

RADICALLY RURAL KEYNOTE SPEAKERS: John Molinaro & Becky McCray

John Molinaro and Becky McCray will be speaking at the 2020 Radically Rural Summit organized by the Keene Sentinel and the Hannah Grimes Center for Entrepreneurship. This September's summit will address questions and spark ideas on how to hit the ground running as we emerge from a greatly changed economy. Molinaro has a wealth of information to share on what he has done to bolster rural economies as they begin to rebrand themselves in modern times. McCray intends to highlight ways in which small communities can build resiliency and flourish as we head into a new future.

BY ANNIKA KRISTIANSEN



JOHN MOLINARO
CEO, President
Appalachian
Partnership, Inc.

“Find a way to make yourself useful,” is the mantra behind the life and work of Appalachian Partnership Inc.’s president and CEO, John Molinaro. Backed by decades of valuable experience, Molinaro has led valiant initiatives to boost the economies of Ohio’s 32 Appalachian counties.

Just out of college, Molinaro spent time in seminary, laying the foundation for what would become a strong belief in helping others. Although it turned out that giving sacrament was not to be his vocation, his deeply-rooted Lutheran background lent this born-and-raised Minnesotan a calling: to lift people up by making rural economies stronger.

Molinaro served as vice president of the Minnesota-based, West Central Initiative, for 20 years. This McKnight-funded program, a response to the farm crisis of the 1980s, supports six rural foundations in improving west-central Minnesota’s social and economic viability. During his

time at WCI, Molinaro worked to leverage the marketable skills of local workforces, utilizing communities’ unique assets for change and growth.

For six years, Molinaro co-directed The Aspen Institute’s Community Strategies Group (CSG) in Washington, D.C. Here he focused primarily on economic, community and workforce development in rural and small metro regions. His fellow group members hailed from the driest desert lands to the richest farmlands, joined by a shared interest in bettering the rural spaces that are near and dear.

“One issue in rural America,” Molinaro notes, “is that there may be someone on the other side of a mountain that has the solution to your problem, but you don’t know it.”

One of the purposes of the CSG is to highlight things ideas that are working so that others, too, might follow the blueprint for success.

In 2012, Molinaro was recruited to the newly chartered Appalachian Partnership Inc. (API), and its subsidiary, Appalachian Partnership for Economic Growth (APEG). He brought valuable political knowledge and experience to the job as an advisor to the White House Rural Council with a seat on multiple national rural development boards. Molinaro has since worked tirelessly to add more than 6,000 jobs to the Appalachian counties of Ohio and has helped to support business retention, expansion and attraction.

An idea from his seminary roots, “where there is no vision, the people perish,” now fuels Mo-

linaro’s action. To restate, “where there is a vision, people flourish.”

In Ohio’s Appalachia, hardwood forests are part of this vision. Today, more than half of the trees cut down in these regions are exported as logs. However, by employing as many local resources as possible, more steps in processing can be taken within the region. Molinaro knows that an increase in the number of locally created jobs and circulating dollars will follow. In partnership with the Department of Commerce, API has been providing support to the region’s hardwood furniture industry in building supply chain relationships.

In his experience, Molinaro has found some common roadblocks to success in rural areas. The first is that small groups, when influential, control access to resources. Concentrated leadership, he feels, quash innovation and initiative, and prevents a thriving community.

“Places that do best are those that exercise collective leadership and a participatory planning process,” he says. “When more people are involved, ideas become the charge of a group rather than an individual.”

Secondly, rural places have what Molinaro calls “a long memory.” Family history, and times past shape small communities, making a leadership role out to be risky business.

“People are scared to move into the spotlight with their ideas,” he says, “any mistake or disagreement has greater detriment and long term consequences for an individual.”

Again, Molinaro finds that the

more the roles of leadership can be distributed, the more likely people will willingly step out and take the risk to do something new.

Lastly, Molinaro sees a lack of hope in the people of small communities. In the last few decades, an emptying out of farms and jobs in rural areas has left little motivation to move forward. Here, Molinaro is optimistic about the genesis of the wealth creation movement currently taking place in rural America. With a strong, asset-based community development plan, already existing markets can be built upon, and new, more relevant connections can be made.

In a pandemic-changed economy, Molinaro is most concerned about smaller organizations and rural areas getting the short end of the stick when it comes to aid and support. For small businesses, applying for grants and putting together projections is not always a forte. Furthermore, in the case of small, rural banks, approved SBA lenders are few and far between. Fewer options mean longer lines for small businesses to wait in for a loan and an increased chance of money running out. By utilizing relationships he has developed via the Aspen Institute, Molinaro hopes to influence staffers of Congress in the honing of rural development legislation.

Hope, for Molinaro, is found in the truly rural concept that you can’t separate who you are from what you do.

“You can’t be a jerk at work while also being a pillar of the community,” he notes.

This level of raw scrupulousness

that is inherent to small communities is both a strength and a weakness, but it allows for a degree of honest collaboration. Molinaro sees that where the social fabric is robust in rural places, people tend to value the contributions of every community member.

