



# ENERGIZING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES

## *A Pathway to Prosperity*



Source: Ellie Dudding, E Communities Coach, [Rural Action](#), OH

On December 19th, 2019, Ellie Dudding interviewed Lynne Genter, a key partner in the ECommunity Project for Amesville OH. Notes in brackets indicate editorial additions for context.

## Ellie Dudding interview with Lynne Genter

Ellie: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me and do this interview to describe how you've related to the E Communities program that Rural Action has led. I want to ask you how you fit in with the program, your experience with it, and then also your thoughts on the program. I will get started by asking your early experiences, how you did you get to be involved? What were your first impressions?

Lynne: I remember that my first step in the entrepreneurial work was through Gary Gooseman [Mayor of Amesville], who had met with Dan [Vorisek] in December of 2016. Gary and I had a conversation that Fall, and then I was able to make it to a small committee group meeting in Amesville where Dan and Gary were kind of shepherding the meeting. We had different players at the table than we do now, but Miranda Krider was there and Dan Continenza, who had a body work business in Amesville at the time. It was a different group of people [than who is involved now] and they invited me and I said, "Oh yeah," because I was really interested in keeping Amesville vibrant and keeping the businesses there and learning more.

I came in as a learner. We hadn't really even established ourselves [in Amesville], you know, we owned our land, but we weren't living there on a day-to-day basis. All of 2017, I tried to make it down to meetings, and they were meeting about every month to 5 or 6 weeks. I think that first year was certainly more Dan teaching us what a vibrant and entrepreneurial community could be.

So, he was really teaching us and coaching us and then at the end of 2017, I knew we would be moving down within the next four or five months and that's when they approached me. I think Dan asked me, Dan was really doing a lot of the minute keeping and logistics and Dan asked if I would be willing to take over more as a chair and a facilitator role, which I did formally.

I guess it was maybe August 2017 that I took over. Gary, God love him, just got spread so thin. Gary knows everything about Amesville, which is great, but then also if it's all just one person doing that it can get cumbersome and wavy for that one person and then you also lose a little bit of scope in terms of different ideas or ways things might go. I was happy to step in because I thought for those very reasons, to take one thing off Gary's list, and to then bring some breath of, not what I know about rural communities because I had only grown up in one until I was eighteen, but I never really lived in one until I was an adult so I was eager to do that.

Ellie: Amesville was really successful with the Business Bonanzas. Could you tell us the story of how that got started and how that evolved?

Lynne: Oh, sure! So, we were doing the surveys and using the template that Rural Action had for us to do the entrepreneurial work, which is about a seven-page survey. Trying to engage our community partners and do the survey— we weren't having a lot of luck. Not because of the survey, although I think the length of it sometimes

frightens maybe even those of us on the team, but I think people are busy and it was hard to find face-to-face time with the enterprises and the small cottage industry people. We weren't getting a lot of paper and pen survey results. We had only four or five people complete it and it was a lot of work on the team members to complete it, so we thought why don't we just try and bring people together where they can talk about themselves more than feel the duty and the worry of homework.

Dan was really good because he said, "Don't put that survey out in front of them or say 'hey go fill this out', you know, have the conversation." We were just having trouble getting people to the table for the conversation, but we thought maybe a group gathering would be less threatening, kind of more fun, and so our first Business Bonanza was just that very thing. Let's bring people together, let each other see each other's faces, and see if through conversation and some presentation at the meeting we could learn more about people in our community that own small businesses.

So, that was the purpose and then it really had legs because people were energized by it and had a great time. We felt really, for those of us who facilitated, that if people were sticking around after the meeting to talk and debrief and people weren't running out the door then it's a good meeting. We took that as a sign of a healthy, constructive gathering. From there on we just decided to keep going. We asked the group, I guess I was one of the stronger voices trying to get people together, I felt even though we had the surveys we still needed to validate what people thought they needed and at that time, such as, better internet. I wanted to validate that we weren't making any wrong assumptions about anything and I thought that was best done face-to-face. As we saw a group come together, they enjoyed each other, we identified topics, and they took off from there.

Ellie: That's great. That is such a successful event and organizing tool. I was really impressed by it when I came on board and I am very much looking forward to the ones coming up in the future. You came on as a new resident in Amesville. I guess I am curious about your relationship to Amesville? How did you come to pick this place? Has your impression of Amesville shifted through the evolution of the work you have been doing?

Lynne: I think that I was kind of baffled when Dan and Gary, but mostly Dan, said "Hey, could you take on the role of facilitator?" and I said "I don't even know anything about what goes on here, I don't even own a business here" and of course the response, which I kind of anticipated, was "Even better! Because you won't have allies or foes and you could be a natural facilitator." I said to him "Yeah, I could do that." Plus I know that one of my strong suits is facilitation and being able to bring groups together.

