

WINTER
2020
EDITION

The Bridge

KENTUCKY'S CONNECTION TO RURAL HEALTH ISSUES

SHINING A LIGHT

Adair County newspaper
confronts addiction

DEVELOPING TALENT

Rockcastle County program
provides head start for nurses

COMMUNITY STAR

Corbin administrator
wins national recognition



A WORD FROM

Ernie L. Scott

DIRECTOR, KENTUCKY OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

Recognizing THE NEXT GENERATION OF RURAL HEALTH LEADERS

She's strong willed and bright.

She's compassionate to others and generous to those in need. She stands up for what's right.

She chases her dreams, while constantly striving for perfection.

She's involved with her school's National Junior Beta Club, glee club and band. She plays volleyball and basketball, and runs cross country. She also cheers. And, she's involved with her church youth group.

The *she* I'm describing is my own 12-year-old daughter, Addyson.

While she'd probably be a little bit embarrassed to know that I'm mentioning her in *The Bridge*, she's really something else. Something special. The kind of child that any father would feel blessed to call his own.

And, although she may only half-heartedly agree with being labeled a "leader," she does demonstrate many of the qualities that we've come to expect from leaders today. She's certainly not alone.

Take Isaiah Pruitt, for instance. He's profiled in this issue in a new feature we're calling, "Focus on the Future."

In 2018, Pruitt, who lives in Buffalo, in LaRue County, and participates in his high school's chapter of the National FFA Organization (formerly known as Future Farmers of America), teamed with staff from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture to develop a grain safety kit for farmers. The kit, which was created to assist farmers who may become entrapped in a grain bin, included, among other things, a safety harness and respirator. Fifteen kits were distributed to ag producers in LaRue County and the surrounding area. Pruitt also helped to organize a training event to demonstrate how the kits could be used.

This past year, he starred in a farmer suicide prevention public service announcement that was produced by the Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention, and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

He also recently helped draft a Kentucky House resolution recognizing September 18 as Farmer Suicide Prevention Day across the Commonwealth. Pruitt was among the speakers in Frankfort last fall trying to raise awareness about the issue.

Some pretty significant achievements.

Other young people across rural Kentucky have made a similar commitment to combatting the health challenges they see and experience daily at home, in their schools and in their communities. Some have implemented school-wide campaigns against e-cigarettes. Others have engaged in efforts to reduce food insecurity. Their accomplishments warrant our praise and some publicity. They are doing good work. No, *great* work.

Beyond merely calling attention to their efforts, sharing the stories of these young people can do more: It can provide models for the types of useful and successful projects that can be replicated in other communities.

So, we're enlisting your assistance to help us highlight these students' efforts. If you know of young people in your rural community — or in any rural community across Kentucky — who are making a difference in the broad areas of health and wellness, we want to know. We'd like to hear their story. And, better yet, we'd like to share their story with the rest of Kentucky in an upcoming "Focus on the Future" spotlight.

We know the rural health challenges faced by Kentuckians — everything from chronic diseases to medical provider shortages. These challenges didn't spring up overnight. And they won't be solved overnight, either.

Instead, it will take the efforts of all of us — including the energy, passion and determination of today's youth and young leaders like Isaiah Pruitt — working together, side by side, to continue to make progress.

Our future and our children's future depends on it.

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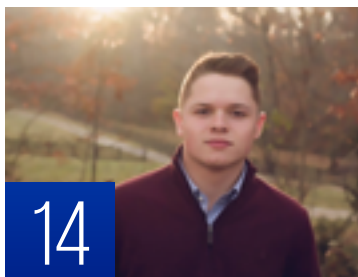
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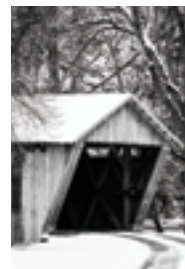
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Rural Health Champion
On a Crusade for Better Health

On the Cover

Winter in Greenup County
Photographer | Sherman Cahal

Bennett's Mill Covered Bridge, near the town of South Shore in Greenup County, is one of Kentucky's longest wooden one-span covered bridges. The bridge, which traverses Tygart Creek, was originally built in 1855 by brothers Benjamin Franklin "B.F." Bennett and William Parmaly Bennett to help their customers from the west side of the creek reach their mill. The bridge was restored in 2004.



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The Kentucky Office of Rural Health (KORH), established in 1991, is a federal-state partnership authorized by federal legislation. The mission of the KORH is to support the health and well-being of Kentuckians by promoting access to rural health services. The KORH assists clinicians, administrators and consumers find ways to improve communications, finances and access to quality health care while ensuring that funding agencies and policymakers are made aware of the needs of rural communities. The KORH receives support from the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy in the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The statements and opinions contained in the articles published in **The Bridge** are solely those of the individual authors and contributors and not of the UK Center of Excellence in Rural Health, the Kentucky Office of Rural Health, its affiliates or funding agencies.

ADDRESSING THE DRUG EPIDEMIC

Adair County community newspaper tackles addiction head-on

By Robin Roenker

Like many communities across America, Kentucky's Adair County knows the pain of substance abuse. Parents have lost children. Children have lost parents. Many residents there have had their lives upended by addiction — either firsthand, or through relationships with loved ones struggling with substance use disorders.

Adair County isn't alone in this struggle. The issue is one that all 120 Kentucky counties are facing, to one degree or another. According to a recent Overdose Fatality Report compiled by the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy, 1,247 Kentuckians died of drug overdoses in 2018 — down from the all-time statewide single-year high of 1,565 drug-related deaths a year earlier.

What sets Adair County apart from many

rural communities, though, is the willingness of local journalists there to consistently and proactively provide in-depth coverage of addiction and its aftermath.

Spearheading this effort has been Sharon Burton, the publisher and editor of both the *Adair County Community Voice*, a weekly paper covering the community, and *The Farmer's Pride*, a statewide publication covering Kentucky's agriculture industry.

"I love my community, but my newspaper philosophy, I'd guess you'd say, is to look at both the positives and the negatives [here]," said Burton, who launched the *Community Voice* in 2002 and *The Farmer's Pride* in 1989. "I think the role of responsible journalism is just to be honest. And that's what we've tried to do from day one."

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM

While some communities might prefer to turn a blind eye to the substance use disorder epidemic — for fear that acknowledging drug use within their boundaries might lead to poor publicity — that's simply not Burton's style.

A dedicated, passionate journalist whose work earned her the 2016 Al Smith Award for public service through community journalism by a Kentuckian — an annual honor presented by the University of Kentucky's Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues — Burton knew from the start that ignoring the drug problem in Adair County wouldn't solve

anything. But she felt strongly that shining a light on it just might.

"When you start to write about these things, there's always that concern that people are going to think, 'Oh, this is a terrible place to live.' Or that no one will want to live here or bring their jobs here because of all the drug issues we have going on," Burton said. "We are no worse than any other community in Kentucky [when it comes to substance use]. We're just willing to acknowledge it, and we're trying to work toward solutions. I think that makes us a very progressive community."

Igniting a much-needed conversation in the community

THE COST OF ADDICTION



Cally McFall and her son, Briggs.

The cost of addiction runs high. It has affected every family and every aspect of our community. In this issue, the Community Voice begins an ongoing series of articles about the cost of addiction, from personal loss to its impact on tax dollars. Anyone with a story to tell who would like to part of a future article is encouraged to call editor Sharon Burton at 270-384-9454.

