

RMJ

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Taking the Helm:
How rural Minnesota's next
generation sees the future

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Any opinions voiced in the Journal are those solely of the authors and not necessarily of the Center.

Center for Rural Policy and Development
600 S. Fifth Street, Suite 211 • Saint Peter, Minnesota 56082
(507) 934-7700 • (877) RURALMN

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Editor's Note

Marnie Werner

Ever wanted to travel into the future?

Talk to some kids. They're little time machines. How? Look at them. They aren't hauling any baggage behind them in the form of experiences telling them they can't do something or their ideas won't work. For them, every direction they look is forward, and all ideas are possible. What they tell you they are going to do is what they fully intend to do. Listen to them, and you'll get a picture of the future.

It's human nature to look back when we're trying to prepare for the future. After all, as we well know, those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. Our vision of the future is framed in the context of our past, so it's hard not to base our decisions and plans on the changes we have marked over the course of our lives. The last 60 years, from the heyday of agriculture, manufacturing and mining after World War II through the decline and consolidation of all three, to the beginnings of a resurgence, have marked long-term changes in the state and have created a frame of reference for so many of our policy decisions. In recent years, however, our state and our nation have been going through a major transition, driven partly by generation, largely by technology, changing everything we do and how we do it. It's different enough that it's been dubbed "The New Normal."

For the generations coming up, though, the "New Normal" isn't new at all; it's just normal. Those in high school, just entering college or just leaving college — those just

starting their adult lives — this generation is preparing to take the helm on everything from state and local government to business, education and health care. They're at step one in this new reality. But are they ready to go?

That's why for this edition of the Rural Minnesota Journal, we're looking at the issues where young people and rural Minnesota intersect. How do they see life right now, and how do they see the future? What roles will they play? How do older Minnesotans pass the torch on to younger Minnesotans? For this edition of the Rural Minnesota Journal we tried to get authors under the age of 40 and for the most part succeeded. All of the contributors work and live in Greater Minnesota.

Here's what you'll find in this issue:

Ben Winchester and his fellow authors offer up an intriguing look into why the "brain drain" may not be living up to its publicity. But with the potential for families to move back to rural communities, what should those communities be doing to help this trend? With Minnesota's population aging, preparing an adequate health care workforce is a priority. Laurissa Stigen, executive director of the Central Minnesota Area Health Education Center, discusses ways her organization and others are working to introduce kids to health care professions in rural communities. Priscilla Day of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, discusses a troublesome trend in American Indian youth in Minnesota, the prevalence of out-of-home placements and their impact on the children, their families and the tribe itself.

Bryan Joyce, a social studies teacher at Windom Area Schools, goes over the four components necessary in education to create future leaders. For Neil Linscheid of the University of Minnesota Extension in Marshall, attracting people to rural communities begins with the message. Residents need to figure out what their message is, then communicate, communicate, communicate. Young people are the perfect candidates to be entrepreneurs, says Michael Nolan, director of the Small Business Development Center at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and a serial entrepreneur himself. According to Nolan, kids and young adults are full of ideas, and rural communities would be wise to encourage them.

Tracy Gaalswyk is a young farmer in rural Nicollet County who understands the impact of the changes in technology and society on farming. Gaalswyk comments on the differences between farming in the past and farming today, and what needs to be considered for preserving farming into the future. And Jessica Beyer reflects on issues with today's local government, how government operations and participation are changing, and how the upcoming generations can fit in.

Two themes run through these articles (unplanned and unintentionally). One is the impact of technology: how it has changed everything in our lives and how it is shaping the future. The second is that it is not necessarily a disaster that young people are leaving their hometowns when they finish high school. In leaving, they are generally going someplace to gain an education and skills, and yes, not all of them come back. But some of them do, and many more might. The key is to make sure your hometown is one they want to come back to, because when they do, says Winchester, they're coming back with their own children. Look in those children's faces, and you'll see the future.

