

Title: Seeds of Change: Nurturing Micropolitan Futures

Show Notes: Welcome to the Home of Future Thinking, where micropolitans unite to face the challenges of the future head-on. In our inaugural episode, we answer the following question - Are smaller communities equipped to face the complex challenges of our ever-changing world?

Today we're joined by Clark Casteel, President and CEO of the Danville Regional Foundation, and Willie Jones, Senior Program Officer, as they share their insights on transforming micropolitans into thriving hubs of innovation and growth. Tune in to discover how to nurture change from the ground up. Welcome to a podcast where problems meet their match in forward-thinking solutions.

Today's episode is hosted by Casey Steinbacher, Founder and CEO of Finding Next, and Ted Abernathy, Founder of Economic Leadership. Home of Future Thinking is produced by Earfluence.

For more on the Home of Future Thinking, including information on the 2024 Conference, visit HomeOfFutureThinking.com.

Clark - 00:00:08:

Wouldn't it be more effective for a place like ours to start thinking about the future? With that, we started the conversation about I wonder if there's other people in the same boat, right? Other old industrial towns, other small cities.

Willie - 00:00:26:

A lot of times when you think about our communities and communities of our size, if not smaller, you hear the negative stories. You don't hear about all the positive wins.

Casie - 00:00:40:

Welcome to the Home of Future Thinking, where we focus on the challenges and innovations of micropolitans. Hello everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Casey Steinbacher, Founder and CEO of Finding Next. And with me, as usual, is Ted Abernathy. Ted is Founder of Economic Leadership. Ted and his team are an internationally recognized economic strategist that help communities and companies anticipate and prepare for the future. Now, we all know understanding and preparing for the future is never an easy task, but it's especially hard for the hundreds of smaller micropolitan communities across the country. This podcast series is dedicated to having conversations with communities and thought leaders that can help shed some light on what's next and share best practice in this work. So today, welcome to our inaugural podcast. And Ted, can you give us a little overview what we can expect today?

Ted - 00:01:38:

Thanks, Casey, I appreciate it. A few years ago, we started thinking about how smaller communities can compete in today's world. And some of this is urban, rural, and that's been part of the discussion in the economic world for years. But we were looking at smaller cities and what was changing in those small cities. And our firm had been lucky enough to work with the Danville Regional Foundation on a few projects. And we started talking to them about how do you get that information out to smaller communities? They're really just trying, some of them to reinvent themselves, some of them to hang on. They're all terribly busy. And so we managed to come up with an idea that we've been working on now for about the last six years. Home of Future Thinking, which is a great title and was a URL we thought surely we couldn't get, but we ended up with it. Nobody had ever done it before. Was a way to try to help smaller communities have the best information they could, to exchange ideas with each other, get to know each other. And it's all led by the Danville Regional Foundation. So today we're going to start all of this by talking to the leaders there about how this all came about and try to set the stage for how we got here.

Casie - 00:02:58:

Wow, that's really interesting. I'm really anxious to hear what it is they have to say. So you want to welcome our guests?

Ted - 00:03:04:

Yes, we're lucky. Clark Casteel is the president and CEO of the Danville Regional Foundation. He has been with this project since the very beginning. And Willie Jones is the Project Manager for this project. And has been around, we're going to let them introduce themselves because you always tell the wrong story when you're starting to talk about people, you know. So welcome to both Clark and Willie today. And Clark, you want to start just introduce yourself and I'll ask you in a few minutes to tell us the Danville Regional Foundation story as it relates to home of future thinking, but also tell us a little bit about the Danville Regional Foundation.

Clark - 00:03:40:

Sure. So I'm Clark Castile, the President and CEO of the Danville Regional Foundation. I've been in Danville for about 15 years and been with the Danville Regional Foundation about that same time. And for me, as I think about this work and the origins of my interest in this subject, it all started with where I grew up. I grew up in a small city in Virginia, population about 11,000 in the county. The little town had about 700 people, and there were six garment plants in our town where I grew up. And when I graduated high school in 1986, all those garment plants were gone. And so since that time, I've spent my professional career thinking about how little places like I grew up are going to move forward and where are all the people I graduated high school with going to work. And so I've been honored to be here in Danville, helping this micropolitan region that includes the city of Danville, Pennsylvania County in Virginia, and then Caswell County in North Carolina, thinking about how this place moves forward in this kind of dynamic global economy.