Mother suffers greatest cost in loss of daughter

Stacey Wilson knows the greatest cost of addiction – the loss of a child. Stacey's daughter, Cally McFall, died Jan. 28 at the age of 23. Stacey still has trouble coming to terms with her loss, but she speaks out in hopes that she can help others. Cally started using marijuana as a teenager. Stacey believes Cally started taking prescription pills and became an active user around a year before her death. Cally had not "hit rock bottom," a term often used when someone's daily life has deteriorated completely because of drugs. She did, however, illegally that turned out to be fentanyl. "She got a bad pill," Stacey said. Stacey had tried to help Cally, even moving in with her at one point, and she had custody of Cally's son, Briggs. But she stopped short of using a Kentucky law that forces someone with an addiction into a treatment program. "I had (the paperwork) already filled out, I had my timeline, all I had to do was file it. I didn't do it," Stacey said. Stacey wanted Cally to attend a doctor's appointment she had scheduled for Briggs, so she put off filing and dead ended ruled ap- s started 3

THE COST OF ADDICTION Jails, courts overflow from drug offenses

The complications from our nation's drug epidemic go deep. Obviously affecting users and their loved ones the most, its severity also disrupts many areas of local government. With law enforcement across the training on how



THE COST OF ADDICTION: System watching over children is overburdened

When Jennifer Russell appeared before Circuit Judge Judy Vance Murphy for final sentencing on the death of her 5-week-old son, Murphy expressed shock that Russell even left the hospital with her newborn child. "To be honest this court is appalled. I've been appalled from

weeks ago, disgusted to know that this baby not only died with meth in his system but was born with meth in his system and the authorities sent him home with Ms. Russell," Judge Murphy said. Russell was sentenced to nine and a half years in prison after entering an Alford plea of

guilty. Commonwealth's Attorney Brian Wright originally recommended six and half years but increased the recommendation after Russell missed two mandatory drug tests then tested positive for methamphetamine after appearing in court for sentencing on May 28. Russell's son, Dakota De-

Mott, was born Sept. 19, 2017 and died Oct. 24, 2017. A medical examiner ruled that Dakota died from positional asphyxia, meaning his body was in a position where he was unable to breathe. That finding alone, however, does not tell the

See INFANT'S, page 2

Burton and her six-person *Community Voice* staff have addressed addiction frankly from the paper's earliest days. The newspaper's first edition, published in November 2002, featured a cover story about local resident Allen Owens, who shared his journey to sobriety and a newfound mission to help others battling substance use disorders. (In 2019, Burton did a follow-up story with Owens, who is still drug free. "It was really a fun story to do. He's a great guy and a great success story," Burton said. "We were sitting in his living room, and he was basically saying, 'This is what you can have, if you stay off drugs. I think he's an inspiration to many people.'")

In 2017, the *Community Voice* ran a series of stories about the paths to recovery taken by

community members who had previously had a substance use disorder.

"Our goal with that series was to share good news — that there is hope for people struggling with addiction," said Burton, who found local sources to be not only willing but eager to share their painful experiences with drug use — seeing it as an opportunity to aid someone else.

"The number one message I want other people in the [local journalism] industry to know is that people are willing to share their stories because they want to help others," she said. "There's nobody more understanding about what a person with addiction is going through than a person who has gone through it — or who has had a family member go through it — themselves."

THE COST OF ADDICTION

While the *Community Voice's* 2017 recovery series showcased uplifting stories of local citizens' healing and renewal following addiction, one event, in particular, that year gutted the entire Adair County community and drove home the message that no one — no matter how young — was immune to the drug epidemic.

On Oct. 24, 2017, a five-week-old baby, who had been born with traces of meth in his system, died of positional asphyxia — meaning he was in a position which left him unable to breathe. A law enforcement investigation revealed that the baby's mother, who had been using meth, awoke to find him dead.

Burton covered the case extensively from start to finish in the *Community Voice*, culminating with a story about the mother's 2019 sentencing after she entered an Alford plea to a manslaughter charge. As part of the newspaper's coverage, Burton launched a formal open records request with the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services to investigate why social services allowed the baby to remain in the mother's care after he was born with drugs in his system.

"That whole thing left a lot of questions for me," said Burton, who earned a degree in journalism from Western Kentucky University in 1972 and now serves as vice president of the Kentucky Press Association. "How do a mother and baby both come home from the hospital together when both tested positive for meth?

Where's our government, who is supposed to be looking out for our children?"

Another drug-related tragedy rocked Adair County in January 2019, when the 23-year-old daughter of Stacey Wilson, a beloved community figure, died of an overdose.

"The community loves this woman," Burton said. "And when she lost her daughter to drugs, it devastated all of us."

Wilson shared her heart-wrenching story of loss in an August 1 *Community Voice* cover story that launched the newspaper's 2019 series dedicated to spotlighting "The Cost of Addiction." In the article, Wilson expressed her deepest regret: failing to formally file paperwork, which she had filled out, to have her daughter involuntarily admitted for drug abuse treatment.

In Kentucky, Casey's Law, passed in 2004, allows parents, relatives or friends of a substance use-impaired person to lawfully intervene and request involuntary, court-ordered addiction treatment for their loved one. In her raw interview with Burton, Wilson shared how her daughter overdosed from a pill tainted with fentanyl — just before Wilson could officially file the Casey's Law petition.

"The bottom line is, she was going to get [legally mandated treatment] for her daughter and she didn't. So she started sharing her story and posting on social media, telling people that was her biggest regret," Burton said.



Adair County Community Voice editor and publisher Sharon Burton and assistant editor Anna Buckman don't shy away from covering topics that other local newspapers are more likely to avoid. Burton's philosophy is "to look at both the positives and the negatives" in the community.



Burton addresses how small town newspapers can cover substance use and recovery in their communities during a one-day workshop for reporters held in November 2019 in Ashland.

BREAKING THE STIGMA

While the *Community Voice* has around 3,200 paying subscribers, Burton sent the August 1 “Cost of Addiction” edition containing Wilson’s story — along with articles about Casey’s Law and the ways the drug epidemic is overburdening the childhood social service system and crowding jails and courts — to all residences in the county.

“We mail more than 8,000 copies when we do a county-wide distribution,” Burton said. “We thought it was important to reach [*Community Voice*] readers and non-readers to encourage dialogue about substance abuse and recovery and its impact on our community.”

Subsequent issues in the series examined, among other topics, one mother’s story of forcing her daughter into treatment, holistic recovery services available at Isaiah House Treatment Center — which operates three campuses in Kentucky — and Burton’s personal experiences attending a Columbia Al-Anon meeting and visiting the Adair County Health Department’s needle exchange program.

“Our local health department actually has [a] 117 percent return on syringes,” Burton said, noting that many participants pick up needles

they find and return them as well.

“I wanted people to see what the program really does. I called the nurse that runs the exchange and asked to come through. I said, ‘I don’t want you to treat me like a journalist. I want to be like a regular client using the service,’” Burton said. “You could really see, in that story, that this was a place where people dealing with addiction could get help and feel loved.”

Community health worker Misty May was one of the people Burton encountered during her needle exchange clinic visit. May, who is now 14 years drug free, had previously openly shared her journey to sobriety in a 2017 *Community Voice* recovery series article.

When asked whether the newspaper’s coverage has helped establish a community dialogue about the drug problem in the county, May answered unequivocally.

“They’re helping change the stigma [surrounding addiction],” she said. “The real-life stories that Sharon has been sharing show that there is positivity and hope and that recovery is possible. Families see that they don’t have to be ashamed [to ask for help], because this is an issue that doesn’t discriminate.”

