assets and network with like-minded positive people.

Ricchiuto and Holley emphasize that it's typically only a couple "small acts" from fulfilling a dream. Small acts and the other "conversations" Ricchiuto advocates create "rhizomes" (underground roots from which new seedlings originate) that generate positive change.

Holley sees great potential in local "food clusters," farm-based enterprises (along with lenders and university and government reps) that team up to make things happen in their area, be it a farmer's market, kitchen incubator, restaurant using a myriad of local foods. If you can dream it, you're only a couple "small acts" away from making it happen.