Ted - 00:04:55:

Thanks, Clark. And Willie, you've been in the area about a dozen years now, but also grew up outside of Danville. You're not native there, right?

Willie - 00:05:07:

Right. I'm Willie Jones. I'm the Senior Program Officer at the Danville Regional Foundation. I'm originally from Ohio, so I was born in Akron, Ohio, and I moved to Cincinnati, grew up there, and I made my career and was educated in Brevard, North Carolina, and in Cullowhee. And so, as Clark said, being in these communities that are really tiny, you build a community in itself. I've learned who I was as a person, as a leader, and how communities can blossom at one moment and then be diminished by just a turn of a button or a company leaving. And you see that very heavily in Akron, Ohio. And so community is very important to me. I don't know what I'll be doing if it wasn't for that type of community work.

Ted - 00:05:57:

Casey, you also have a small town background, I think.

Casie - 00:06:01:

Yes, I am originally from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. We are known solely as the location of the Little League World Series. Every year, community of about 30,000 people grew up and then went to school at Penn State. I love to tell this story. My father was an architect and an engineer, and so I went gung ho, ready to go be an architect and engineer. And after about three months. They said we might want to think about a change in subject matter for you. And very luckily, I moved over to urban economic development. And I've been in that field ever since, working with chambers of commerce and communities across the US. And Canada. So love the work, but I must have a special like you two, a very special soft spot for smaller communities and the challenges that they face and how some of them have done such a remarkable job of doing that and others have not.

Ted - 00:06:52:

Clark I thought I grew up in a small town, Dallas, North Carolina, but it was 3000 people. And I live in a town. Shallotte, North Carolina. On the coast. That's about 4000 people. So we all come from places that have had to reinvent themselves. My grandparents were all textile workers. None of those textile mills exist anymore. And so when we think about Home of Future Thinking, it's all of those components. It's thinking, how do we reimagine, how do we recast our communities? Because we know the economies keep changing. But it's also, how do we impart that to small places that typically don't have a huge staff, don't have the money to send people all over the world to learn things. The idea of helping micropolitans, which for those of you listening, that's a place where the core city is less than 50,000. We have a few cities that are slightly bigger than that and a lot of places that are a lot smaller than that. How did Home of Future Thinking, how the idea get started Clark?

Clark - 00:07:59:

Well, Ted, you know how the idea got started.

Ted - 00:08:02:

I wouldn't have asked.

Clark - 00:08:03:

This may be a trick question. In, I think, 2015, 2016. Ted, you did a report for our region called I think the title was Good Enough is no Longer Good Enough.

Casie - 00:08:21:

Damn. That's good, Ted.

Clark - 00:08:22:

That's pretty strong.

Ted - 00:08:23:

I probably didn't think of it.

Casie - 00:08:25:

Are you sure you didn't come up with that name? Clark that does not sound like something Ted would.

Clark - 00:08:28:

No, I think Ted came up with that title. And in that report, Ted suggested that in a lot of places you focus on the past and you can get into a woe as me cycle thinking about what once was. And wouldn't it be more effective for a place like ours to start thinking about the future, to have a future focus? And with that, we started the conversation about, I wonder if there's other people in the same boat, right? Other old industrial towns, other small cities. And as we started to think about it, we did a little bit of an analysis and said there are platforms out there for rural folks to come together, and there's a lot of platforms out there for urban folks to come together, but what about these micropolitans? What about places like ours? And so we just said, let's give it a shot and see if there's others interested in having this conversation. And sure enough, there was. And that was really the origin story. And we did the first event not having any earthly idea if folks would ever show up or if it would be worth doing. And it was great. So that's how it started and we've been very pleased with the conversation and the impact it's had on us and our own thinking, and we look forward to continuing the effort.

