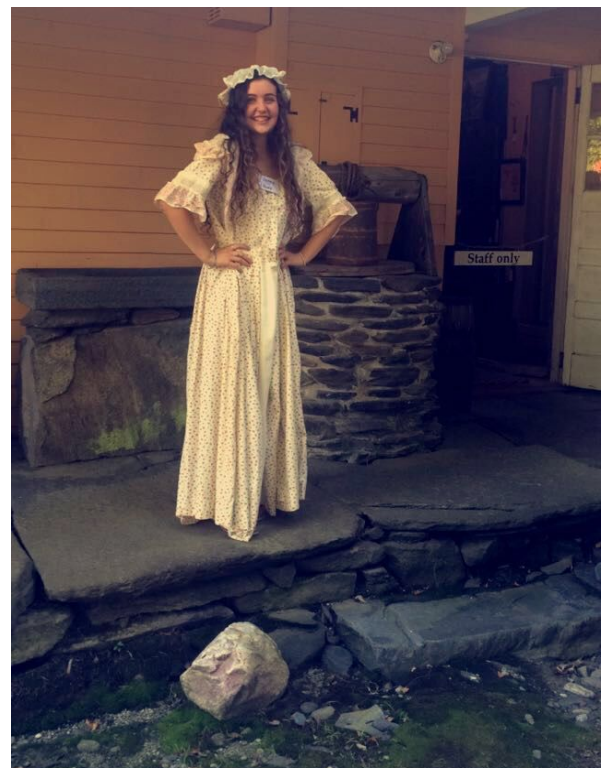


## How A Small Town Taught Me The Necessity Of Engagement

Growing up in a small town is inextricable from my current identity. My community resides in a bucolic hilltown with just under one-thousand residents. My hometown borders the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts. The pastoral houses dot the hilly landscape with great distances in between them. The town self-selects for individuals who are resilient, competent, and community-oriented. It would be incredibly difficult to survive without one's neighbors, because for miles there are no gas stations, there are no supermarkets, and there are no reliable cell phone towers.

My town is a time warp. I grew up with cider making parties, maple syrup collections, and harvest gatherings. There are farm stands where people leave money without hesitation in unlocked boxes. The economy is supplemented by bargaining and traded labor. Citizens become accustomed to eroded dirt roads and frequent power outages. I have even ridden by horseback to the only store in town with my friends.

One of the ways that I have affected positive change in my community is by working at the historical museum. The local museum is an avenue to connect to my hometown through history. The seventeen-room museum is bursting with antiquities. There are human hair wreaths, topographical maps, and old-fashion munitions. As I better my own understanding of my New England town's history, I



am able to share my knowledge with my wider community.

I have been a docent for almost three years, and recently I have become the youngest board member. As a docent, I am immersed in decades of the town's history. I teach my community members about older customs, local inventions, and



historic figures. I have also learned about various types of conservation. One of my favorite ways of recording history is through dendrochronology. Dendrochronology is where the swirling rings on a tree stump correspond to important historical events. What fascinates me most about the museum is how the rich stories and vibrant museum culture breathe vitality into the historical center. My small town has helped me see how engaging in one's community is a symbiotic relationship. I am helping to preserve the town's history, and I also genuinely enjoy spending my days at the museum bonding with sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, and even one-hundred year-olds.

Befriending the oldest historian in town was transformative for me. This past summer, I remember helping the kind historian, Stephen, out of his wheelchair. As I hand him his smooth glassy cane, he leans on my shoulder. We walk together into the historic cider barn. I watch his grin illuminate the dusty cramped space. Stephen points his brittle hairy finger at the mill.

“It still works...I bet’cha,” his chuckle fights to override his wheezing. I smile back and our eyes connect. I am next to him, and on the other side of him is his granddaughter. His granddaughter is an eighth generation townie. Stephen’s eyes glisten mischievously as he motions towards the cider mill, and I finally understand.

“That’s it, girls! Keep her turning ‘round,” Stephen yells with excitement. Hannah, his granddaughter, and I run in circles like cars speeding around a rotary. Our laughter shakes the sighing barn. Stephen begins explaining why he thought it was so crucial to preserve all aspects of the town history. He recalls fighting for the industrial artifacts and convincing the board that these artifacts are just as valuable as manuscripts from the town.

As I have grown older, I realized just how crucial and extraordinary my local community is. I believe positive change begins with engagement, and becoming so involved in local history exemplifies my dedication to being active in my community. I thoroughly enjoy being the part of the next generation that will keep the town’s history alive. The world is moving away from physical books and preserving tangible artifacts. The next inventions may only be found on a computer, and thus may be the next museum. In this rapidly changing world, I strive to continue increasing my engagement on a local and global level.

