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The 'A' Word with John Davis

Two tiny Minnesota towns buzz with culture, ideas, and (yes) art, thanks to this guy.

by [Stephanie Wilbur Ash](#)



Drive north on Highway 10 to New York Mills and you'll be subjected to a litany of worst-named towns. Keep going past Pillager, Staples, and Motley, and just a hair beyond Oink Joint Road. Veer east and you're in Nimrod. The Burlington-Santa Fe train barrels through New York Mills without braking—no reason to stop.

And yet, on an idyllic June evening, the rural town of 1,200—mostly descendants of Finnish and German farmers—is packed. Motorcyclists from the world's largest Ronald McDonald House benefit ride roar in, and the Great American Think-Off is about to begin. It's 166 miles from Minneapolis, but New York Mills buzzes with engines, people, and big ideas.

The Think-Off is an amateur philosophy competition held at the high school. Boy Scouts distribute programs. Organizers sell coffee mugs printed with the event's logo: Rodin's Thinker atop an open-cab tractor. Promptly at 7 pm, the audience sings "America the Beautiful" and then settles in to hear the competitors address this year's question: Which is more ethical—compromise or sticking to one's principles? A fiction writer, a professor, an IT consultant, and the CEO of a health management company each take their turn at podiums, invoking Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, Jesus Christ, and weight loss along the way. The health CEO—arguing for compromise—wins by audience vote. Then everyone packs into the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center for dessert bars, wine, and the best meatballs you've ever eaten (these are Finns, after all). They check out a photography exhibit by Minneapolis-based John Noltner that's showing here before it hits the Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota. And they consider buying something made by one of the more than 70 local artists who sell work at the gift shop, be it a \$100 sculpted wooden bowl or a \$5 hand-knit "beard warmer" that hooks around your ears.

As everyone mingles, a Boy Scout drinking lemonade sums up what he learned: "I think you can listen to other people and share your ideas without giving up your beliefs," he says. His fellow scouts nod in agreement.

The next morning at the Whistle Stop Bed and Breakfast, members of the town's Regional Cultural Center board gather. They give handmade gifts to the amateur philosophers who made this year's Think-Off another big success. And they chat about all of the other creative endeavors happening around their community.

A retired Park Nicollet pediatrician describes the labyrinth he built on his New York Mills property. He was inspired by another labyrinth in town, the one in the New York Mills Sculpture Park that's right next to the world's largest art tractor, a 17-foot-tall, 3,800-pound monster made of 1,154 scraps of welded iron.



Lanesboro, Minnesota, population 754, lost its grocery and hardware stores this past decade. But its arts economy is thriving.

Talk inevitably turns to the subject of how little New York Mills, once a nowhere of a place, became so interesting. The explanation is simple. It's all because of one man. John Davis, they say. He started all this, and now he's in Lanesboro.

It's another bright night in June, this time south of the Twin Cities on Highway 52. The members of the Lanesboro Arts Center board are entertaining themselves with a capital campaign and board meeting. An architect, an attorney, a biofuel plant manager, a retired pharmacist, a retired financial adviser who also sits on the city council, and two innkeepers make up the board.

At the head of the table sits a man in an innocuously patterned button-down shirt and dark pants. John Davis, executive director of the Lanesboro Arts Center, is distinguishable in demeanor from these other middle-aged Midwesterners in just one aspect: He is slightly more understated.

After everyone takes a potshot at the attorney, including the attorney, they get into the financials. How are they? Pretty close to last year. How did the ArtLofts do? Pretty close to last year, despite the long winter. The line of credit that saw them through the winter? They'll make it all back with the Art in the Park event. The \$5,000 the city was to earmark to work on empty storefronts? That's a done deal.

And how about the little issue of the \$1.1 million capital campaign? "We are two-thirds of the way there already. If we even get through one-quarter of our 'personal ask' list, we'll get there by December," Davis says.

Then the fear creeps in: Are they thinking big enough? Is this going to bring in jobs? Is there enough capacity to implement the plan? Will they really be able to raise another \$400,000?

Davis calmly folds his hands in front of him. "We're doing something no other organization this size has ever tried," he says. "And the answer to all of your questions is 'yes.' "

John Davis moved to New York Mills from Minneapolis in 1987 because that's where the \$10,000 he had saved up would buy him acreage. Born in Manhattan and raised in Minneapolis by hippie intellectuals, he had just graduated from MCAD. He had done OK there. For a class called "Creative Problem-Solving," he had so smartly redesigned bedside tables at Children's Hospitals and Clinics that it resulted in a production order and an offer to help redesign a hospital wing. He was 19 years old. He received a C because he was two weeks late turning in the assignment.

