

Working Together for Social Justice: Red Bluff Alums for Justice and Grassroots Policy Change in Action

By John Glasgow

Abstract

While we hear much about how Black Lives Matter (BLM) has sought change in urban areas and at the national level, the story of Red Bluff suggests that rural communities are also addressing racial inequities. Moreover, movements like Red Bluff Alums for Justice (RBAFJ) show that rural attributes may support action steps that have the potential to bring about real change.

Introduction

As national media highlighted the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for racial justice in urban centers across the country, similar efforts germinated in rural communities. While much time has been devoted to understanding BLM within an urban context, less is known about small-town efforts for racial justice and equity. Although not typically thought of as such, rural America is incredibly diverse, if not increasingly so. Likewise, small towns face challenges similar to those of more populated areas, including widespread underemployment, economic inopportunity, severe underfunding of public infrastructure, crushing addiction epidemics, and persistent racist policies and behaviors. Yet, as is often the case with issues shared across urban-rural borders, the size and momentum of actions seeking change in urban areas draw the vast majority of the attention, funding, and human and material resources needed to create solutions to these challenges.

Neither urban centers nor rural towns have a monopoly on inequity in the United States, both suffer as a result of it, yet more can be done to recognize and support efforts seeking social and economic justice in all places. Meaningful and lasting action stems from efforts attuned to the real needs and lived experiences of people and communities, particularly those sharing a given physical location. If our collective goal is to work toward justice and equity for all, then we must champion the unique, innovative actions of local grassroots movements in small towns in addition to their larger, louder siblings in urban centers. In this spirit, a Red Bluff, California group shows that rural attributes—familiarity, connection to place, and a sense of community—provide fertile ground for dialogue, action, and reflection in small-town America.

Red Bluff Alums for Justice and Grassroots Policy Change in Action

Founded in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless more Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) people, Red Bluff Alums for Justice (RBAFJ) united hometown alumni to address injustice and inequality they believed permeated their school community. Based on a desire to improve their hometown for future generations, the group partnered with the Red Bluff School District to share experiences and establish concrete steps to achieve change.

One of eight board members for the group, Alana Hinkston (Red Bluff class of 2012), recalls that RBAFJ started rather humbly: “This really started with a message being like, hey

guys, with everything going on during the summer, let's get together and see what we can do at the high school."

As ideas and conversations about how to best engage the community progressed, members of RBAFJ grew increasingly excited at the promise of their vision. Delaney Sheffield (Red Bluff class of 2018) remarks, "You see all these big changes happen in big cities, but you don't ever see a small-town push for social justice changes within their community. And so, for me, seeing a big group of people come out of this town who wanted that [change] was really exciting."

Hinkston explains how her high school experience and her post-high school experience came together during the process. "For me, the impetus of wanting to do this came out of being a Black student who went to Red Bluff High—there definitely were elements that could have been improved. Now I've learned a little bit more, and lived a little bit more, and I'm able to partner with and help the school do more for its students of color."

Bonded through shared experiences at Red Bluff High and beyond—and a commitment to change—RBAFJ board members and participants created policy recommendations to share with the local school board.

Hinkston points out that seeking tangible and measurable goals was a priority. "The biggest thing was pushing for getting things systematically changed. One of the things that I've learned is that if we don't actually change the systems and the way [outcomes] are measured, or success is measured, then you've had a really 'good program,' but you're not actually making change."

Although RBAFJ shared a vision for the change they wished to see, they also recognized they had to involve other perspectives from the community. Excluding participation in a movement seeking profound change in such a small area would have undermined the group's efforts. Effective action in a rural area acknowledges and involves different voices within the same close community that a movement seeks to impact. Not only does this invitation ensure that the effort accounts for allied and divergent opinions, but it also generates a greater sense of ownership toward the movement within the community.

Adrienne Hinkston (Red Bluff class of 2014), Alana's sister, explains how RBAFJ took steps to involve others: "We looked into ways to make changes both from a faculty and staff perspective as well as a student perspective so that the whole culture and experience is better. We talked about doing antiracist training for staff members and changing the curriculum. But on the student side, how can we create a safe space for Black students and people of color?" She adds, "How can we have a diversity representative? How can we have the student newspaper more involved?" Involving many voices, perspectives, and experiences, RBAFJ presented a multifaceted plan that included an antiracist orientation for staff and students, an increased amount of classroom material reflecting the experiences of BIPOC people, and designating a chair in the student body government to work with issues of explicit and implicit racism in the school.

Critical to the group's momentum is that the members of RBAFJ have known the school administrators since they were children. The administrators have seen them grow up. "What has made it a different conversation from what it could have been," Alana Hinkston explains, "is that we're not people coming in from the outside. People on the [school] board are pastors and basketball coaches we grew up with. We grew up with their kids, and we've ridden in their cars to go to games." She continues, "I think what we learned was that a lot of tactics we thought we

would have to employ, because that's what you see in the big movements, actually aren't as useful or necessary." Instead, discussion to bring about change was grounded in years of familiarity and a sense of trust. This rootedness in people, place, and shared experiences is one type of "rural advantage" that gives RBAFJ's efforts authenticity and meaning.

Jane Kinner (Red Bluff class of 2014) echoes that history and relationships matter and prove invaluable. "The superintendent [Todd Brose] has been a point of contact, and he knows us. We knew that going in, and that he would be willing to work with us and on the side of social justice."

After several months of dialogue, RBAFJ formally launched a partnership with Red Bluff High School to tackle equity and social justice issues. The first action step was a school-wide survey that assessed relative experiences with race and equity. This survey was administered to all students, teachers, and staff. Secondly, the school offered antiracist and implicit bias training for faculty and extracurricular programs. Additionally, RBAFJ established a new scholarship for BIPOC students, students identifying with other marginalized identities, and those working on social justice as they graduate and consider post-secondary options.

The results of these efforts are visible. Lee Shilts, a lifelong Red Bluff resident and teacher in the district for 30 years, has already noticed changes. Shilts reports that changes have been made to the school's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). In California, these accountability documents report to the state the district's goals, steps to reach those goals, and the amount of funding needed. Now labeled a "stakeholder group," RBAFJ helps advise the district's LCAP planning to include goals of equity and social justice. In response, Shilts says students seem "more aware" of language and behavior, "[and they] are trying to create more of an open dialogue and address some things we have not been aware of."

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These rural efforts begin by listening to the diverse voices in small communities and seeking to involve them, thus building collective investment and campaign resilience. Local movements like this recall shared histories, familiarity among people, and belonging to a place to build relationships and networks. In this way, these efforts can pool limited human and material resources and direct them toward a shared goal. Finally, these movements collaboratively generate solutions so that the actions taken are not only meaningful in how they reflect the needs and experiences of the community, but also sustainable in the long term because of their broad-based origin.

All that is required to begin a movement is a catalyst—a group or an individual with the drive to start a meaningful conversation, and a shared vision to unify and guide the process. Adrienne Hinkston concludes: "You just have to start and get the ball rolling. Have a conversation and make how you feel known because you never know who else might be thinking the same thing or might be on a similar journey."

About the Author

John Glasgow is currently the Programs and Partnerships Manager at Rural Schools Collaborative, a national non-profit organization helping to build sustainable rural communities through a keen focus on place, teachers, and philanthropy.

Growing up in rural Illinois, John saw how communities could rally together to seek meaningful action on local issues. Inspired by these acts of collaboration, John continued his studies of the power and politics of change through his B.A. in political science and Chinese at Macalester College. Returning to his small-town roots, he focused his master's research at the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies on the intersection of social issues, political structures, economic development, and environmental action in rural communities.