“ I don't know of another weekly newspaper in this country that has done as good of a job covering this topic as the *Adair County Community Voice*. ”

Al Cross, Director, UK's Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues

Local newspapers often avoid holding up an unflattering mirror to the community they serve, but Burton and the *Community Voice* do “an excellent job of that when it needs to be done,” said Al Cross, director of UK's Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. “She doesn't sensationalize things. She's an excellent storyteller, and she knows how to find really good examples to illustrate [issues]. People like to read about people. They don't like to read [only] about policies and programs.”

Burton's dedication to covering Adair County's drug problem has earned statewide

and national notice. Last August, the website of The Poynter Institute — a nonprofit journalism school and research organization based in St. Petersburg, Florida — ran a story spotlighting the *Community Voice's* drug coverage, and in November, Burton led a journalism workshop on covering substance abuse, sponsored by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues and Oak Ridge Associated Universities.

“I don't know of another weekly newspaper in this country that has done as good of a job covering this topic as the *Adair County Community Voice*,” Cross said.

A SPRINGBOARD FOR CHANGE

While the drug epidemic has been a major focus of the *Community Voice's* public health coverage, the paper hasn't shied away from tackling other major health issues facing the county as well.

The newspaper closely covered debate surrounding Adair County's 2016 wet-dry vote, for example, and last October, *Community Voice* assistant editor Anna Buckman helped raise awareness of a little-known tick-borne allergy to red meat, known as Alpha-gal syndrome, which has been reported in the community.

Buckman, an Adair County native who began at the paper as an intern while studying at Lindsey Wilson College, said she's proud to work at a mission-driven publication like the *Community Voice*.

“Sharon always has an approach of honesty. She says the hard things that no one else is willing to say,” Buckman said. “I'm very proud to work for this paper because we cover the things that need to be covered and say the things that people need to hear.”

The *Community Voice's* substance abuse coverage has captured the attention of the community. Buckman said residents often stop her after church or around town to talk about things she and Burton have written. And recently, a coalition of area church pastors has begun to meet to brainstorm ways to better address the problem.

In the meantime, Burton has no plans to stop covering the issue.

“Like everything we cover, there has to be a balance,” she said. “We don't want to cause reader burnout. With that said, we won't be dropping the issue, because it's too important. When we see good things going on in the community to help people struggling with addiction, we want to be there to support those efforts.” ■

LEARN
MORE

READ THE ADAIR COUNTY COMMUNITY VOICE'S
“COST OF ADDICTION” SERIES ONLINE AT
[HTTPS://ADAIRVOICE.COM](https://adairvoice.com)

Robin Roenker is a Lexington-based freelance writer who covers sustainability, travel, business trends, and Kentucky people and places.



A LEG UP STATE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM DEVELOPS TALENT PIPELINE

By Katheran Wasson

Arriving at the hospital at 6:45 a.m. to bathe, dress and feed ventilator-dependent patients isn't how the typical high schooler starts the school day.

But a partnership between the Rockcastle Regional Hospital and Respiratory Center in Mt. Vernon and the Rockcastle Area Technology Center is making it possible for a select group of students who are passionate about pursuing careers in nursing.

The students are participants in the state's first Tech Ready Apprentices for Careers in Kentucky (TRACK) Youth Apprenticeship program in the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) field. The first cohort of four students completed the program in 2019; the second cohort of four is now enrolled.

And, when students finish the year-long program, they'll earn a journey person certification and a job at their hometown hospital. For hospital leadership, developing a local talent pipeline is the ultimate reward.

HOW IT STARTED

Rockcastle County students have long participated in a co-op program with the local hospital, splitting their time between the classroom and working with patients to earn a CNA certification.

But, when Rhonda Childress, the Technology Center's health science teacher, first heard about the Commonwealth's TRACK program, she saw an opportunity to make the existing co-op

program more robust. Childress, a registered nurse who began the Tech Center's health science program 21 years ago, approached hospital administrators about a possible partnership.

Hospital leadership saw it as an opportunity to grow their own nursing talent, said Julie Mullins, who facilitates the program for the hospital — managing students' data, tracking their hours and monitoring their progress. The hospital already had a scholarship program for aspiring physicians from the area and developing a similar program for the nursing field was a natural next step.

"If we can grow our own talent here, we'll keep them in the county," Mullins said.

GETTING A HEAD START

Mullins said the TRACK program offers students more training, the incentive of a work-ready certificate and a job when they graduate.

Rockcastle County students can start the health science program as a freshman or sophomore. If they like it, they return as a junior and spend two hours per day at the Area Technology Center, completing four courses that are prerequisites for their senior year. Students choose an area of study for their senior year — nursing is just one of many options, including phlebotomy, pharmacy, occupational therapy and more.

For those who choose nursing, they can fill out an application in the spring to be considered



Members of the Rockcastle TRACK program's first cohort include (left to right): Britany Doan, Janelle Brown, Lindsay Mink and Bailey Johnson. Since 2013, more than 300 students have completed — or are currently enrolled — in a TRACK program across Kentucky.

for the TRACK program. Candidates are interviewed by hospital personnel and selected to participate. Students who aren't selected can still take part in the nursing program and earn a CNA certificate.

TRACK students start working at the hospital the summer before their senior year. The work isn't clinical in nature — instead, think answering phones and cleaning equipment — but the early exposure to the hospital gives these students a leg up, Childress said.

Year after year, she has watched her students' anxiety build as the time comes for clinical work to begin during the second half of their senior year. For teenagers who aspire to be nurses, stepping into the halls of Rockcastle Regional can be a challenging initiation. The hospital has 143 ventilator-dependent beds across five units; most residents have feeding tubes, numerous IV medications and other challenges, Mullins said.

"They'll see everything from cancer to COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease], children born prematurely, genetic syndromes, injuries from accidents — things they'll read about in textbooks," she said.

But, Childress said, TRACK students display far fewer nerves.

"They're more comfortable at the hospital, they see familiar faces," she said. "They get in a little bit earlier, and even though they're not

doing the same duties as a nursing assistant, it gradually moves them into that role. It helps their confidence, and, really, it's not as scary for them when they start working with patients."

TRYING A CAREER ON FOR SIZE

That was the case for Lebrana Sparks, a senior in the TRACK program.

Sparks spent the past summer working at the hospital — assisting a secretary, filing paperwork, answering phone calls, cleaning, organizing stock rooms and more. She said working at the hospital kept her busy; no two days were the same. And even though the work wasn't clinically focused, just having a presence in the hospital helped her feel more prepared to be around patients.

In December of their senior year, students take the CNA exam. If they pass, they can begin working with patients each morning and attending their academic classes each afternoon.

"It got me into the inside of what the hospital is actually like," Sparks said. "I think it's really cool how every patient is different, and I'm excited to get to know everyone I get to work with every day."

Sparks said the blend of hands-on work experience and classroom education is beneficial to her. She hopes to eventually become a neonatal nurse, and although she's keeping

her options open, she thinks she'll return to Rockcastle County after college.

She plans to continue working at the hospital over breaks and encourages other students to enroll in the apprenticeship program.

"You get to see what nursing is like, and you can decide if it's the job for you," Sparks said. "I don't feel like there's any other way to go. I'd rather be working at the hospital, figuring out what I want to do with my career, than flipping burgers. I absolutely love my job, and I'd encourage anyone to do it."

