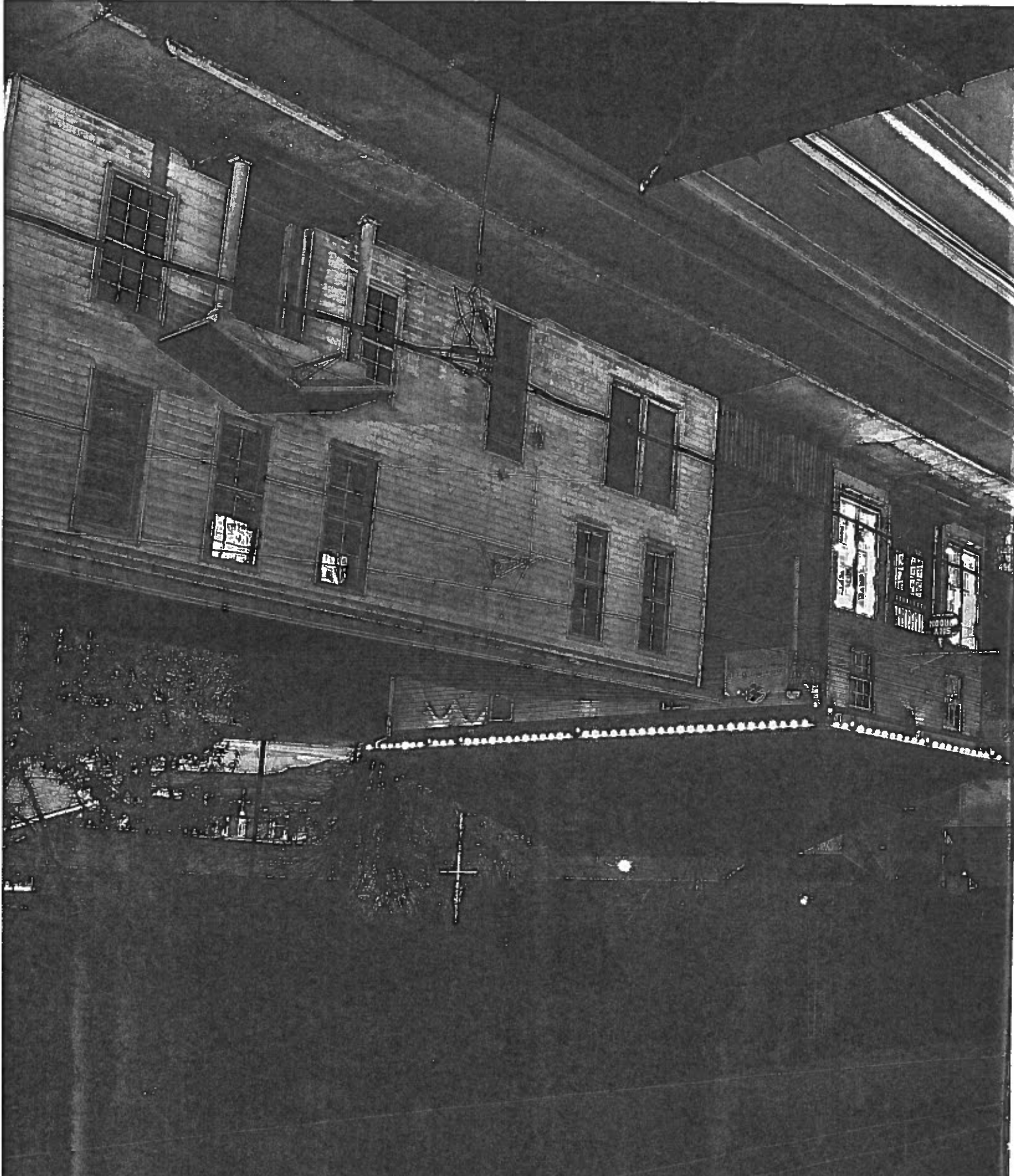