I think early on I had ideas that we could make a really robust street scene, get businesses on State Street and get a presence there. That was probably my first "OK, we could do this! Let's clean up this building!" The ones next to the restaurant, I was like, "Oh, a pub, or a craft show, or a farmers market, or something on State Street."

I have learned that that is not what will probably happen, and we might get a scene there, but it's not what the cottage industry was. In the fall of 2017, I was just starting as a facilitator, we were focusing only on State Street but it's about the look and the feel of our little downtown Amesville. What can we do here, what can we create, how can we make it bigger, robust, or give it a look? That was really what we were doing. Then I started to just

write down every business person I knew from Homecoming Farms to Blue Bird Pottery, and Ed Caplins Pottery. All these people I knew had businesses and were running them out of their homes. Once we got that list and I created this list of 26 businesses, well out of 26 businesses, 20 of them aren't on State Street. It was obvious we needed to shift our focus and look at the cottage industries in our community and support the businesses out there in people's homes.

That was the big shift for what I thought I was going to be focusing on. Moving from the focus on State Street to supporting people who run cottage industries. Whether it be part-time, pass times, part-time leisure, you know it's not the way they make their bread and butter or get their insurance or their benefits, but it's what feeds their soul, so, now, that's our focus— to really support the cottage industry people.

Ellie: Yeah! That is so great to see. That was my first impression of Amesville. On the surface it seems like such a small community, but when you look beneath that immediate surface it is so rich with community networks and small businesses. To see who's working together, it is really amazing.

Lynne: Right. The weavers, the potters, the woodworkers. We have like six serious woodworkers.

Ellie: Which is incredible! So, having seen that evolution, what are your hopes for Amesville?

Lynne: I think to continue to support the cottage industry network. We need to link them to our third Saturdays [events]. One of the third Saturdays, we were trying to get the woodworkers to demonstrate their work and we weren't successful this year. Keeping those people linked together, we've added Ohio Hills Midwifery, which is my daughter's business and we've added 4 or 5 businesses to our list of businesses and we've only taken 1 or 2 off the list in 3 years, everyone else is still hanging in there. The WolfTree Winery is still there, we've added Dutch Creek Winery so we haven't lost ground, which I think is an achievement. It is easy in small towns and big cities to lose independent businesses and we haven't.

Ellie: That's really great. What is your impression of Rural Action's role or how do you feel about Rural Action's input in that work?

Lynne: If it hadn't been for Rural Action, we would have never connected or woven a tapestry for the Amesville cottage industry people. It's still loose, I don't think the weave is tight, but I also think we've woven it together. People do know each other now and people came forward like, "Oh, I didn't know that's what you did!" and we've also really strengthened the bank's [Unified Bank in Amesville] engagement in the community. They have a presence. They are a brick and

mortar, but they have really stepped up to be a part of the community and wanting to be involved with the community. I think that is one of the things I feel really good about. That and maintaining our numbers, and knowing we've grown, and added new businesses to the list.

Ellie: That is so great.

Lynne: I think we had a good hand in supporting Park's Place [the restaurant in Amesville]. I mean, we stayed engaged and we kept talking to people about a business. When we heard the building was for sale and that there might be a restaurant going in there, we took time to figure out who was looking at the business. Gary and

I reached out to those people long before they signed a contract or anything for the building. We talked to Adam who owned the building who was willing to sell, then we just encouraged the owner's of Park's Place, Josh and Vernon, and their family, to do it. We said "we will support you!"

Ellie: I think my last question is simply and generally how can we help in the future? What do you need from us? How can we grow Rural Action's relationship and Amesville's relationship? What do you need from us as we move forward?

Lynne: Well, I think of what you've done in the past. Rural Action has so many deep resources and knowledgeable people. Bringing people in, Rural Action's resources are so vast that they can keep us connected. Mainly I think Rural Action keeps our entrepreneurial team energized. The meetings that you and Dan have, whether it's at Stuart's Opera House [in Nelsonville, OH] or in Stewart [a nearby village] or wherever, when we get to network with other people who are doing this work in our vicinity, in our corner of Ohio, it is very energizing. Even if people are failing, we are there to support one another and one of the things we did when we learned that Shawnee was going to do Second Saturdays, we were like, "Why would we compete with you? Let's move our events to Third Saturdays." So, it was through the networking of Rural Action that we learned about what other communities were doing so we could hitchhike on and steal good ideas from communities down the road.

Ellie: Thank you so much, I think that's all the questions I have for you. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, Lynne.