PART OF A STATEWIDE EFFORT

The TRACK program in Rockcastle County is part of a larger statewide effort. More than 300 students have completed — or are currently enrolled — in the pre-apprenticeship program since it began in 2013.

Mary Taylor, industry training and development specialist for the Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Career and Technical Education, works to encourage employers to participate and helps set up their programs.

TRACK started in fields like manufacturing, welding, machining, electrical and carpentry. Rockcastle County is one of the first in the state to pursue the program in the health field, and the first for CNAs. The other health-related TRACK program operates at Jefferson County Public Schools, where students work as medical assistants alongside school nurses.

Taylor said the state is working to expand its TRACK health care offerings — there are far more interested students than there are employers currently participating. And interest goes beyond patient care, she said. Hospitals need workers to provide maintenance, IT, billing and culinary services.

"There are so many areas we can go into the health care field," Taylor said. "It's an opportunity to grow your own workforce, and it cuts down on relocation costs and recruiting costs, and improves retention."

It also offers employers a chance to train students how they want, before they've learned bad habits elsewhere.

"When we talk about work-based learning, there are several opportunities for students to



learn 21st century skills, soft skills like getting to work on time, being team players," said David Horseman, the Kentucky Department of Education's associate commissioner of career and technical education.

"The youth apprenticeship program is a gem," Horseman said. "They [students] get it all there. We call it 'career and tech AP [Advanced Placement]' because these students have a leg up."

'I WANT TO COME BACK'

Lindsay Mink was among the first cohort to complete the TRACK program in Rockcastle in 2019. She's now a freshman studying nursing at Union College in Barbourville.

She says her classes at Rockcastle County Area Technology Center, paired with her experiences in patient care at Rockcastle Regional, have given her a head start on her college classes.

"Some nursing students don't have that experience, they don't know how to interact with patients, or how to cope when one is very ill," said Mink, who continues to work at the hospital every other weekend and when she's on breaks from classes.

"I have a guaranteed job when I get out of college and scholarships that will help cover tuition," she said. "It's like a family there and that makes it so much better — it's why I want to come back." ■

Katheran Wasson is a Northern Kentucky-based writer and editor who covers business, health, agriculture and life in Kentucky.



FOCUS ON
THE FUTURE

Meet Isaiah

“Isaiah Pruitt is an incredible young leader with a deep understanding of the critical issues that face not only his generation, but also our agricultural community and state as a whole. Isaiah is a servant leader and the perfect example of what it means to say that you can accomplish a great deal when you don’t care who gets the credit.”

BRANDON REED
KENTUCKY STATE REPRESENTATIVE

MAKING EVERY MOMENT COUNT

LaRue County Teen Advocates for the Health, Safety of Kentucky's Farmers

By Kristy Horine

From the outside, Isaiah Pruitt, of Buffalo, Kentucky, looks like any normal teenager.

His mother, Farrah, is a member of the LaRue County school board.

His father, Jeremy, works as a car hauler at a truck plant in Louisville.

Isaiah, a high school junior, works and plays like many who have gone before him in this rural part of the Commonwealth.

But, beneath the surface, there lies something a bit special about Isaiah Pruitt: At just the age of 17, he's already a passionate advocate for the health and safety of Kentucky's farmers. And, it's a passion that's only likely to further develop and grow.

Straight Talk

In 2017, Isaiah's mother had a little straight talk with him.

"These are the last four years of your child-life," she told him. "The next four years from now will just breeze by and you're going to be an adult and out in the real world. Right now, every grade counts. Everything's on record. Everybody's going to see this."

Isaiah let her words sink in.

Then he walked to his room, found a piece of paper and wrote down all the things about his life he wanted to change.

He knew his weak spots and jotted those down.

He knew his goals and put them to paper.

He chose one line from the list and went over the letters of each word with a thick, black Sharpie.

Public Speaking.

"I didn't care how I went about it, I just wanted to get over that public speaking hump because my whole life I've jumped on and off of wanting to be involved in politics in some way. But I can't be involved in politics if I can't talk in front of a few thousand people," Pruitt says.

Back then, Pruitt couldn't even speak in front of 15 people.

"I hate having a weakness," he says. "A weakness is something I want to get rid of."

'An Advocate for Agriculture'

During his freshman year at LaRue County High School (LCHS), he had the opportunity to do just that through participation in the high school's chapter of the National FFA Organization (FFA). Formerly known as the Future Farmers of America, the national youth organization, with local chapters in all 50 states, provides leadership, personal growth and career success training through agricultural education.

"I love agriculture. I consider myself an advocate for agriculture. My family has been involved in that for a long time," Pruitt says. "I think the farmer is one of the most important people in this world. They feed us, they give us the necessities of life. While not living on a farm, I've always had the opportunity to work on a farm and to see agriculture at its best and at its worst."

He traces his lineage in the agriculture field back through both sides of his family.

His paternal grandfather was a dairy farmer. His maternal grandfather owns a beef farm in addition to working in real estate. His mother was involved in FFA during her years in high school and served as a state officer.

His family's home — located between Mount Sherman and Buffalo — is surrounded by a granary, a beef farm and now a hemp farm. And, even though he worked on nearby farms, he wasn't satisfied with having just a cursory experience.

"When I joined FFA that was a big thing. I was equipped with all the right tools to succeed," he says. "The first thing I really wanted to do was to learn how to be a public speaker, and I wanted to learn more about agriculture. I want to learn



Isaiah Pruitt speaks on Sept. 18, 2019 at a ceremony celebrating National Farm Safety and Health Week and Farmer Suicide Awareness Day. The event, held at the Kentucky State Capitol in Frankfort, included comments from Kentucky Agriculture Commissioner Ryan Quarles and Rep. Brandon Reed (R-Hodgenville).

something new every day. I knew there were cows. I knew there were goats. I knew there were pigs. I knew there were chickens. But FFA is so much more.”

Pruitt found out how much more there was to FFA when Dale Dobson, the safety administrator with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture’s Division of Agricultural Education and Outreach in Frankfort, approached the high school’s FFA with a project idea. The project would end up being a part of Pruitt’s supervised agricultural experience, or SAE.

A Perfect Match

According to the Kentucky FFA office, students can grow personally through training in the classroom, leadership development opportunities in the statewide student association and through the experiential, service and/or work-based SAE. These projects provide students with real-world experience and the ability to put the skills that they’ve learned in class to work.

Dobson, the safety administrator, needed help with a community safety issue.

It ended up being a perfect match for Pruitt.

LaRue County is a patchwork of fields that produce winter wheat, soybeans and corn. Grain bins — structures that house the harvested grains — are plentiful. So is the danger that grain bins can present.

“The biggest thing is that when corn is harvested, it usually has moisture,” Pruitt says. “Just like if you left a bowl of cereal out on the counter, those pieces would float to the top. Eventually, it would make a crusty layer

and that’s what happens with corn. It locks and creates a shelf and it never looks like it’s dangerous. If you hit one hole or crack in that shelf, you could fall down with it and, as PG [rated] as possible, you could get ground up in the auger that’s moving the corn out of that bin. Losing a leg, losing an arm, suffocating from getting stuck in the corn. There is no solid ground in corn, but falling into corn is preventable.”

Pruitt helped to develop a safety kit that included a harness and a respirator that farmers could wear when working in grain bins. If they lost their footing, the harness would only allow the farmer to fall so far. The respirator could keep trapped farmers from breathing in corn dust, which is known to cause lung complications.

Once Pruitt determined what needed to be included in the safety kit, it was time to begin fundraising efforts — which involved public speaking.