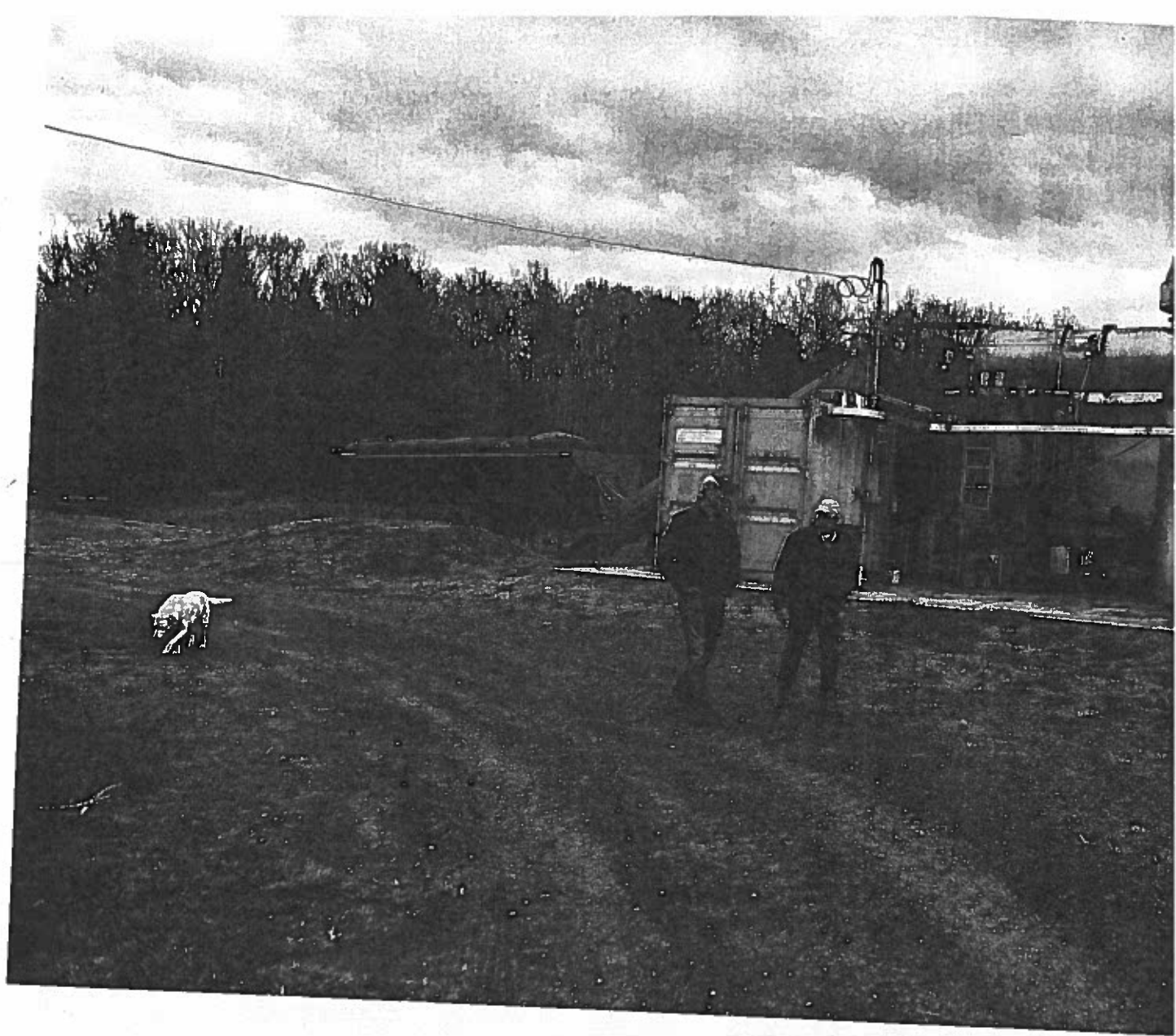


