

2008-2009 Rural Voices Youth Contest submission
"Rural Kansas...My Community"

Although I've spent much of my life as a member of a rural community, I didn't always understand what that meant, or more importantly, what that meant to me. When I was ten, we moved "away from civilization", as my older sister put it. My dad retired from the military, and my mom insisted that across a gravel road from a cow pasture and next to public hunting ground was the perfect place to raise a family. It was strange to move from a life with soldiers to a life with farmers. The first few lessons came easily: smile and wave at strangers, invite your neighbors to a bonfire when you burn your downed branches, and don't worry about dog poop. On the surface it was a laid back existence, but eventually I would discover that to be a part of a rural community meant to come together, to support one another, and to make casseroles. It took me a while to learn this lesson, and the shame is that it was only through a tragedy that I saw the sense of community that was always there.

We had already been living in our house a year or two when the Hoffmans moved in next-door, well a quarter of a mile away next door. We saw the U-Haul pull up, and I excitedly hoped they would have a little girl. My mom went over with cookies that afternoon, and my dad followed. All three of my brothers eventually headed that way. Curiosity got of the best of my sister and me, so we went as well.

The first thing I ever heard Jim Hoffman say was, "Wow! They just keep on coming, how many do you have?" Leaning out of the rented truck, he passed a loaded cardboard box down to my father.

My mom laughed and replied, "Five."

"And they all want to help us move in.?" He asked incredulously.

"Sure," She shrugged, "You look like you need the help."

And they did. The family: a husband and wife, who looked too young to be grandparents, and their grandchild, a girl a couple years younger than me, readily accepted our help. We moved them in that day, and our neighborly friendship blossomed. The girl, Chelsea, often spent time at our house while Vicki and Jim were at work. We played Super Mario Brothers, and we made up dances. We did all of the silly little things that young girls do for no apparent reason. During the evenings, the families often sat around on one porch or the other to enjoy the occasional cool breeze. That summer was a cool breeze, a calm whisper of wind, the calm before the storm.

The reason why I so distinctively remember the first thing Jim Hoffman said was because it was one of the few words I ever heard him say. Not soon after moving into his dream retirement home, he was deployed to Iraq. On January 27th, Sergeant 1st Class James Hoffman was killed by an Improvised Explosive Device while serving his country in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

I was napping when my mom startled me awake. "Jim Hoffman was killed in Iraq," She stared at me through hollow eyes, her mind drifting elsewhere.

I sat straight up in bed. "No," was all I could muster. As if with this simple word, I could reverse all that had passed, as if I could alter all that would come. We threw on our shoes and went to visit Vicki and Chelsea.

I spent a lot of time with Chelsea while the adults took care of whatever comes next after a soldier is killed in action. The silly little girl stuff was never the same after

that. The video games had no appeal, and it suddenly didn't matter that there was nothing on TV. Most of the time we just sat and talked, and we cried.

The funeral made it real. The muted voices, the black dresses, and the somber atmosphere closed around me. Even though in later years I would trumpet "Taps" myself, that rendition is still the most heartbreaking. Not wanting to cry in public, I tried to become immune, but when I saw the casket, the tears raced each other down my cheeks. There was a dead husband, father, and soldier in there, and he was never getting out.

The time we spent helping the remaining Hoffmans was a painful blur, but there was one thing that stands out in my mind: the number of people always around. Everyone in the community came by to see how the family was doing. They brought flowers, cards, and lasagnas. They shared sympathy, grief, and Kleenex. Mostly, it was themselves that they presented. Coming together, to support fellow human beings because Vicki and Chelsea needed it and because this small family made smaller lived nearby. It was that sense of community that I remember.

The lengths community members went to help were impressed upon me. The phone constantly rang, and a neighbor was always ready to answer. The women coordinated dinners; one woman brought over a salad, another made spaghetti, and a third presented dessert. Men helped in practical ways. When the horses' water tank froze over, they broke up the ice. A farmer drove his tractor over to plow the driveway when it was impassible because of the snow. The amazing part was that people were not simply walking next door, but driving a good deal, some more than twenty miles to show support.

Our family, the closest not only in distance, did everything we could think of to help. We invited Chelsea and Vicki over for dinner. When they headed down south to visit their family, I dutifully trudged over to feed their horses every morning and every night. Some nights we all just sat around and talked about Jim. Often they didn't need anything but a friend.

I took that sense of community with me, and I use it daily. It reminds me to stop in the hallway and help the little girl who has dropped all of her papers. I always pick up the phone and go to a quiet room when a fellow student calls for homework help. I slow down and ask the woman on the side of the road with her car hood up if anyone is on his way. My rural community taught me that these were not just good deeds, but necessities of life. My community showed me that only by acknowledging the people around me and helping them in their times of need, can I really become human. Maybe we were moving towards civilization after all.