Possibilitarian Jonathan D. Lewis is transforming Wardensville and the lives of its youth

Meet the

POSSIBILITARIANS

JONATHAN D. LEWIS

These changemakers are turning their towns around

WARDENSVILLE

Jonathan D. Lewis Foundation transforms Wardensville and the lives of its youth.

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Ever wonder how a dying town finds a new lease on life? How boarded up buildings become bastions for new businesses? How small rural communities can educate youth while empowering them to improve their hometowns? If so, you’re going to love meeting these Possibilitarians. They embrace bold ideas with purposeful action and inspire and mobilize others to do the same. They focus on solutions instead of problems. They think positively and act with passion. They turn possibilities into realities.

If you’ve driven through Wardensville in the last five years, you know something wonderful is in the air. Maybe it’s the smell of freshly baked bread or newly tilled fields. Or maybe it’s because once-boarded up buildings are now bustling with new businesses. But what you may not know is that Wardensville has an angel, and his name is Jonathan D. Lewis. OK, he doesn’t really have a halo or effervescent wings, but as a social impact angel investor, he is an important part of the town’s transformation story.
In 2016, Lewis, founder and board chair of Jonathan D. Lewis Foundation, launched Farms Work Wonders, an experimental pilot project in Wardensville. His nonprofit focuses on creating opportunities for local youth through food-, farm-, and arts-based social enterprises where youth are provided employment and taught essential skills. Farms Work Wonders started with a pilot budget of $150,000 and six employees and, in five short years, has grown to a $2 million budget with more than 80 employees, along with several successful nonprofit social enterprise businesses that serve as dynamic living classrooms—an organic farm, market, bakery, glass studio, and soon-to-be-launched restaurant. Unlike most foundations, the Jonathan D. Lewis Foundation prefers a hands-on approach, working side-by-side with local changemakers as opposed to simply being a traditional benefactor. By creating income through their social enterprises and reinvesting 100% of it back into their program and the community, the foundation has been an economic engine for the town and catalyst for change.

YOU PREVIOUSLY HAD NO TIES TO THE STATE, SO WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN INVESTING IN RURAL WEST VIRGINIA?

My foundation has tested various experimental models over the years across the United States, mostly in urban areas, and we had been searching for a rural site or farm for our next youth empowerment project. My familiarity with the Appalachian region stems from my childhood. My husband, Mark, grew up in Pennsylvania, and I grew up in Ohio in the foothills of Appalachia. That has always meant something to me and stuck in my mind as a special place even when I moved away.

Several years prior to the launch of Farms Work Wonders, I visited Paul Yandura and Donald Hitchcock (founders of the Lost River Trading Post in Wardensville) and fell in love with the area. It reminded me of the drives we would take around Ohio, but West Virginia’s natural beauty was even more stunning. Paul has worked for my foundation for almost 20 years, so it seemed like a natural place for our next foundation venture. It came together so effortlessly, it felt as if it was meant to be. Looking back now, I believe we made the right decision and could not be happier with it.
TELL ME ABOUT YOUR NONPROFIT SOCIAL ENTERPRISE MODEL. HOW HAS IT CHANGED AND EXPANDED? HOW IS IT SUSTAINABLE?

Think of this model as creating a nonprofit business that serves as a living classroom for local youth while also creating income, or “profit,” to sustain the organization so it can continue to do good locally. This allows the programs to have instant impact, provide stability, and focus on doing good instead of focusing nonstop on fundraising.

In this model, my foundation becomes an investor and mentor to the programs instead of a funder, providing the start-up capital to secure assets and infrastructure while also guaranteeing a multi-year operating grant. That operating grant should lessen as the years go by, and the “profits” from the social enterprise businesses kick in.

