



By Steve Werblow

Serving up pioneer spirit

Tapping into rural values

Mike Campbell woke up staring at his hand. Paralyzed, deaf, and numb, it took him a while to realize he was lying on a ridge in Afghanistan's Helmand province. He didn't remember the firefight that had been raging for hours that morning. He couldn't recall the explosion that pulverized his Kevlar helmet, peppered him with stones and shrapnel, and created a wedge-shaped injury in his brain that pierced the regions governing short-term memory and emotion. Then the pain started, and it hasn't stopped since.

Campbell spent four months in Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., before returning to his hometown—Keno, Ore., population 1,059, a tiny bridge on the Klam-

ath River between Cascade Range timber and the hay, grain, and potato fields of the Klamath Basin.

"I've been around all different places, and it seems I always come back here," says Campbell. "It's quiet. Everybody watches out for everybody and looks after each other."

Rural values. After the parades ended and the yellow ribbons came down in late 2008, the community's support for Campbell began in earnest.

People offered him jobs, though Campbell realized his brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder would make it tough to work for somebody else. It's hard for him to remember details or appointments now, and he gets frustrated and angry when he's tired or under pressure.

Then long-time friend Trent Williams offered him a one-ton pickup and a toolbox to build a service truck for repairing machinery in the field.

"When I go out on a farm and work on a piece of equipment, it's so calming," Campbell says quietly. "Every project I do, I tell people I work at my own speed, and it's not fast. I tell them I have to go over things again and again. I get confused. Everything in my mind is like a whirlwind. But they all say, 'It's no problem. We've got time. Do what you need to do.'"

The small-town values that drew Campbell back home—the values he learned growing up there—are helping him and his family through his long, slow recovery process. They're the same values that will help a num-

ber of rural communities recover from tough decades of shrinking populations and shuttered storefronts. Qualities like resourcefulness, resilience, independence, patriotism, and community spirit arise when rural sociologists talk about small-town values. For Campbell, it was those fundamentals that propelled his rise to command sergeant major, the Army's highest enlisted rank.

►**Above:** Seeing neighbors over morning coffee is more than a small-town tradition—it's a vital way of maintaining community. ►**Upper right:** Command Sergeant Major Mike Campbell came home from Afghanistan with a Bronze Star and a traumatic brain injury. Friends and neighbors in his hometown are helping him heal. ►**Right:** Sports leagues can help unite small communities.





PHOTO: ERIC HODGSON

►**Above:** Darren Hodgkinson of Pratt, Kan., joined friends on his township's volunteer fire department to help his neighbors. ►**Below:** Firefighters like John Brent Hoener of Pratt, Kan., reflect a vital resource in rural communities—citizens willing to volunteer time and energy.

In rural communities across the continent, those values also lead residents to heed the call for volunteers closer to home. Near Pratt, Kan., farmer Darren Hodgkinson joined the Township 12 Rural Fire Department in 1998 after seeing his neighbors fight a pair of fires on his farm.

"If everybody steps up and takes a piece of it, then it's not such a burden on one person to do it all," he says. "In a smaller community, you know more people, so you're more willing to help."

Jon Brent Hoener, another Township 12 firefighter in Pratt, adds a personal touch that has kept rural people together since the pioneer days.

"We go different directions when we leave here," Hoener says. "But when we come together here, we're a family, and I thoroughly enjoy that."

In Anguilla, Miss., Paul Hollis taps the same volunteer spirit in his work on the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta Levee Board and other civic activities.

Sometimes, his service comes from sitting through long levee board budget meetings. In the spring, he helps out with "A Dream Revisited," a play in nearby Rolling Fork to raise funds for the Mont Helena mansion and draw people into town. And when floodwaters rose last year, Hollis grabbed a shovel and worked through the night filling sandbags to fight sand boils that threatened the levees.

"You can't wait around for somebody else to do it," Hollis observes. "We have a real strong feeling here

of trying to keep our towns alive the best we can. There's a real strong sense of volunteerism."

Hollis adds that the survival of rural communities like his depends on more than just keeping levees intact.

"What you've got to do is keep people here instead of moving away so you support local businesses and keep them open," he maintains.

Bringing back families is key, says Chuck Hassebrook of the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Neb. "We need to think about the young family that's been working in a city for a decade or less that wants to settle down and raise children in a small town," Hassebrook says.

Manitoba civic and business leaders travel to Asia and Latin America to invite immigrants to their communities, notes Bill Ashton at Brandon University's Rural Development Institute. Immigrants are vital to the growth of towns and industries there, he says, and many are drawn to small-town life.

Seeing neighbors in town is an integral part of strengthening a community. Though the Internet and better highways can connect farmers and rural entrepreneurs with distant

markets, it's crucial for residents of small towns to gather around—and in—local institutions as well.

"Rural communities in particular need a strong sense of community, a strong sense of place," explains Paul Hosford, a blogger, musician, and fifth-generation farmer in Albion, Neb. "Communities really start to unravel when people aren't in a position to interact as much anymore."

Hosford is a proponent of what he calls "repioneering"—tapping 19th century pioneering spirit to build successful 21st century communities.

Hosford's vision of the future looks much like the past, with a pioneer-inspired emphasis on entrepreneurship, energy efficiency, and community gatherings. Old-time barn dances may no longer draw a crowd, but scout troops, ballgames, or concerts could.

Building on a community's attributes starts with encouraging local leadership.

"I think you have to look at what resources you have available—that's how a pioneer or entrepreneur approaches a problem," Hosford adds. "Look at your social infrastructure. What people do you have? How can you maximize their effectiveness?"

Come together. Today's rural residents are connected to leaders and experts anywhere. Most of Mike Campbell's care is handled through local office visits and video conferences with specialists, though he and his wife, Rani, still have to spend hours driving to special procedures or to wrestle with the Veterans Administration.

The combination of local resources and limitless connections can help rural people link not only to top doctors or global buyers, but to each other, creating opportunities for teamwork.

"If we want our communities to



►**Above:** Drawing young families with attractive communities, good schools, and recreation can help rural towns thrive, says Chuck Hassebrook.

survive, we need to come together," says Hassebrook in Nebraska.

"We can't wait for somebody else to come in and do it for us, because they won't," Hassebrook says. "But together, we can do it ourselves. Working together with our neighbors, working together with people across rural America, we have a bright future." ■

See the video at JohnDeere.com/Furrow



PHOTO: ERIC HODGSON

►**Large photo:** Patriotism runs strong in rural communities. The challenge: veterans' unique medical needs can stretch rural health systems.