Ted - 00:10:09:

One of the great things is that even though Clark is being modest and Karl Stauber, who was the CEO before him, we knew some people around the country. So at the beginning we were able to get some pretty heavy hitters to come and talk to us. I collect books from these and I mean, Bill Bishop was one of our first speakers who wrote *The Big Sort*, talking about how people were moving around the country. Andy Levine from DCI, which is the largest economic development marketing firm in the world, came down and talked about the type of things community needs to attract people. James and Deborah Fallows, when they were doing their national road tour on our towns, came and talked to us about this. So we were lucky enough to have some experts come in and we balanced it between experts and communities. I think we were always looking for the types of challenges that communities had when you talk out there and just as a reminder, we're going to have Danville to tell their story at a future one of these. So if this is about the general story, what do you see as the challenges that smaller communities all seem to face?

Willie - 00:11:20:

Yeah, I think the greatest challenge that we've seen across the communities we've been speaking with is the lack of collaboration at the Danville Regional Foundation. We think that's the foundation of our work, and you hear us say this a lot, community development is preceded by economic development. But when you think about building true community development, you need to have everyone at the table, different stakeholders, different perspectives, the doers, the idealists. And with that, a lot of times when we look at a problem in our communities, it's because everyone's attacking that problem separately. So when we're able to do this work together, we are able to succeed together, we're able to fail or pivot together and learn together. And I think while there's going to be a lot of challenges that communities are going to face and they're going to struggle to grasp at that moment, if you're able to build a network where people truly can share the same vision and mission for that community and collaborate, you're able to move the needle so much more effectively and quickly. And we need to make sure that people know this work takes time and our community is changing. You can't have the traditional approach to a lot of these problems. Our community is advancing so quickly in technology and just different thoughts and with that. We need to think of innovative ways to address on these problems and the only way you're going to do that is if you have different individuals at the table and working together.

Ted - 00:13:05:

That generational leadership is always one of the things we hear is you go into a community and people say, well, it's that old way of thinking and the power is all in this group and the younger groups don't seem to seem to be involved. You see that also in the communities you're in.

Willie - 00:13:23:

Of course, when we have those situations, it's really just finding something that everyone can agree on and have those quick, easy wins.

Casie - 00:13:35:

Yeah, I was going to ask you that. Willie, you and Clark have seen so much of this. So what tips do you have for people listening to this podcast around? If collaboration is the key, how do we get there? What are some of the things that get people to start collaborating that you guys have seen or used to get the ball rolling?

Willie - 00:13:54:

Yeah, I think picking something that's very easy to tackle and then bringing people to the table and making sure that it's a space where everyone can express themselves in a safe and challenging way and you got to have food. If you're able to dine together and share a meal together, you're more likely to let your guard down and you can talk about a lot of things that you share in common. We all have the same basic needs and so if you can start there and you can tackle a problem that's not as polarized in the community. So if there's like a vacant lot and you can have a conversation of what would be really cool to put here, you might come up with a community garden. Now that's an easy win that the community can rally around together and have those conversations and then as that trust is being built, you can start tackling more difficult problems.

Ted - 00:14:54:

Clark, thoughts on maybe some harder ones?

Clark - 00:14:58:

Well, I was going to jump in there and just really highlight a couple of things that Willie pointed out. When it comes to collaboration, collaboration happens at the speed of trust and part of what we've learned as a funder is it doesn't work if we come in with a shotgun and tell folks, collaborate, right. It gets back to the power dynamics that you were alluding to there. Ted but what does tend to work is exactly what Willie said. You bring people together and you talk about their aspirations and you try to bring diverse groups together and you have these very simple conversations about what do you aspire for our community. And what you find is people's aspirations are very similar. And then you do, you start with what's easy and you get some wins and then it starts building. You also manage expectations. And Willie mentioned this earlier that when we look at communities that have transformed really around the country. You find it takes a while, it takes 40 years, and we all want superheroes and silver bullets, but you manage expectations that say, this is not about silver bullets, this is really about planting seeds and starting to work together. And then you make the argument that if we can learn to work together, if we can build trust, we think this is going to make a long term difference in our community. We think that's what we're in the starting points of here. And we've only been doing this since 2005, so we got 20 years to go.

