

Faces and Places - A Place for Familiar F.A.C.E.S.

In the book *Toward One Oregon: Rural-Urban Interdependence and the Evolution of a State* the authors present two definitions of “rural”:

A core urban area with a population of fifty thousand or more and consisting of one or more counties, including the counties containing the urban core, plus any adjacent counties that have a high degree of social and economic integration with the urban core, as measured by commuting patterns (Office of Management and Budget 2000, U.S. Census Bureau). Urban counties contain 76% of Oregon’s population, and 18% of its land area.

Urban places [are] those places with twenty-five hundred or more people that met certain density criteria, including a core of at least one thousand people per square mile. Open countryside and places with fewer than twenty-five hundred people are considered rural. (U.S. Census Bureau) Urban Oregon contains 69% of the population and 1% of the land.

What does it mean to live in a state in which the majority of its residents live in 1% of its land area? What does it mean for the people, children and communities who live in the other 99% of the state’s geographic region?

Last week Ta Vang, our new OregonASK VISTA, and I went to Falls City. Falls City is located ten miles outside of Dallas in the Willamette Valley. 960 people live in Falls City, including roughly 154 school-aged children and youth. 78% of these children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Despite the evidence of poverty in Falls City, there exists a strong community spirit. I saw a piece of this spirit in Amy Houghtaling.

Amy, like many leaders in small rural communities across the state and country, wears many hats. Amy is the mayor of Falls City, she is the director of the 21st CCLC afterschool program F.A.C.E.S., she is the wife of a high school teacher (who also doubles as a school administrator), a parent, the Vice President of the parent group, and a member of the Falls City Arts Council. Despite this lengthy list, I wonder whether I have listed all of her hats, perhaps it would be most appropriate to add that Amy is also a community member of Falls City. As Amy put it, “if you’re a leader in small town you’re wearing many hats, and I can’t think of any leader in this town that’s not.”

F.A.C.E.S., like the city itself, is a special program. F.A.C.E.S (Family Academics Community and Enrichment for Success) is the only K-12 afterschool option in Falls City. Located in both of the small school buildings in the town, F.A.C.E.S. provides children and youth with a healthy meal, academic support, enrichment activities like Roller Coaster Physics, Geo-caching, theater and sewing. Falls City students do not have school on Fridays. For the past 4

years F.A.C.E.S. has offered Friday field trips for the students. Students of all ages have visited the state capitol in Salem, the Oregon coast, OMSI, numerous universities across the state.

In a place where transportation and access is a serious issue—both because of geographic local and poverty—F.A.C.E.S. has developed some unique opportunities that offer solutions to this issue. Not only does the program expose students to experiences they never would have had otherwise via its Friday fieldtrips, it also provides older (high school sophomores to seniors) youth with the opportunity to gain work experience via its high school program. Falls City high school students can apply via a formal application and interview process, to work in the K-8 afterschool program. High school students work as frontline staff for two hours every day. They receive a wage for one hour, and school credit for the second hour. This aspect of F.A.C.E.S. is a boon to both the program and the students participating. Students gain work experience, and earn a little money right in their community and F.A.C.E.S. decreases some of its staffing costs. Without this program, there are very few (if any) opportunities for young people to gain such experience.

Pick up from AfterZone...

I spoke with a recent Falls City High School graduate, Brandon, who worked in the afterschool program for three of his high school years. Although Brandon is currently between jobs, after moving from Falls City to Salem and back again in only a few months, he reflects on his experiences working at F.A.C.E.S. “Working in F.A.C.E.S. helped reinforce what I learned in school, and taught me how to teach. The more you practice educating young people, the better you get at it. This is one of the main things I think the high school students get out of the program, but they also have a schedule after school. We went to school, then went to work. It was a full day.”

Not only are students gaining transferable skills—how to work with youth, accountability, maturity and more—students have structured things to do afterschool. When talking with Brandon it was evident to me that more important than all of the obvious things students gain from the program, they gain a sense of value. One of the first things Brandon talked about was how much he was appreciated by the students and staff, stating “I was one of the more popular student workers.” After my interview with Brandon, Amy teased him about how talkative he was. “You never would have gotten that much out of him before he started working here.” F.A.C.E.S. changed this young man’s life for the better, and is doing the same for the community as a whole.

You can literally see F.A.C.E.S. all over the city—the flowers in front of city hall planted by F.A.C.E.S. students, the Falls City sign constructed by F.A.C.E.S., and the bridge, which was fixed a few years ago with the help of F.A.C.E.S. students. The program gives back to the community, and the community gives back to F.A.C.E.S.

In the past ten years Falls City residents have voted twice to support its students via city levies. The first of these two levies, supported improvements to school facilities, and the second supports the library, athletics and F.A.C.E.S. In a town where money is tight for the majority of residents, it is amazing how much community support and spirit exists.

Amy reflects on why this might be. "I think the voters of Falls City recognize that these kids are our future leaders. That they're worth investing in, because one day they will be running our community."

There are challenges and opportunities to being a leader, or an afterschool program, in a small rural community. In a place where generational poverty is rampant, and everybody knows everybody, it is hard to escape. It is also hard, as a leader, to not get weighed down by the many responsibilities that come with having multiple leadership roles. Yet, these challenges also present opportunities. It is easier to get things done when everybody knows everybody. And, despite the great need of many of its citizens, the community is willing to come together to support its youth because they are so close. As the mayor put it, "we're more like a family here than anything else."