“My mom said to go in front of a mirror and speak. She said my biggest fear was always going to be myself. If I could look in a mirror and speak in front of myself, everything would come so much easier. That helped tremendously,” Pruitt says. “Then she told me, ‘Don’t screw up when you go to the [fundraising] meeting.’”

Pruitt laughs.

“I screwed up, but I kept on going,” he says.

He helped to raise more than \$4,000 to purchase 15 harnesses and 30 respirators for farmers. Pruitt also helped to organize a safety training program to teach local farmers how to use the equipment.

Within the first nine months of his high school career, Isaiah Pruitt had not only

overcome his fear of public speaking, but also proved his worth as an effective orator.

But he didn't stop there.

During the 2018-2019 school year, Pruitt worked with Dobson again — this time on generating awareness about farmer suicide.

Pruitt had a cameo role in a public service announcement produced by the Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention, and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. The PSA encouraged farmers to seek help when the pressures of farming seemed too much to bear. The video included contact information for a suicide hotline and communicated to farmers that they are not alone; that they are appreciated and needed.

And again, Pruitt took the project a step further.

He helped draft House Concurrent Resolution 62, which designated Sept. 18 as Farmer Suicide Prevention Day across Kentucky and served as an outspoken advocate for the resolution.

Making Every Moment Count

When he's not advocating in Frankfort on agricultural and community issues, Pruitt is living out the advice his mother gave him at the very beginning of high school — making every grade and every moment count for something good.

He currently represents the LCHS student body as a member of the Student Advisory Council, a group that serves as “the direct line of communication between the students and our administration,” he says. He's also a peer leader with the LaRue County Sources of Strength, the local chapter of a national wellness program that uses evidence-based practices to aid in the prevention of suicide, violence, bullying and substance use. Peer leaders share messages of hope, help and strength with their classmates.

According to Misty Bivens, Pruitt's agriculture teacher and FFA adviser, he puts in the time and effort necessary to complete his projects and initiatives with excellence.

He was the top scorer in the state FFA Agricultural Communications team contest and earned an individual silver in the national

contest. He was also a member of the Milk Quality and Products winning team and silvered individually in the national contest as well.

Pruitt has also developed a podcast — Beyond Ag — which is now available on iTunes, Spotify and other podcast platforms.

“I have always been passionate about agriculture. I have been especially passionate about how politics affect agriculture,” Pruitt says. “This podcast will help give insight to the agricultural community on how these decisions affect farmers and agriculturalists. I will speak to legislators, members of the executive administration, leaders in agriculture and farmers.”

Most recently, Pruitt ran for office in the YMCA's Kentucky Youth Assembly (KYA), an annual event that teaches the Commonwealth's youth how government works and how they can grow to be a part of it. While he was not elected to the office of governor in the KYA, he has served as a delegate — a representative who voted and spoke on bills.

“I saw people get up there and talk about bills they had made and different interests they had. I really wanted to do that. I got interested in how state politics and how the Kentucky constitution and Supreme Court works,” Pruitt says. “The big thing is that KYA teaches you that representatives don't just sit in their offices all day, they get out there and they write these different bills, they go to meetings.”

In short, they make a difference for the people of Kentucky — one of Pruitt's long-term goals.

After high school, he plans to attend the University of Kentucky where he will major in agricultural education and complete a minor in agricultural economics.

Eventually, he wants to attend law school, become an attorney and work with agricultural companies and on issues that directly or indirectly impact the farming community.

He says he might even one day become Kentucky's commissioner of agriculture — where he could have an even greater impact on the health, safety and well-being of the Commonwealth's farmers. ■

Kristy Horine is a Kentucky-based creative and freelance writer whose main focus is to faithfully share the stories of her fellow Kentuckians.

Baptist Health Corbin's Holcomb garners national award for rural telehealth initiatives

By Jackie Hollenkamp Bentley

Over the course of Chris Holcomb's 20-year career as a licensed therapist, he's witnessed some of the challenges faced by those with a mental illness or substance use disorder.

It's a situation he calls tragic.

"Many of their outpatient facilities and programs will have sometimes up to three- and four-month waiting lists," said Holcomb, now the assistant vice president of Behavioral Health Services for Baptist Health Corbin. "I've seen that, for individuals trying to also get into chemical dependency residential treatment, [that process] would sometimes take up to six months. When you have that window of opportunity that is open and you have people that are asking for help, it's such a travesty to not be able to get them the help they truly need."

So in 2016, Holcomb began work to bring much-needed care closer to patients in rural Kentucky by establishing a telehealth program across primary care facilities and adolescent treatment residential centers in seven counties in Southeast Kentucky. Adding similar services to additional counties is also in the works.

"Due to the struggles with the transportation costs and just travel time, in general, I felt it was a way of giving back and helping to get outside of the four walls of a hospital setting and being more customer friendly by trying to go toward the customer as opposed to having the customer come to us," Holcomb said.

Holcomb's work is also partly driven by personal experience.

His father, a Vietnam veteran, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Living in rural Appalachia restricted his access to care — the nearest Veterans Affairs health facility was two hours away.

For his efforts to expand access points to rural mental health services, Holcomb was named Kentucky's 2019 Community Star by the National Organization of State

Offices of Rural Health. He's one of 44 individuals and organizations from across the country who were honored on November 21 — National Rural Health Day — for their work serving the health needs of the nearly 60 million people who live in rural America.

Ernie Scott, the director of the Kentucky Office of Rural Health, said he applauds Holcomb's national recognition.

"On behalf of the team at the Kentucky Office of Rural Health, we are excited to pay tribute to the work Chris is doing across the telehealth space," Scott said. "His own personal experiences — seeing his father struggle to find care — have clearly impacted his work and inspired a passion to help others."

Holcomb said he was shocked by the recognition.

"I'm very humbled and honored to be nominated in the first place, and then, of course, to have been chosen for the award," Holcomb said.

But, the honor came as no surprise to his supervisors at Baptist Health Corbin.

"We are so proud of his accomplishments," said Anthony Powers, president of Baptist Health Corbin. "Chris's contributions to rural health and the behavioral health program he helped to develop at Baptist Health Corbin are most deserving of recognition and appreciation."

The stories of all 44 Community Stars can be read online at www.powerofrural.org. ■





Mercy Health clinics earn notice for hypertension control rates

By Jackie Hollenkamp Bentley

Three Mercy Health rural health clinics — located in Beattyville, Clay City and Irvine — can now count themselves among some of the top health care facilities in the country in the fight against high blood pressure.

The clinics are among the 17 clinicians, practices and health systems recognized in December as champions of the Million Hearts Hypertension Control Challenge.

Launched in 2012, the competition is part of a larger, national initiative — co-sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services — to promote cardiovascular health. Health care providers and facilities across the country were recognized as champions for consistently working to help at least 80 percent of their patients achieve blood pressure control.

“Everybody got on board,” said Dr. Julie Kennon, a primary care physician at Mercy Health-Powell County Primary Care in Clay City. “I think we got ahead of the game and put forth a lot of effort ... for that reason I’m not surprised [by the national accolades].”

Kennon said clinic staff began to focus attention on the hypertension control goals

in 2015, recognizing that treating high blood pressure can lead to lower heart disease and stroke occurrences among their patients.

Staff at the three clinics scheduled patients for frequent re-check visits, offered easy-to-schedule re-check appointments and encouraged patients to continue monitoring their blood pressure at home.