Ultimately, we wanted to test a rural nonprofit model that could teach valuable skills and provide employment to local youth while also becoming a self-sustaining, respected pillar of the community. We want this project to inspire others and to live on beyond us, providing a hand up instead of a hand out that would disappear when funding ran out. The initial investment and this model creates an independent income stream to keep the nonprofit alive for years to come.
WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT THE SUCCESSES YOU’VE SEEN?

I have been amazed at how hard the local youth are willing to work. Every time I visit and see their smiles while they are hard at work, the return on investment is visible. It has been a privilege to watch the journey of several of our junior crew (teenage employees) graduate high school, go to college, and return to work for us.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE NONPROFIT’S BIGGEST CHALLENGES? AND HOW HAVE YOU WORKED TO SOLVE THEM?

The success of the business enterprises has taken us by surprise. Some days it seems like we can not keep up with customer demand. The sales from our market in the old farmhouse last year, our fifth year in operation, surpassed a half-million dollars. We have had to create the necessary infrastructure and expand our crews so fast in such a short period that we are now having to really focus on the organizational side of things. We have seen an average of 29% growth in sales year after year,

I think the other, and possibly bigger, challenge is the tension between successfully carrying out our youth empowerment mission while also managing multiple, successful connected businesses. We say that we are “making money to do good,” but sometimes those two things can be at odds. We want to always focus on doing good but, in order for it to be truly sustainable and live past us, we must also create income, or the project will have to spend inordinate amounts of time fundraising. It may be a nonprofit, but to be sustainable, the income from the business enterprises is key. The way to tackle all of these challenges is by being open and honest about them and challenging ourselves to find creative ways to solve and navigate them, instead of ignoring them.

YOUR SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT HAS BEEN AN IMPORTANT CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN WARDENSVILLE. WHAT CAN OTHER COMMUNITIES DO TO ATTRACT OTHER INVESTORS LIKE YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION?

I think it can be tough for any outsider to come into a new community. I wholeheartedly believe that tough questions should be asked, and I believe that you should hold people accountable to do what they say. I also believe we have done just that. I know that rural economic development is going through a popular period nowadays, and everyone is talking about it. But who is really investing for the long-term and experimenting to find the best solutions, whether new or old ideas, and who is giving it lip service? We have been investing in Wardensville for over six years now, and are not going anywhere. We are committed to seeing this through.
It is not easy to attract investors, but it can be done. One of my goals is to inspire others through our work. It is no longer theoretical—we are actually building and testing this model, and other investors can come and see it for themselves. I do know that the way we attract smart, talented people is by always striving to be open to new ways of doing things, and new ideas, while also constantly challenging ourselves to be better and do more. We also are continually reassessing our compensation and benefits structures to ensure that we are highly competitive. In fact, we just adjusted all employee wages upwards and have fully-paid health insurance for full-time employees, along with other generous benefits.

WHEN YOU FIRST CAME TO WEST VIRGINIA, WHAT WERE YOUR PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE STATE?

I had a perception that West Virginia was a beautiful state, but I have to admit it is even more beautiful than I had imagined. I now understand why so many love the state. I had no preconception about the people, but I have been so moved by the warmth and openness of the youth, their parents, and the local community in making us a part of the community and history of Wardensville.

I also understand better why some feel the need to protect their state. But closing the gates is not going to create new opportunities, economic or otherwise. It is one reason we specifically used a nonprofit social enterprise model in order to create an immediate positive impact locally and correct the historically negative economic development in Appalachia, which often created profits for outside companies. It was one way for us to prove our intentions. We have no shareholders or any investors making a profit from our sales or the project—100% of the sales go right back into the program to inspire and hire more local youth. Our true return on investment is the good that we are doing and the amazing stories we hear from youth who have worked with the program.

WHAT KEEPS YOU HERE AND VESTED?

The amazing young people and the natural beauty of the mountains. My goal is to ensure that as many young people as possible, regardless of economic or other barriers, are empowered and equipped to make their own unique contribution to the world. I would also add that the positive feedback and hearty welcome from the community has been moving.