Molinaro knows that the ingredients for a resilient community are found in the connections, values, and skillsets already present in its community members. Knowledge of the land, and the people who care for it, is the only superpower required to build an irrepressible rural path forward.



BECKY MCCRAY
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Out with the old and in with the new. The archaic, hierarchical methods of times past no longer apply. The town has become distinct from the city — and the approach of one does not necessarily fit the needs of the other.

In the tiny town of Hoptown, Oklahoma, home of 30, entrepreneur and out-of-the-box thinker, Becky McCray has taken on the role of “small town saver.” Having tried on the hat of businesswoman, city manager and nonprofit organizer, McCray now knows that decision-making, policy changing,

and community-building needs to look different in a rural setting.

A self-sufficient rancher, McCray lives in a multi-generational home that her grandparents built long ago. From her windows, she sees fields; from her front step, she smells fresh air. In this neck of the woods, time passes with the seasons rather than the traffic lights. McCray has access to bigger cities; however, her rural surroundings compel the beautiful opportunity to design her own way of life, uninhibited by the confines of urban infrastructure. That said, modern life has expanded to even the farthest reaches of the American countryside and McCray says we must leverage this reality of the present day.

“We used to need to drive somewhere, or write a letter or make a phone call from a phone attached to our kitchen wall,” McCray says with a laugh. “But with the tools we have today, we can make things happen regardless of the distance. We can be local in our lifestyle but global in our reach.”

As rural towns struggle to adapt and rebrand themselves in post-industrial times, McCray offers her support. First, however, she makes it clear that small towns can only be saved by their own people with their own resources.

“No factory or big business is going to save you,” she says. “No outside expert has the one right answer. It’s you.”

McCray met Deb Brown in the comment section of a blog about five years ago and quickly learned that if they combined forces, nothing could stop them. Together, they started SaveYour.Town, an online platform for their message of change. Quickly they defined and rejected the “old way” and devised the “new idea-friendly way” for small towns to harness their unique qualities and strengths and put them to good use.

The old way is defined by exclusive and formal decision-making behind closed doors with little to no input from the community. The new way allows any member of the

community to present ideas, step up and take action, and create and make change. McCray conveys that with modern technology, we don’t need the stodgy committee (the few) that make decisions (for the many). Rather, the crowd can be sourced, polls can be made, data collected, and plans implemented that feel good for everyone. In rural areas and small communities, there is space for individual action.

Seem chaotic?

Welcoming the disordered, the muddled, and the confused is important for McCray because she sees that it draws communities closer. If community members are supported in taking their ideas and flying, all opportunities (hit or miss) are given a chance. When there is chaos, specialists can emerge from the woodwork and are called upon for their knowledge on a certain topic. Networks are made rather than hierarchies. The true talents of the town are highlighted and create the focal point for change.

“Providing small, but meaningful, ways for citizens to have an input in what is going on start to build a culture where people know that their ideas are appreciated,” says McCray.

When this environment is nurtured in a small town, consensus comes easily, a sense of ownership is instilled, and the change that occurs is organic and effective.

As we face increasing instability as a result of the spread of COVID-19, McCray sees promise in rural living. This is because of a strong feeling of community and interconnectedness that she finds to be inherent in most small towns.

“The fabric is more densely woven,” she notes. “I can point to my neighbor and say, their cousin is my bank loan officer and their kids run the corner store and so on.”

In response to the COVID-19 question, McCray remains calm.

“We don’t need all the answers right now,” she says. “The idea-friendly method tells us that we build resiliency by being open to

new ideas, testing those ideas as they arise, and remaining hopeful.”

By keeping these tests small-scale, failures also remain equally small. This way, if a plan backfires, there isn’t too far to fall. But if it succeeds, these small steps become the building blocks to be built upon.

“If small communities are seeking answers to problems in this manner, and if we can communicate well amongst ourselves, we can learn from one another,” says McCray.

The SaveYour.Town website provides a setting for this communication and serves as a platform to highlight success stories. McCray and her partner, Brown, release innovative videos and blog posts regularly and offer a live web session once a month to answer questions and offer advice.

Moving forward, McCray hopes that what is thought to constitute the size of a business can change. For her, “The tiny, the temporary, and the mobile” provide the affordability and flexibility needed to thrive in the coming times. Some examples? Booths, tables, the backs of trucks (why not?), trailers, or in-home businesses. This she feels, along with an openness to new ideas and the involvement of newcomers in decision-making processes, will build resiliency.

McCray emphasizes that empowering people to have influential ideas is all about proper engagement. She usually begins with, “What are everyone’s ideas?” Then she adds, “Not because I will act upon them, but because I know that YOU will.”

McCray knows there are people everywhere with visions for their small towns that are exciting and engaging. She knows that people are harboring these ideas that, if properly supported, could shape their communities positively.

“Everywhere there are people dreaming and caring about their towns,” McCray says, “we just need to bring these dreams to life. I know rural communities can have a future.” ■