The result: All three clinics achieved control rates of 85 percent in 2017 and 89 percent in 2018 — a significant accomplishment since more than 40 percent of the clinics’ patients were diagnosed with hypertension.

“We knew as a system, as an organization, that in order to make the health of our community better, this is a measure we needed to be striving for,” said Morgan Fowler, director of operations for primary care at Mercy Health-Marcum and Wallace Hospital, which owns and operates the three clinics.

Marcum and Wallace President Trena Stocker said this project aligns well with the hospital’s mission.

“It’s really instrumental for us to show the impact we have on the community and this is a perfect example of what we can do,” she said. ■

Jackie Hollenkamp Bentley is a Louisville-based freelance writer who covers all things Kentucky.



Baptist Health Madisonville welcomes children of all abilities to new pediatric play park

By Deanna Lee Sherman

For 14-year-old Abbey Wood, a little bit of fun goes a long way.

Fortunately for Wood, who is a therapy patient at Baptist Health Madisonville, the fun is not too far away from home.

She and her family live less than 10 minutes from the hospital's new pediatric play park. The playground, named the Rog Badgett All Inclusive Pediatric Play Park and located on the hospital's campus, opened in June 2019.

That's where Abbey enjoys an accessible merry-go-round — "[s]he smiles every time she's on the merry-go-round," her mother Jessica Wood said — and a swing.

"It gives not only her, but any special needs child, something to do, but without having to drive an hour or two away for an activity," Wood said. "It gives her something to do, to get out of her wheelchair and to have fun."

The playground features a rubberized play pad, on which wheelchairs and strollers can easily roll, and multiple pieces of equipment that children can use while in or out of their wheelchairs.

The design of the park means "that children of all abilities can play side by side together," said Marianne Ramsey, director of sports medicine and rehabilitation at Baptist Health Madisonville.

Ramsey said for children with special needs and their families, it's important to achieve this kind of equality.

"These kiddos work so hard to complete tasks that you and I take for granted. Their access to play should not have to be difficult as well," she said.

PARK'S ORIGINS

The park's origins date back a few years ago to a birthday party held for one of Ramsey's patients. The party took place at a local park that lacked play equipment that the child, who used a wheelchair, could interact with. As a result, the child remained seated beneath a pavilion — away from his guests.

"The child had to remain in his wheelchair throughout the party because none of the equipment was remotely appropriate for him to even attempt and

the ground was mulch and his wheelchair would not roll very well over it," Ramsey said. "He had to sit and watch everyone else have a fun time at his party, versus being able to play with them."

After visiting several other playgrounds at schools and throughout the region, Ramsey said it became clear to her and others that there was a need for an all-inclusive playground in the Madisonville area.

"It was extremely disheartening to see the absence of any equipment that would have been appropriate for these children in our area," Ramsey said. "Baptist Health Pediatric Therapy Care envisioned a playground where children of all abilities could play side by side, sharing a wide variety of activities."

Raising money for the park took years, with the hospital's pediatric therapy care department taking the lead on planning and executing a series of fundraisers.

The Baptist Health Foundation, too, "was key in getting us across the finish line," Ramsey said. The group organized a fundraising campaign with the Hopkins County Young Professionals and worked to secure a donation from Madisonville's Tourism Committee and Advisory Board. The foundation also received several private individual and civic group donations specifically earmarked for the playground.

'INFORMAL NETWORK OF SUPPORT'

In addition to providing a recreational outlet to area children — it's open to all children, no matter their ability level — and patients of the hospital's pediatric therapy care team, Ramsey said the playground can serve "as an informal network of support for our parents and a place where day camps or field trips can take place or support groups can meet."

One of the park's greatest benefits, Ramsey said, is the public awareness it has raised about the need for all parks to have inclusive elements so that all children can learn to play together. (In fact, some upgrades to public parks in Madisonville have now been completed making them more accessible.)

"It gives these kids a place where they can show other children what they can do," Ramsey said. ■



Meet

Amber Osborne

LCSW

Therapist – Billing/Clinical Supervisor
Astra Behavioral Health
Bardstown, Kentucky



■ **When did your service begin?**

September 2019

■ **What are your job responsibilities at your NHSC practice site?**

Counsel clients and patients to assist in overcoming dependencies, adjusting to life, and making choices; develop and implement treatment plans based on clinical experience and knowledge and collaboration with other staff members; evaluate the effectiveness of counseling programs and clients' progress in resolving identified problems; and, conduct monthly billing supervision meetings with supervisees and/or weekly clinical supervision.

■ **How did you first learn about NHSC programs?**

Through my current employer.

■ **What does it mean to you to be a NHSC participant?**

This is an opportunity to serve the community I live in and have the opportunity to pay off my student loans. I'm not sure paying off my student loans would have ever been possible without this program.

■ **What is the most important thing/lesson that you learned during your NHSC service?**

I've only been in the program for a few months, but I have worked within the community for nearly two years and in that time I have come to understand how community issues can impact a rural community and, specifically, how addiction can be disruptive to a community.

■ **What advice would you offer to someone who is considering participating in NHSC programs?**

Apply for all the programs you qualify for, because you can't be considered if you don't apply. I would also recommend being sure that you are prepared to stay with that company/population for the duration of the program and be committed to serving the needs of the community before applying. I would also recommend getting everything turned in as early as possible. ■

If you have participated in a National Health Service Corps program or know of someone who has, please let us know. We're looking for participants to feature in future issues of *The Bridge*.





On a Crusade for Better Health

Twin Lakes CEO spearheads health initiatives throughout Grayson County

By Michael McGill

Wayne Meriwether can pretty easily pinpoint the initial moment that helped to spark his crusade against smoking in public in Grayson County.

It involved his teenage daughter, Kelsey.

Back in 2013, Meriwether had just taken over as CEO of Twin Lakes Regional Medical Center in Leitchfield. His wife and daughter remained in Henderson — until Kelsey graduated from high school later in the spring.

One night after Kelsey finally arrived in Leitchfield, the family went out to eat at a local Mexican restaurant. As Meriwether's daughter walked into the restaurant, she asked, "What's that smell?"

It was cigarette smoke.

Meriwether remembers telling her, "Kelsey, they allow smoking here." At the time, the restaurant was divided into smoking and non-smoking sections.

Henderson, where the Meriwethers had just moved from, had passed a smoke-free ordinance in 2006 which outlawed smoking in workplaces and in enclosed public places. Meriwether's children had little-to-no firsthand experience seeing, smelling or ingesting cigarette smoke in public. And, they grew up to be nonsmokers.

"I saw it in Henderson, in a short period of time, you can have such an influence on young people's lives," Meriwether says of the ordinance's impact. "You know, in less than a decade, you go from young people being exposed to smoke ... to the fact that, well, they probably don't even know what it is. So I saw it in my own kids."

Meriwether wanted other people — his new neighbors in Grayson County and especially the region's young people — to have that same access to

smoke-free air.

He worked on the smoke-free initiative for nearly two years. He faced obstacles along the way. But, by late 2017, all three of the cities in Grayson County had adopted smoke-free laws.

That campaign is just one of the many health-related projects that Meriwether has spearheaded as a tireless advocate for health, wellness and healthy living in Grayson County. The work hasn't always been easy, but it's been part of his personal mission.

"As a hospital CEO, if I can't get excited about trying to have an influence and change things to make people healthier ... I probably shouldn't be in this job," he says.

'To Protect the Health of All Our Residents'

Tackling the adoption of smoke-free ordinances throughout Grayson County wasn't something that Meriwether did single handedly.