The farm he bought in New York Mills included a house with no front door or working plumbing. "I went broke three times. The first two years I lived there, I made \$4,500 a year if I was lucky," Davis says. To stay fed, he painted farmers' barns and often ended up coming into the house for coffee and pie. Though an introvert, Davis had once sold shoes and hence had learned how to talk to anyone with feet. But talking to farm families changed him.



Damon Prestemon (right) gossips with Norwegian farmer “Lars” played by Robin Krom. Both perform in Lanesboro’s Over the Back Fence radio show to sold-out audiences.

“I had preconceived notions of what a farming community was about,” he says. When farmers learned he was an arts graduate from “the Cities,” they wanted to talk poetry, and opera, and works of art they admired, and art they themselves had made. “There was a yearning for the arts,” Davis says. “But there was no access.”

There was no Music Man–like fanfare for his leadership either. “People there didn’t see me as an agent for change. They saw me as a guy who worked really hard painting houses and barns.” And they liked him. And he liked them. And, well, he could see people wanted the arts, so he asked: “How can we weave the arts into this community so tightly that it’s hard to remove it?”

Within three years he had founded an artist residency in his home, established a nonprofit in an abandoned building downtown, started the Great American Think-Off, and the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center received \$35,000 from the New York Mills city council. It was the equivalent, he claims, of asking a city the size of Minneapolis to donate \$13.7 million. Another \$50,000 followed from the McKnight Foundation in 1991, but such city-based arts funders were a hard sell at the time. Back then, funding rural arts activities was considered a universally bad idea because there was no perceived value, Davis says. He kept hearing, “Why would you waste your time up there when people could just come to the Twin Cities?”

“I was so frustrated, I wanted to body slam people,” he says.

From 1992 to 1998, 17 new businesses opened in New York Mills. The Today Show, The New York Times, USA Today, and National Public Radio all called. Bucking a national trend for rural areas, New York Mills did not lose population but actually grew slightly from 2000 to 2010.

It was never about the money, Davis is quick to point out. You don't create economic sustainability by finding grantors or asking your neighbors for donations. And you don't build an arts economy by talking conceptually about "the arts."

"You don't start by looking for money. And you don't use the 'A' word," Davis says. "You start by sitting down and having coffee with people and making a collective vision." You start, he says, by understanding what your community has to share and then looking for interesting ways to tell its story.

For example, one of the first visiting artists Davis brought up to New York Mills, Linda Koutsky, was fascinated by local grain elevators and did an entire art exhibition on them, some rendered in seed art. Her work so captivated people's hearts that grain elevator management stepped up to host a joint exhibition with the cultural center.

Later, when New York Mills opened its sculpture park, a petite elderly woman who had lived in the community her whole life said to Davis, "I just want you to know what this change in this community means to me." Then she said, "I bet you don't remember who I am." He replied, "Of course I do. I painted your garage 10 years ago."



In 2000, Davis showed up in Lanesboro.

Unlike New York Mills, Lanesboro had been using the "A" word quite liberally since the paved Root River State Bike Trail covered the old railroad grade in 1986. In fact, Lanesboro already had three arts organizations. Davis was hired to run one of them. Lanesboro also had a gallery and gift shop representing local and regional artists and a 120-seat theater. Much of the downtown was already on the National Register of Historic Places.

Lanesboro had its good looks, too. Naturally breathtakingly beautiful, it is tucked deep into that corner bit of southeastern Minnesota the glaciers let be. Just turn off Highway 52 and onto County Road 8 at

the Fillmore County Historical Museum. (Check out the stuffed two-headed calf and the pickup truck that runs on wood.) Once in the valley and around the bend you're plunged into the heart of what appears to be a turn-of-the-century pioneer town, charmingly well kept and minus the gunslinging and houses of ill repute. Instead, bicyclists and paddlers and river anglers and readers of Outside magazine—which, in 2004, named Lanesboro one of its best small towns in which to recreate—all clamor for access to the trails and river.

But the town itself wasn't thriving. Davis proposed a plan that would fiscally and administratively merge two of the three independent arts organizations, improve city infrastructure, and make the entire town into "art."

It was rejected. Unlike New York Mills, Lanesboro did see Davis as an agent for change. They just didn't like what he proposed. So Davis quit.

He went looking for other projects. "I traveled a lot," he says. He started the Kids Philosophy Slam and promoted it out of an Airstream trailer. This year, 17-year-old Christopher Mergen from Maryland was named the most philosophical kid in America for his response to "Which is more powerful, love or hate?" Mergen argued for love.

After four years, Lanesboro called Davis back. The town's hardware store was gone; the grocery was about to go. Liz Bucheit, artist and co-owner of Crown Trout Jewelers, was chair of the arts board that hired Davis back. Partly it was because of his fiscal responsibility. "We needed someone who could balance the checkbook. We needed that to be viable," she says. But really it was the community's change of heart about the plan Davis had. "His vision is golden."

