



PICTURED: Mary Libby Campbell, Harding County, New Mexico/T. Brunner

Seeing the Potential in Vacant Homes

A Rural Returnee's Plan to Spruce Up Her County

By Terry Brunner

Driving on the western edge of the Great Plains in Northeast New Mexico my car felt a little like a rowboat adrift in a great ocean of grass. It got a little lonely on that cool November morning as I drove for 45 miles on highway 56 between Clayton and Springer and didn't spot another human being.

So I was eager for some company as I pulled into Annette's Cafe in Roy, New Mexico, to meet my friend, Mary Libby Campbell. Roy, New Mexico, sits in Harding County where there are 695 residents scattered over 2,100 square miles. For Harding County's dispersed population, Annette's Cafe serves an important function as not only a restaurant but also as a community gathering place where people pass through, say hi, have lunch, a cup of coffee, and check in on one another. Plus, their hand-cut french fries can't be missed.

Mary waited for me at a booth. I didn't recognize her at first, because she wore a shorter hairstyle than the last time I saw her. But something that wasn't new was the permanent smile Mary always wears. It's that smile and the optimism that comes with it that brought me to Harding County that day. Mary is what I like to call a "doer." She's always doing something and working to make things happen in her community.

We discussed many local issues over lunch, but our main focus was on housing. You hear a lot of talk these days about bringing industry and jobs to New Mexico but if there's not adequate housing for folks, it just isn't going to work. You need to work with what you might call good housing "stock" for families: good homes to buy and good homes to rent, new homes and used homes.

If you've traveled to northeast New Mexico you've probably noticed the landscape is littered with old homes that are uninhabitable or in desperate need of repair. You don't see many new homes and some of the homes you do spot look like they came straight out of an old photo of the Dustbowl days. These vacant homes are not only an eyesore, but they can be a problem for the community as they fall victim to vandalism and other criminal activity.

Harding County is no exception and Mary was bound and determined to do something about it. She traveled around town, photographed all the abandoned homes and researched who owns them. Mary plans to contact these homeowners and figure out if there might be a better use for their vacant

home. Perhaps it can be fixed-up and sold to a new family, torn down if it's uninhabitable, or utilized for another purpose. As you flip through her collection of photos of home after home you realize the scope of the problem and you wonder how different Harding County might look if people returned to those homes.

There's actually a growing trend across the country of people that are returning to their rural hometowns after being away for many years. Mary grew up in Harding County, moved away for some years, and recently returned. I've found that these returnees often add a little spark to efforts to reinvigorate communities that is based on the knowledge gained from exposure to the world outside their hometowns.

Sometimes that spark results in a couple of new businesses starting up or someone deciding to fix up an old home downtown and moving in. After we talked about Harding County's vacant homes and what might be done to help with the issue, Mary handed me a copy of the Harding county newspaper. High school students put it together quarterly and it chronicles all that's going on in Harding County- especially as it relates to high school sports and events. As I leafed through that paper, I thought about those kids and wondered if there was a future for them in Harding County. Would they be able start a business, farm, ranch, or raise a family in the community where they grew up? Would they instead seek opportunities in Albuquerque or another state?

Mary is one person working hard to give them an opportunity in Harding County. After all, in a County of about 700 people if Mary helps to fix up a few homes and get just 10 families to make a home there that would make a big impact in a small county. •