Instead, it was the work of the Population Health Committee, which he chairs.

The committee, made up of representatives from local industry, local government, the county health department, the county school system, the county extension service, the county tourism office, the hospital, civic leaders and, now, law enforcement — takes the top health concerns identified by Twin Lakes' federally-mandated community health needs assessment and finds ways to address those challenges locally. Committee members limit their efforts to dealing with health issues that they think they can have a legitimate influence on.

It turns out, smoking has regularly topped that

list of local health concerns.

So, in November 2015, members of the Population Health Committee publicly announced plans to approach the Grayson County Fiscal Court at the start of the new year with a request to adopt an ordinance prohibiting smoking inside local workplaces and enclosed public spaces. The law would have no impact on smoking in private homes or outdoor spaces.

“A smoke-free ordinance would not force anyone to stop smoking,” Meriwether told the *Russellville News-Democrat & Leader* at the time. “However, everyone has the right to breathe smoke-free air at work and in public places. We hope the Grayson County Fiscal Court will take action to protect the health of all our residents.”

In Meriwether’s thinking, smoking in public has never been a rights issue. It’s always been a health issue.

“We were just saying, people that don’t smoke have rights, too. It’s a health issue,” he says. “And, you know, somebody’s right to breathe clean air trumps somebody’s right to damage their health. And we’re not saying they can’t smoke, but there should be parameters where they have places to smoke and not in confined areas, public buildings and so forth.”

Population Health Committee members appeared to have the public on their side: An online survey they conducted found overwhelming support (82 percent) for the establishment of a countywide smoke-free ordinance. Even more people (96 percent) agreed that they preferred to work, shop and eat at businesses that did not allow smoking inside.

And, the proposed ordinance was similar to what nearly 50 other communities across Kentucky had passed since 2004.

The fiscal court magistrates, it turns out, saw otherwise.

At a January 2016 meeting, the magistrates failed to adopt the ordinance. In fact, a full vote on the ordinance never materialized; the motion to create it died for lack of a second.

That came after magistrates had time to look over information packets — containing facts about the dangers of secondhand smoke, results of the public survey and information about smoke-free laws — assembled by the Population Health Committee.

After an address that night from Meriwether.

After comments from other hospital staff members.

And after presentations from Grayson County High School students.

One magistrate said it wasn’t the fiscal court’s responsibility to tell citizens what they can and cannot do.

Another magistrate said the people of Grayson County should decide — by ballot — whether smoking should be allowed in local businesses and in public places. Three other magistrates agreed with those sentiments.

The judge-executive also said he wouldn’t support the ordinance. He said any decision to ban smoking in public places should be made by business owners, not the government. He also interjected race and then-President Barack Obama into the discussion. (He later apologized for those comments.)

A lone magistrate, who had managed tobacco production for three decades, offered the only support for the ordinance. He said he received calls from his constituents requesting that he do so.

Meriwether sat there and didn’t say a word.

It was a setback.

“It’s a shame,” he says, looking back. “A lot of it’s education. And people just not wanting to change. It’s a shame — people killing themselves and some of them you can’t convince otherwise.”

Members of the Population Health Committee could have given up. It would have been the easy thing to do.

“But,” as Meriwether puts it, “there were other avenues for us.”

Those other avenues were the individual cities of Grayson County — Caneyville, Clarkson and Leitchfield. If the county wouldn’t pass a smoke-free ordinance, Meriwether’s thinking was, the county’s three cities could be systematically targeted. They *might* act.

‘People Just Got to Try’

First up: the Leitchfield City Council.

Meriwether approached council members in early March 2016 with a request to adopt a smoke-free ordinance. Most council members — some of whom were smokers — were supportive of the measure.

The first reading of the ordinance passed 5-1 in early September. The second and final reading passed 4-1 later that month. The law, which restricted smoking in enclosed public places, went into effect on Jan. 1, 2017.

Meriwether points to city council member Kelley Stevenson as one of the reasons for the ordinance’s passage. In addition to serving on the Leitchfield City Council, Stevenson also sat on the Population Health Committee and “became our champion for smoke free,” Meriwether says. “And you really need a champion — a local champion — when you’re going to do something like that.”

Next up: Clarkson.

Meriwether brought an official proposal to the Clarkson City Commission at the start of 2017.

(Commissioners had toyed a year earlier with the idea of a ban on smoking in public. That effort had died.)

Clarkson's mayor voiced some initial disapproval of the proposed ordinance. She shared that a number of local business owners had contacted her complaining that they didn't want the city to tell them what to do inside their private businesses.

Another commissioner — a local businesswoman who was a smoker herself — said adoption of the smoke-free law was all about “what you want your city to be.” Two years earlier, in 2015, she had converted her city restaurant to smoke free. She said she didn't regret the decision.

The first reading of the ordinance passed unanimously in February. And, four months after it was first introduced, the citywide smoking ban — which outlawed smoking in enclosed public places *and* in workplaces — was passed in May on a narrow 3-2 vote. It remains the most comprehensive smoke-free ordinance passed in Grayson County.

Finally: Caneyville.

In July 2017, Meriwether addressed the Caneyville City Commission and urged them to become the third city in Grayson County to enact restrictions on smoking in public.

Across several months' of meetings, commissioners publicly expressed concerns that Meriwether had heard before: How can commissioners tell businesses what they can do on their own property?

He responded as he had before, “Workers have the right to work in a healthy environment that is smoke free.”

He also advised commissioners that they could limit the scope of any ordinance they passed. They could, for instance, adopt an ordinance that would only prohibit smoking in public places, not in businesses.

By December, commissioners acted. They adopted a far more limited ordinance that only prohibited smoking inside city-owned and city-controlled properties. The law also allowed businesses in the city to prohibit smoking on their premises.

Something was better than nothing at all.

“I guess the point here is, if you can pass a smoke-free ordinance in Grayson County, in three different cities, as conservative as this county is and as entrenched as smoking is in this state, you ought to be able to do it anywhere,” he says. “I mean, people just got to try, they've got to work at it, get people behind it.”

In 2017, Meriwether and the City of Leitchfield were both honored by the Kentucky Center for Smoke-Free Policy (KCSP) for their efforts to promote smoke-free communities.



Twin Lakes Regional Medical Center CEO Wayne Meriwether accepts the Lee T. Todd, Jr. Smoke-Free Hero Award in 2017 at the Kentucky Center for Smoke-Free Policy's annual conference.

Meriwether was presented with the Lee T. Todd, Jr. Smoke-Free Hero Award, which annually recognizes “courage, leadership, perseverance and continuous commitment to smoke- and tobacco-free environments in the face of adversity.”

Leitchfield leaders were given the Smoke-Free Indoor Air Endeavor Award for “leadership in promoting the health of the citizens of Leitchfield” by enacting a smoke-free ordinance.

A year later, the City of Clarkson was also presented with KCSP's Smoke-Free Indoor Air Endeavor Award.

‘We're Here to Heal the Sick’

Meriwether and the Population Health Committee haven't slowed down since then.

To address community concerns about nutrition and obesity, they've encouraged both local industries and local schools to educate on MyPlate, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's curriculum on dietary guidelines.

They've also teamed up with the Master Gardener Association of Grayson County to develop the Wallace Avenue Community Garden. Located just behind the hospital, the garden, which opened in 2018, provides raised bed plots for community member use during the growing season. Plots are rented for a nominal fee.

Members of the Master Gardener Association — led by Meriwether's wife, Carol — planned the garden and solicited donations of supplies from area businesses. County inmates supplied the labor to make the garden a reality.

