Mechanization has bled jobs from rural America for decades. But the future may be bright.

**Expert from "Rebuilding Rural" from Fall 2018 Utah State Magazine**

Seven miles down the street an awakening is happening in downtown Helper. A row of homes on Main Street pop with new coats of blue, yellow and lavender paint. Posters taped to shop windows advertise an upcoming potluck BBQ where local politicians are serving the community lunch.

"We are just so proud of everything that is happening here," says council member Malarie Matsuda. "Sometimes we get so caught up in the work we are doing that we forget to celebrate."

She co-chairs the town's revitalization committee working to galvanize economic development. They are using the town's past as its north start to guide efforts. Historically, the railroad and coal industries build the town and Helper served as the entertainment hub for local coal mining camps. "It was the watering hole," Matsuda says. "They fueled the economy for Helper. But for 40-50 years those have been on the decline."

Matsuda's ties to Carbon County go back five generations. She is "a proud coal-miner's daughter." Her dad still teaches mine safety at USU Eastern. "We just can't rely on it anymore," she says.

As mines closed, businesses shuttered. But slowly, intentionally, a change has taken hold. Restoration of 2.5 miles of the Price River that flows through the center of town is underway and most storefronts downtown have been purchased with plans for renovation. But signs of Helper's reinvention stem back 20 years or more to when artists attracted to the abandoned buildings moved in.

"They say beauty in this place," Matsuda says. "The economy was so bad for so long, it created this opportunity for these really awesome things to happen."

After graduating from USU Eastern in 2006, Matsuda moved out of the county, and later the state. But she and her husband, also a Carbon County native, kept tabs on the region from afar. We kept our eye on news from home, she shays. "Suicide rates were going way up, opioid overdoses were going way up, we just felt called to come back. I think that's one of the biggest struggles in the county is the brain-drain. People leave and don't come back."

They moved to Helper in 2014 and Matsuda joined the revitalization's steering committee. Helper was awarded a grant from the American Institute of Architects to create a sustainable community redevelopment plan, an exercise involving robust public meetings. The process gave people a way to speak up and work together. Findings showed a preference for increasing tourism spending to boost retail and downtown development.

"We are the gateway to the Arches, to Canyonlands, to Nine Mile Canyon, to the San Rafael Swell," Matsuda says. "A lot of people are traveling right through here on their way. Let's capture some of those dollars. For a long time we have been a pit stop, but we are trying to be a destination spot on our own."

Helper hosts monthly art walks, seasonal arts and music festivals, and sporting events. However, the revitalization is not without challenges. Some people worry about becoming Park City, Matsuda says. "We are never going to be Park City. Helper is Helper."

She believes inclusion will be key to the revitalization's success. There are a lot of people in rural communities with good ideas, she says. "What's critical is being invited into the process, into the political arena so that things can be done." Matsuda points to Helper's mayor who coached her on seeing projects to fruition. "We just need a little guidance and support. It's little steps, little actions, and all of a sudden this project is complete."

Inclusion validates the process and gives people a sense of ownership of changes - down to the type of trees planted on Main Street. But inclusion is also part of
Helper's past. At the turn of the century, 27 languages were spoken here," Matsuda says. "We are really proud of our heritage here. People from Helper are very proud of their town."

And that hometown pride is helping rebuild it, rock by rock. When the town replaced its water lines, leftover boulders unearthed during construction were put to use. The revitalization committee asked volunteers to help build a stone labyrinth by the river. Nearly 30 people showed up - some who didn't even know what they were building," Matsuda says.

There is no blueprint to follow and Matsuda isn't certain she can pinpoint what has made the difference in Helper. She believes that camaraderie between local businesses and community members doesn't hurt. "It's 'we,'" she says. "We talk like 'we.'"

Read the rest of the story in the Fall 2018 Utah State Magazine.