

Youth-Powered Hopes Drive Howard Ahead

By [Julie Ardery](#)

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A small town in South Dakota has become a model of community planning, thanks to an inspired high school assignment and continued leadership of local youth.

By [Julie Ardery](#)



Danielle Rosheim/Forward THINKING

More than 500 people turned out for the dedication of Maroney Commons in Howard, SD, August 2011 -- the culmination of over a decade of inclusive community problem-solving and action.

When local high school students make the state playoffs, a small town stands up and cheers. When they stimulate a 40% percent increase in local sales revenue, a town sits down and reconsiders its future.

That's what happened in Howard, South Dakota (population 858). After nearly 15 years of work, Howard has become a poster child of community resolve. And it all began at the high school, building on an imaginative and intensely practical assignment.

The district set out in 1995 to integrate the schools and a struggling community, boosted with \$150,000 from the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal at South Dakota State University (funding provided by the Annenberg Rural Challenge).

"Dust was blowing down the street," says Kathy Callies, who volunteered in the project then and now leads Howard's [Rural Learning Center](#). "Kids were expressing, 'What's the point, there's no future.'"

The town had lost [nearly a hundred local businesses](#) between 1960 and 1999. Farm production was declining. And young people, without prospects, were moving away.

Randy Parry, a basketball coach at Howard High, devised a compelling way to introduce the Future Business Leaders of America class to computational software – and to teach them about the town and themselves. The students began a “community cash flow study,” looking closely at how Howard citizens spent their money. Keeping the town in operation depended, and still depends, on sales receipts. Says Callies, “We have no income tax. If you’re not a property owner, everything you buy is how you affect your local government.”



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Randy Parry, former high school teacher, led students to examine the economic and social structure of the town.

The students began to examine Howard and surrounding Miner County more critically and to ask painful questions: “Why is it we don’t have infrastructure? Why are the buildings in town empty and why do they stand empty?”

With help from Callies and others, Randy Parry and his students developed a survey that would explain the distress of the local economy. They discovered that many Howard residents were routinely commuting 30 miles away to shop. They also learned that dollars spent locally circulated within the community, benefitting the whole town.

Justin Palmquist, a fourth generation native of Howard, was a student at the high school when the project got underway. “They sent a ton of questionnaires out over a year. And there was great turnout filling them out and getting them back in,” Palmquist says. He saw that the student body and, gradually, residents throughout the whole town were drawn in by community self-discovery.



“Most of the kids were pretty interested in it, seeing what the data was going to say. They were surprised,” says Palmquist. “And it broke up that ho-hum, got people involved.” Palmquist says that the project came to include many high school faculty members and courses, not Parry’s business class alone. English teacher Mary Stangohr was

deeply involved, assigning Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Osha Gray Davidson's *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto* to excite students about both rural and urban realities.

Now the technical director of Horizon Health Care in Howard, Palmquist notes that the study also changed his perspective on local society. "The thing I took away from it was every dollar spent in town changed hands eight times. It really made you understand." In big cities, displays of personal wealth are accepted, even encouraged, he notes, but in a town like Howard, "you almost buy a cheaper vehicle" so as not to stand out. Often there's an underlying "animosity," he says, toward the wealthiest folks in town.



Kristi Atkinson

Justin Palmquist, former high school student who took part in Howard's revisioning, is working and raising his family here.

But the cash flow study helped Palmquist see big spenders differently. He decided, "You should be happy that somebody was making money in town, because that money could end up in your pocket."

After learning how much of Howard's wealth was flowing to out-of-town retailers, the students followed up, to see if residents would change their shopping habits. "We're not asking you to spend more money," said Kathy Callies, who helped conduct the research. Instead, they asked, "Could you change and spend 10% more at home? And if not, what's in the way?"

The results were startling. In the first year after their effort, local retail sales increased 41%.

Meanwhile, the students had unearthed some of the reasons that local companies were struggling: a shortage of automated teller machines, a grumpy employee at the service counter.... With tact, they approached business owners with the complaints they'd uncovered, and gradually Howard's retailers began changing.

Witnessing the turnaround in local sales, Howard launched an extended series of "community vision meetings" – small groups of residents coming together to air their concerns and discuss their hopes for the town. Kathy Callies says the groups were asking, "What else can we change?"

The process involved an 82 member task-force and seven committees to ensure that such key topics as elder care, education, health, and economic development were addressed. Over time,

more than 400 residents of Miner County were involved.

And once more, young people were key in organizing these groups, conducting them, participating, and gathering the results. Tami Severson, a Howard High School student during these transformative years, says she learned that problem-solving needs to be inclusive; she saw first hand how that worked: "If you see a problem bring all of the affected persons together and discuss the best alternative for the group as a whole."



Rural Learning Center

Tami Severson helped organize community meetings in Howard as a teenager. She now works within the Rural Learning Center.