Ted - 00:16:48:

We have a rule in our office that collaboration people collaborate when it's in their interest to do so, period. You've got to find common interest on those. So that's how you get the topics. Some of the topics we talk about and we've talked about in the past but seem to be emerging, are job creation and workforce and housing, child care. Are there topics you all are hearing more about these days and sort of in a post COVID world? And we did a lot of work on Home of Future Thinking during COVID with a lot of blogs and people trying to project what it would be like afterwards. What's on the ground today? What are the topics that are driving discussions at the local level? What needs to be addressed?

Clark - 00:17:34:

A couple of them you've already mentioned Ted and a couple of them, I think, are kind of universal challenges around things like polarization and division, things like workforce development and child care. And is there a hospital anywhere in the US that says we've got plenty of nurses right now or a school system that's going, you know, we're pretty good on teachers. We don't think we need any more of those. And so you've got these kind of universal challenges. And one of the problems with that in smaller cities, especially those that have kind of been punched in the nose economically, is there is this it's just us, we're the only our people are so bad, we can't find nurses. Nobody wants to work, so nobody wants to be a teacher. And part of the conversation is, no, this is kind of this global challenge that everybody's facing. And then there are some more localized things that I think really do scale does matter there. And so part of that is around the next generation of leaders and how you're bringing more people to the table and thinking about the leadership transitions in your community around talent development and a talent recruitment. And part of this is why collaboration is so important, is that in small cities, you can't afford to leave anybody behind. Right? It's an all hands on deck. We don't have another 10,000 high school graduates to choose from who's going to stay here, right? So it's an all hands on deck thing. And then there are economic development differences that are clearly different. What's the right scale? What's the right diversified portfolio for a population of 40,000 versus a population of 40 million? And those are some of the differences that really bringing our colleagues who are in similar sized places and hearing about how they're thinking about them. Those are some of the important conversations we've had.

Ted - 00:19:53:

Willie, you want to add something?

Willie - 00:19:55:

Yeah. I agreed with everything Clark said and I think something he hinted on that's very important is storytelling and narrating with that. A lot of times when you think about our communities and communities of our sides, if not smaller, you hear the negative story. You don't hear about all the positive wins. And so that's the benefit of having a cohort like home of future thinking. You can now have this social network where you can tell your story and tell your wins and you can change that mindset of we're the only one that's failing, we're the only one that's going through this hard time. And so there's this unity you get there. And another issue that we're seeing too is I think COVID really brought our awareness to us even more is the connectivity part. And so broadband has always been an issue, especially in rural communities. But then when you think about the social alternatives of health, it became even greater because if you can't FaceTime someone or you can't connect with someone, now you have the challenge of a lot of people are considering their quality of life. And with that you got people migrating from very populated cities to our smaller communities. And a lot of times these communities are being overlooked because of that connectivity aspect. And so it's very important. And as Clark said, a lot of these issues you're going to see in every city, every county, every country around the world and it's just really trying to let people know you're not alone.

Ted - 00:21:43:

One of the things I liked about the first three conferences and a lot of the content that we created is some of it is the broad discussions of leadership and collaboration and place making and all of that. And then some of it was pretty narrow. I mean, how do you get that vacant building filled downtown that is an eyesore on the corner. Or how do you create, how do you get your school systems, CTE programs to connect to your local employer? Are there successes that you've seen that you find aspirational to others? It's not all negative news out there.

Willie - 00:22:23:

Great.

Clark - 00:22:24:

No, it's really not. In our community, as Willie suggested, we're on the cusp of some real growth and we've seen some real change. And part of our success and you can see this success in many other places, other micropolitans is around downtown revitalization. And there are so many good stories out there that we've been able to hear and learn from. And as we've thought about our own kind of regional approach to economic development, we recognize pretty early on can we create, even in a small city, more urban like amenities of loft apartments and cool breweries and places that people want to hang out. And we've seen a remarkable amount of success there. Those are the easiest ones to see because you can drive by and see it. But I think there are a number of their successes around workforce development, and that in our case, early childhood education. And these are longer term bets, but we're seeing the metrics all pointing in the right direction, convincing us that over time, these are going to make a really significant difference in our community.

Casie - 00:23:50:

I want to go back to something Willie said earlier, and Clark, I think is a really essential piece of your model that I think might be helping with the success. And I'd like to hear your take on it. This whole concept of when you created home of future thinking that you would do it in cohorts, that you would bring communities together and have these conversations collaboratively together as a cohort, as a group that were all dealing with challenges and hearing the same experts, hearing the same stories, hearing the same successes. How did you fall into that concept of let's do this in cohorts?