"I proposed it again in the worst economy since the Depression," Davis says. But this time, he took his own advice and established goodwill with the existing arts organizations. He listened the way he had listened in New York Mills. He let go of timelines. Eventually, two arts organizations combined into one. Davis became executive director of the new Lanesboro Arts Center. With the force of this newly coalesced community, employees and volunteers raised \$100,000 to restore a historic walking bridge connecting a parking lot so no one who parks there has to walk across the highway to reach businesses. When that wasn't enough money, Davis strategized efforts to lobby the city to put forth a bond referendum for the rest. It passed.

Is this in the scope of duties for a rural community's arts center director? Such lines don't matter to Davis, or to Lanesboro. And anyway, he was president of the Chamber of Commerce (which he also founded).

None of this was about the money either. And that's when the big money started coming in.



Gordy Tindal and his wife, Val, are in the second year of their Lanesboro diner dream. Spud Boy Diner sits on a plot of land that used to be an open-air latrine for patrons of the downtown bars.

Show up for dinner early at Pedal Pushers Cafe on a Friday night in Lanesboro and you're going to wait for a table. You may even have to contend with a television news team down from "the Cities" filming a segment on the town's tourism. But it will all be worth it because of the homebrewed root beer, which the owner made himself in the basement.

Show up on time to a live taping of Over the Back Fence, Lanesboro's community radio show at the St. Mane Theater (kitty-corner from Pedal Pushers), and you're too late. All 120 seats are taken, and you'll have to stand. But that will be worth it, too. Though it's made with volunteers, Damon Prestemon has been emceeing the show for 19 years and is clearly a pro. On this particular Friday, he's at the piano in a nun's habit with a very un-nun-like hem, because the theme is "gospel."

"I didn't wear a slip. Can you guys see through this?" he asks the audience. Gratefully, we cannot. A choir in full robes sings "This Little Light of Mine." The Pine Box Duo—"Our first gig was a funeral," the guitar player says—is so good someone in the audience of primarily descendants of German and Norwegian farmers actually exclaims "wow!" A guy identified only as Jerry reads a joke with the punch line "and if Jesus sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter." No agrarian stoicism here—the crowd roars with laughter.

Near the show's end, the chairman of the board of Lanesboro's Arts Center, Dick Haight, the retired pharmacist who is one of John Davis's bosses, sings a hymn with two friends. The hymn is "You Can't Stand Up Alone."

The next morning at Dick and Diane Haight's four-bedroom log home just outside of Lanesboro, 16 people make 202 pies for Art in the Park. It is the arts center's largest community-produced event, and it comes just two weeks off of the 24 pies Diane made herself for Rhubarb Festival (which earned a visit

from two National Geographic photographers this June and from Garrison Keillor in 2007). There isn't a lick of rhubarb left within a three-mile radius. Of these 16 pie assemblers, most are transplants from the Twin Cities. Only three were raised in Lanesboro, and two of them are sisters. "When we left Lanesboro in 1974, it was a ghost town," says Heidi Dybing. She and her husband recently retired from their organic farm nearby.

"If we had been rich in high school, we could have bought the whole downtown for \$50,000."

Today, the median home value in Lanesboro is about \$114,000, a 30 percent increase over what it was in 2000. And at Art in the Park, they'll get more than 2,000 visitors. They'll move all of the pies. They'll move thousands of dollars' worth of homegrown goods at the new food co-op. And the arts center staff will move hundreds of works of art because, believe it or not, outside of the current capital campaign, support from the government and foundations is not the Lanesboro Arts Center's largest source of revenue. The sale of art is.

And somewhere in there, Walt Bradley, a Thrivent insurance agent and sometimes musician in the Over the Back Fence radio show, will approach John Davis eating breakfast at the Chat-N-Chew. Bradley will have just seen a painting of himself done by visiting artist Matt Duckett in an exhibition called Rural Americans. Bradley will say, "He got me right! Right down to the buttons on my overalls!" and then he will tell Davis he plans to buy that painting and also to personally donate funds to the arts center capital campaign, which Thrivent will match.

And when Bradley walks away, Davis will lean back, smile with satisfaction, and whisper, "I've been asking him for months."

This is why Davis is so sure Lanesboro will meet its goals. He knows the power of sitting back and letting the art do the work. He knows there would be no money without the art, without a community coming together to share its stories.

Speaking of which, Davis has another favorite story about another grain elevator art show, this one in Lanesboro. During the opening, an old farmer walked in and stood alone before the exhibition. "He was clutching something," Davis says. "It was a photo of the grain elevator his grandfather had built by hand."

You can't buy that kind of connection; you build it from the ground up.



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