

Is There a New Movement in Kansas?

A New 'PowerUp' Generation is Making Change Happen

BY LIZ HENDRICKS



Liz Hendricks

Have you ever been a part of a movement?

Do you think about the great state of Kansas being formed by a movement for freedom?

Right now, right here in Kansas, a potential movement is gaining momentum.

I first learned of it at the 2012 Kansas Sampler's WeKan conference. There, an impressive group of young Kansans proclaimed to our statewide audience their "rural by choice" catch phrase. To me, it served as a birth announcement with an ear-catching name: "PowerUp."

No, I can't be a PowerUp. Remember, I said "young!" These are 21 to 39-year-olds. But I can be a cheerleader, gladly promoting, recruiting and educating citizens about this amazing crusade to power-up this generation that will shape our state's character and hope.

You may be asking yourself, "Is this really a 'movement?' And even if it is, so what?"

We colleagues of Public Square Communities spend hundreds of hours interviewing citizens in order to hear their hopes and dreams for the future. Over and over, voices old and young in some 60 cities and towns have sung one chorus: "We must engage and empower the next generation if rural America is to survive."

The PowerUp movement captures that desire and mobilizes and engages this age group into a formal grassroots effort.

You might challenge me. Wasn't this just an idea introduced at a conference? "No," I'd answer. It was much more than that.

Last fall, with the approval of Marci Penner, Kansas Sampler's executive director, I sneaked into the Eastern Kansas PowerUp Big Rural Brainstorm. Spending a day discussing, vision-

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ing, exploring and networking with this energetic and progressive group inspired me even more than my introductory event. Not only did this group plan several regional social engagements and tackle discussions ranging from locally-grown foods to revitalizing arts and humanities programs, they also set in motion a "Day on the Hill" for PowerUps to discuss their vision for Kansas with state policy makers! For this group, words weren't enough: they spawn action.

Most recently, two of these impressive PowerUps volunteered to lead a collaborative effort with Public Square Communities to engage citizens of 19 Flint Hills counties and envision their future. With the help of Public Square's own PowerUp-Liz Sosa from Garden City—we collectively gathered thoughts and dreams from this age group through one-on-one interviews and large-group brainstorming that we call "Community Conversations."

How exciting to finally hear ABOUT the future from those who ARE the future! And how important to a regional planning effort to hear from those old enough to think big but too young to have spent their lives creating and defending the boundaries that divide us.

So what does this movement mean to Kansas? It means there is hope for our state. We are networking, empowering and engaging this young group who see AND LIVE the value of rural life amidst a prosperous, healthy Kansas.

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