Severson, who left Howard to earn a degree in Business Administration, has returned and is working on housing and other issues with the Rural Learning Center. Like Palmquist, she says that her experience in this high school project changed her outlook on the town.

Severson says, "My class was most involved in community group meetings," both assisting in running the meetings (some of them around residents' kitchen tables) and compiling and reporting results to the larger group. "Young people were very much involved in all of these meetings as co-hosts and co-participants," writes Severson. She said it was crucial to gain "different vantage points. Elderly were able to get a better understanding of the very few things that kids had to do to keep themselves busy without getting into trouble." For Howard's older citizens, the lack of assisted-living residences was a worry.

In fact, Kathy Callies says that probably the most powerful outcome of these meetings was bringing youth together with the county's elders.

"Our seniors citizens became our ambassadors," says Callies. Their life stories, including struggles of all kinds, inspired Howard's youth to push forward, maintain pride in the community, and take the risk of investing themselves in the town. It was the elderly residents who kept asking "What if we don't try?"

Callies says this chemistry of youth and old age really inspired Howard to change. "Those of us in the middle, with our nose in the budget, were the last to be convinced," she says. "It's very difficult to not pay attention to someone who's a young person in your church or your neighborhood, also your seniors." With "one in each ear," Howard's middle-life leaders took notice.

As a consequence the town committed to providing more secure housing for its aging elders, and it

took seriously the need for a licensed day care center. “People thought we were insane,” says Callies, but “now these young people are here and their kids are here.”

In 1998, Howard’s determination and success with community organizing and planning caught the attention of the Northwest Area Foundation. The NAF chose the town for an ambitious long-term partnership. In 1999 Miner County Community Revitalization, a non-profit, was formed to lead that work, and the following year the foundation approved the town’s redevelopment ten year plan.



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Maroney Commons has been awarded for its use of clean energy; a wind turbine serves as spire of the building and supplies power too.

It culminated last October with the opening of Maroney Commons. The “green” building downtown includes the Rural Learning Center (outgrowth of Miner County Community Revitalization), a hotel, conference facilities, and offices for a local health care agency, and more -- all solar powered and crowned with a wind turbine and a roof of prairie plants. It’s also where Howard’s young, elderly, and middle-agers gathered to around a piano for Christmas caroling.

Maroney Commons was singled out by the Environmental Protection Agency for its [2011 Smart Growth](#) award. But this is just the latest accolade for Howard. A federal partnership for Sustainable Communities (including EPA, the Department of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and USDA) also picked Howard as a national model of “sustainability.”



Cheryl Laible

Mayor Andrew Dold, age 27 (at left), has made a habit of consulting with longtime residents (l-r) Leo Poncelet, Eldon Sneesby, Gary Bell, and Bob Terwilliger about city issues at the local coffee shop.

Perhaps most telling of all, Howard's current mayor is Andrew Dold, 27 years old. Born and raised in Howard, Dold works for his father's implement company and is tackling, among other city issues, the problem of supplying more power to a local turbine business that hopes to expand. "It could add maybe four to seven jobs," says Dold.

As mayor, Dold says he turns regularly to the elders of Howard. He knows these men, old enough to be his grandfathers, well and consults with them "four or five times a week" informally at Howard's Higher Grounds coffee shop. "We discuss a wide range of things," says Dold. As city problems arise, he'll bring them to the group and "see what their thoughts on it are and I can bring those concerns to the council." These relationships have afforded him "another layer of insight," and give the town's elders a voice in the city's future.

Despite its ambitions and success, Howard, like most rural communities, is struggling to maintain its vitality. Kathy Callies notes that the town's population actually declined, according to Census figures, from 2000 to 2010, yet she sees promising evidence too. Levels of educational attainment, employment and per capita income are up, and the average age of residents in Miner County (once the oldest county in the state) is younger than it was ten years ago.



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A repurposed grain bin becomes a skylight in the new hotel within Maroney Commons.

What Callies finds most satisfying is the increased school enrollment: proof that young people are returning and establishing themselves here.

“I was in school during the middle of this revitalization,” Justin Palmquist says. He contends that it “changed my mind on what living in Howard was. Before I thought of my home town as a boring dead end that had no future,” but that outlook changed “to a place where I would hope to raise a family and find a job or make a job.” He’s doing just that. Age 32, he and his wife are raising their four daughters in Howard.

Tami Severson recounts, “It was an amazing experience to learn about the very place you are in and how that relates to everyday life and the future you are facing.” Yet for Severson the bigger lesson was that her future, and the town’s, were not simply unfolding before her eyes. She had a crucial role to play. Work on the community cash flow study and involvement in the community meetings that followed led her to realize “that you yourself have a majority of the responsibility to choose how you will shape this future.”

“It boils down to choice and options,” says Severson. “We won't convince all youth graduating from our high school that Miner County is their permanent place in life, but we hope to provide youth with a feeling of community and an ability to come back if they choose to or if the time is right for themselves or their family.”