Clark - 00:24:26:

It's a great question, and I don't have a very good answer. I don't know how it started, but I can tell you that this model is one that we love.

Casie - 00:24:39:

Yeah.

Clark - 00:24:40:

And so we talk a lot about helping our region see the possible. So every two years, we take our board on a see the possible trip. And we've been to Greenville, South Carolina. Chattanooga, Tennessee. Owensboro, Kentucky, Dubuque, Iowa, Lewiston-Auburn, Maine. And doing that shared learning together has been very important for our foundation. We have since taken that model, and we've sent a bunch of different groups to other places to see what success looks like and do it in a group. Right? And so we had a group that was really interested in parks, and so we sent some folks to Cincinnati and Louisville, and I think they also went to Chattanooga to see what some great urban parks look like, our downtown parks look like. And there is something magical about coming together and going on a trip together and being with each other deeply for two or three days. And the other piece and this ties back to something Ted mentioned earlier about our speakers. There was something special about Jim and Deb Fallows and Bill Bishop and Andy Levine in that it's not just they were standing on the speech on the lectern lecturing us with a speech. They were involved in this conversation. And the second piece was they were passionate about what we were trying to do. And so Bill Bishop told this fascinating story to me about how he had personally left Austin. Right. All the cool kids are moving into Austin. And Bill was like, you know, those folks didn't know how to do a potluck supper. And so I wanted to move somewhere where folks knew how to do a potluck supper. That's a passion that many speakers could have come in and said, I know that places like Danville are aspiring to be Austin, Texas, and here's how you need to be more like Austin, right? When in fact, what places like ours need to do is think about what our aspirations really are, what does success mean to us? And part of that is really how we've built our collaborative model in this community, is creating these platforms by which people can come together and work together and think about their own aspirations and what success looks like across our region. So right now we've got ten community councils being established across our region where those groups are a cohort. They're coming together, they're going to learn together, they're going to see the possible together, and they're going to think about what their aspirations are together. And so I don't know how it started with home and future thinking, but we love the model and maybe we stole it from home future thinking or they stole it from us.

Ted - 00:27:50:

Well, I think in the beginning, Clark, we had this idea that we were going to have these thought leaders and we were going to have these small communities and the thought leaders were going to know things. And I know that some of them have come up to me starting in 2016 and said, I learned more than I told here. That Ross DeVol, who runs the Heartland forward group out of Arkansas, when he was with us, he said afterwards, just hearing if I just could spend all day listening to small towns tell me their stories, that I'd be better at what I did. And so I think the model, when we started, we weren't sure. It was a guess that if we could bring people together and we knew that part, I think we all understand that there's joint learning that really helps the community because it helps everything Willie said about collaboration and connectivity. The thought leaders were kind of disparate, but every one of them, I think, practically has wanted to come back to the next one and listen and share. So I think that that's part of it that has come into play. Both Casey and I work all over the country and the stories are the same if we're in New England or we're out west. I was on the western slope of Colorado recently and in a smaller town and they were telling a story and I could have been anywhere. I'm southern, it could be anywhere in the south, could have told me this exact story. And you look around, it doesn't look anything like my hometown, but it sounds like it. So I think all of those things, where do we go, what's the plan for home of future thinking as we go forward for the next few years? What do you hope to get, what do you think we're going to do?

Clark - 00:29:34:

So I'm going to let Willie take that off. But I want to build on something you just said, Ted, that gets to Casey's question as well that I think is really important is this mix of thinkers and doers. Right. I think is really important, what we found even in our collaborative work is if you start off with a whole lot of thinking and planning, the doers are not going to stay around very long because they want to get something done. But there is this interesting interaction that takes place between people who wake up every day wanting to do this work and people who wake up every day wanting to think about this work and they really do learn from each other. They really do learn from each other. And I'm going to let Willie take the second part of your question. The first part of the question, I love this model and we're going to stick with it because we think this is important, of having thinkers and doers coming to the table.