Drugs and addiction were also issues regularly appearing on Twin Lakes' community health needs

assessments. Members of the Population Health Committee, however, weren't sure there was much they could do to tackle the community- and region-wide epidemic.

But, Meriwether soon learned about medical stabilization programs — detox programs that assist patients with substance use disorders in managing their withdrawal. The programs also address any underlying medical issues that patients have. Meriwether saw an opening for the hospital to step in and help.

In early 2018, the hospital instituted a medical stabilization program which has now treated 290 people. Patients typically stay for two-to-three days. And, program staff aid them in entering a long-term rehab program after that.

Nearly 70 percent will enter rehab, Meriwether says.

A little more than a year later, in June 2019, the hospital opened its second addiction-related service: the Maternal Opioid Medical Stabilization (MOMS) program, which offers treatment and assistance to expectant mothers suffering from opioid use disorder.

The MOMS program — modeled after Norton Healthcare's Norton Maternal Opiate Substance Treatment Program — was a physician-led initiative. Husband-and-wife clinicians Dr. Sam Buck and nurse practitioner Kristin Buck approached Meriwether with serious concerns: Around 5 percent of the babies born at the hospital each year were born to addicted mothers. They couldn't stand to see it and wanted to do what they could to alter the trend.

Meriwether supported the idea. The hospital's other OB-GYNs also agreed to participate.

And, since the program's inception, 11 expectant mothers have participated and four babies have been born drug free.

"That's just a success story in its own," Meriwether says.

More recently, the hospital has added a hepatitis C treatment program and a medication assisted treatment program.

Few rural hospitals across the Commonwealth offer such services.

"You know, our mission, we're here to heal the sick, relieve pain and suffering, improve the quality of life in our community. And we just look for ways to do that," Meriwether says. "Now, you can't do everything

you like to do because you got to be able to make money at it, too. So first, any new service or service line that we offer, one, there has to be a need and we have to figure out a way to make money doing it. Now some things, if you're making money one place and you lose a little money someplace else, you do that, but overall, we can't stay in business unless we have a healthy bottom line or a bottom line, [period]."

'My Whole Career in Health Care'

That Meriwether made his way to a CEO position at rural hospital in the Fiddling Capital of Kentucky was anything but preordained.

He grew up in Ballard County, in the town of

Bandana. ("You know, if you're from a real little area, you say you're from that county," Meriwether says with a laugh.) His father was what he calls the "typical rural breadwinner" — he worked for the public works department and operated a small farm where he raised beef cattle and tobacco. Meriwether's mother also worked outside the house.

"Pretty meager means," he says, looking back at his childhood. "You know, but we always thought we had

everything we needed. We did."

Growing up, Meriwether remembers his father sharing a particular bit of advice: "Son, if you want to be better than me, you need to go off to college and learn to live away from home, and go someplace like Murray [State]."

He ended up doing just that: Meriwether earned a business degree from the state university that was a little more than 60 miles southeast of his hometown. (It's where he met his wife. And, it's his daughter's alma mater, too. His son is a graduate of the University of Kentucky.)

He remembers receiving just one job offer following graduation — for a position in a hospital setting.

"I knew nothing about health care," he admits. "And, I've since spent my whole career in health care."

He took that first job as a housekeeping manager at Good Samaritan Hospital in Lexington. He was working for a contractor.

Over the next decade, he was shuffled between a few hospitals before being transferred to Methodist Hospital in Henderson. There, he was eventually named a regional manager, a position that required

"You know, our mission, we're here to heal the sick, relieve pain and suffering, improve the quality of life in our community. And we just look for ways to do that," Meriwether says.

travel around the state.

When he and his wife were finally interested in starting a family, he began the hunt for a job that would limit his travels away from home. He ended up as the housekeeping and laundry manager at St. Mary's Hospital, just across the border in nearby Evansville, Indiana.

But, less than two years later, Methodist came calling. They needed a materials management director to oversee, among other things, the procurement of the hospital's equipment and supplies. Was he interested? He took the job in 1988 and remained in that position for nearly 20 years.

When a close friend announced his retirement as Methodist's assistant executive director (the chief operating officer role), Meriwether was gently nudged by his mentor and fishing buddy, Dr. John Logan, Methodist's long-serving chief medical officer, into considering the job. Logan believed Meriwether had the potential to do more. (At the time, the assistant executive director position was one of the hospital's top-three executive-level positions, responsible for the supervision of 11 hospital departments and just under 400 employees.)

He was offered the COO position in 2007. For two years, he worked full time during the day and studied full time at night to earn a master's degree, which was required for the job. He found time for his family in between.

"A younger person could get all the work done easy, quicker, but it took me a while," he says. "But I was a much better student 30 years away from undergrad than I was when I was an undergrad, I'll tell you that."

Making the transition from department director to managing multiple departments and scores of employees was an easy one, Meriwether says, because he was "great friends" with most of the staff already.

"They wanted me in that role," he says. "And so, my team of all those operation departments, man, that was a great group."

Among his proudest accomplishments as COO, Meriwether says, was working with St. Anthony's Hospice to open the Lucy Smith King Care Center at the hospital — an inpatient center for the terminally ill. The facility just celebrated its 10th anniversary.

After about five years as COO, a recruiter started calling. There was a soon-to-be opening for a CEO at Twin Lakes Regional Medical Center in Leitchfield, the recruiter said. The hospital's long-time hospital administrator, Stephen Meredith, was retiring.

Meriwether admits he had never been to Leitchfield before — even though it's just a 90-minute

drive from Henderson. And, he says, he wasn't actively looking for a job, but, as he puts it, he eventually "threw my hat in the ring."

He was one of 100 applicants for the position. A Louisville-based search firm helped to narrow the list of candidates to nine and five were initially invited for in-person interviews. After candidates were interviewed, Meriwether was named one of two finalists.

He was offered the CEO job in late 2012 and began work in January 2013.

"And, you know, they took a chance on me because I had never been a CEO," he says. "Boy, it's been a wonderful experience for me. I've gotten to do so many things that I couldn't have done otherwise ... Man, it's been a blessing."

Under his leadership, the hospital has repeatedly been recognized for patient safety and quality by The Leapfrog Group, an independent industry watchdog, and the Kentucky Hospital Association.

It was named a Top 100 Rural & Community Hospital by The Chartis Center for Rural Health in 2017 and 2018.

In 2017, the hospital made Becker's Healthcare's list of "150 Great Places to Work in Healthcare."

And, it's also been designated as a Level IV Trauma Center.

Meriwether calls Twin Lakes a "jewel" for the community. Most people in Grayson County realize that, he says.

"We're not perfect. I mean, we make mistakes just like any other hospital. But we're having a tremendous impact on people's lives," Meriwether says. "If we weren't here, you know, if you cut out rural hospitals and people have to travel farther for their health care, it's going to cost people lives."

‘Not Everybody Gets That Opportunity’

When he was younger, Meriwether confesses to regularly thinking, "Man, I can't wait till I can retire."

Today, after more than 40 years in the health care industry, he acknowledges that retirement is finally in his near future.

But he's not rushing toward it — not like he might have done when he was younger.

Instead, his mind is mulling over all the things he *won't* be able to do once he *does* retire.

"When I'm no longer in this role, I'm not going to be able to do some of the things I'm doing now," he says. "And any time you can have an influence on your community and make a difference in people's lives, you know, that's pretty exciting."

"Not everybody gets that opportunity." ■

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