Ted - 00:30:33:

Willie, I've been around a long time. What Clark just did, that thing just jumped on your back. So I think it's up to you to decide what happens in the next few years.

Casie - 00:30:43:

I will say this though, before we get into this, we're going to make sure that we name this episode Thinkers and Doers.

Willie - 00:30:48:

Okay. There you go.

Casie - 00:30:49:

I love that.

Willie - 00:30:51:

Yeah, it's funny you asked that question because I feel like I can't really define it. When we think about our community work and we think about bringing everyone to the table to determine how we're going to tackle these problems, it's the same thing with home and future thinking. I think every year we're going to have to bring together a sub panel of those cohorts to think of what should we do next, the most impactful way for us to learn and to grow together and attack with some of these problems. And so I want this model personally to be adaptive. I want it to evolve and grow with the communities within our cohort. And I want us to always be able to learn about better ways to move the needle. And so this upcoming one, we're going to do a combination of traditional methods in the past, bringing people back, but also we're looking to speak to some of the members and say, how can we make this more impactful for you all and potentially getting the community more involved in the next conversation as well.

Ted - 00:32:02:

So, Casey, we're going to do ten of these podcasts. We're going to try to mix it up between community telling their story about what their evolution has been the last few years and where they're headed, and then some thought leaders about the issues of the day and that's going to be our 2023. We're going to do some blogs and other things, but it's a. Content year, and then the goal. I guess, I think, is to get a gathering together in 2024. Correct?

Willie - 00:32:29:

Absolutely correct.

Ted - 00:32:30:

Right. So I know somebody listening is going, well, I wasn't invited to the first one and we didn't I mean, we we tried, we reached out to communities and picked about ten to try to get a cross section.

Casie - 00:32:43:

Yep.

Ted - 00:32:43:

And over the years, over the there's been, what, 15 or so communities that have participated?

Casie - 00:32:49:

I think that's it, isn't it, Willie? We've had a total of 15, 16, something like that.

Ted - 00:32:55:

If you're listening, the question is, how do I get I want to do this? The answer is, it's not a closed shop. We'd love to have more communities involved. We think it's a movement that can grow and can be there. If somebody hears about Home of Future Thinking and wants to know how to engage Willie, do they call you? What do they do?

Willie - 00:33:16:

Yes. I would definitely say reach out to us. They can contact me at my email at wjones@drfonline. We have a website that we're working on that's in works. They can look there as well. And we also have a couple like of our previous ones on YouTube, which will then be transferred to the website. But we want to make sure that we're able to meet people where they are, and we want to get as many people involved as possible because that's the only way we're going to move this needle.

Ted - 00:33:47:

Great. This is a collaborative effort of small communities trying to think about how to make their communities better in the future. Clark, anything you want to add about where we're headed?

Clark - 00:33:58:

No, I don't think so. I think the notion is, right, we're going to take this year and as Willie said, we want to hear from everybody else about what they would like to hear and what they would like to learn. And we're really looking forward to building out some content this year and then all getting back together in 2024.

Casie - 00:34:18:

So, Clark and Willie, thanks so much for joining us today. I think you gave us some great context for the rest of our nine podcasts, nine or ten podcasts that we'll be doing. It really will be to get back to you're saying it will be a combination of thinkers and doers. We're going to bring some thought leadership on here. We're going to bring some communities tell the story. So hopefully any of you listening out there are going to continue to join us.

Ted - 00:34:41:

And Casey, we haven't picked the location for the 2024 Conference, so we'll be thinking about that too. If you happen to have the best community in the world and want to show off and host us, we'd be interested in hearing from you too.

Casie - 00:34:59:

Clark and Willie, thank you so much for joining us today to kick off this new podcast series. Your story was extremely interesting and enjoyable for all of us and to all of you listening, we hope you found the conversation also interesting and really informative. If you like the show, we'd love it if you gave us a rating and review at ratethispodcast.com/hoft or share it with your network on any social media platform. Also, if you want more information on how micropolitan can innovate, head on over to homeoffuturethinking.com, where you can find current articles and stories and get information about the upcoming 2024 Conference. This episode was edited and produced by Earfluence for Ted Abernathy. I'm Casey Steinbacher, and we'll see you again soon on the Home of Future Thinking.