Town and Country





A LIBERAL ENTREPRENEUR FROM WASHINGTON WANTED TO HELP WEST VIRGINIANS START THEIR OWN BUSINESSES. FIRST HE HAD TO WORK ON HIMSELF.
STORY BY JENNIFER MILLER / PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICKY CARIOTTI



O

n a sunny day last October, Joe Kapp ducked out of the fresh afternoon air and into the ammonia stench of an industrial chicken house. He followed Josh Frye, the owner, into the crush of 30,000 scuttling, chirping and crapping chicks, just 10 days old and still downy. Frye has three such houses here in Wardensville, W.Va., each the length of 1½ football fields, and he walks them three times a day, nearly 300 days a year. He adjusts the temperature and ventilation, checks the water feeders and gauges the flock's health.

"I'm in awe of this," Kapp said as birds scooted out of his path.

"You get a run of emotions from visitors," said Frye, 52. "From awesome to disgusting."

After the first time he visited Frye's farm, Kapp had come home with his boots smeared in chicken poop. "Joey, what have you been *doing*?" asked Carlos Gutierrez, Kapp's partner of 25 years. And Kapp answered, "Honey, you don't even want to know."

When Kapp, 47, an entrepreneur, and Gutierrez, 46, an entertainment lawyer, decamped to a West Virginia cabin in 2012, industrial chicken houses were not on the agenda. They'd come to take professional sabbaticals. But Kapp, who has a restless energy and an insatiable drive to make things happen, had barely settled into his Adirondack chair when he befriended the forward-thinking president at the local community college. From there, it wasn't long before he was helping the college to launch an innovative project, the Institute for Rural Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (IREED), aimed at diversifying the regional economy of West Virginia's eastern panhandle. Over the past two years, Josh Frye had become one of IREED's most promising clients as he tried to develop his chicken farm into something much more ambitious: an innovative business with wide-reaching economic and environmental potential for the state.

And yet, determined as Kapp was to help West Virginians like Frye, he was initially blind to the challenges of such a project — not just the systemic obstacles that have kept West Virginia from adapting to a rapidly evolving economy, but the personal roadblocks he would encounter as an affluent, liberal urbanite living in a rural culture he didn't understand. He would eventually find himself the object of a vicious online campaign, targeted with homophobia and maligned as an arrogant carpetbagger. But easy as it might be, especially in the Trump era, to write off this response as pure bigotry and partisan ignorance, Kapp took another perspective. "I had to take some time to muck around in chicken s---," he says. "I learned humility. If we can drop our sense of 'we know best,' that animus that I have been the target of doesn't need to be there."

Kapp has become an unlikely advocate for rural communities and their largely conservative, working-class populations. He believes this demographic has far more potential than they are given credit for. They deserve economic self-determination, he says, not empty promises to revive dying industries. He is certain that by harnessing local knowledge, like agriculture, they can start businesses and put their own people back to work.

At the same time, Kapp knows that urban partners are vital to helping these

communities access resources and take entrepreneurial risks. Which creates a problem: At a moment when our country is increasingly divided, convincing West Virginians to trust the liberal, urban elites who have long maligned them isn't easy. No less simple, Kapp has discovered, is getting these elites — himself included — to recognize their own shortcomings.

I REED is headquartered at Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, a modest, two-story building overlooking the new Corridor H highway. These days, it's a 20-minute jaunt from Wardensville. A few years ago, the only option was a two-lane road, often backed up by slow-moving chicken and coal trucks. Then, the same drive could take an hour. Only part of Corridor H is open now, but when finished, the 148-mile thoroughfare between Virginia's Shenandoah Valley region and central West Virginia will serve as a badly needed conduit for workers, goods and visitors.

Many people in the Potomac Highlands, the six-county region that Eastern serves, commute. Wardensville residents might drive between 30 and 70 miles to work each way because there aren't jobs closer to home. Those who do work locally gravitate toward poultry processing, furniture manufacturing and agriculture, but the numbers aren't good. In 2015, the unemployment rate in Hardy County, where Eastern is based, was 7.5 percent, compared with 6.7 percent statewide and 5.3 percent nationally. The per capita income in Hardy was just under \$28,000 a year, compared with about \$37,000 for the state and \$48,000 nationwide. The Appalachian Regional Commission may not categorize Hardy County as economically "distressed" like the southwestern part of the state, but it falls somewhere between "transitional" and "at-risk." It's not surprising that so many young people are opting to leave the state.

Lindsey Teets, Eastern's small-business development coach, lamented this fact one afternoon in July. "Ninety percent of the kids I talk to at local high schools say they can't make any money here," he said. "To me, that's heartbreaking." Teets grew up in West Virginia and, in addition to his job at



Previous pages:
Main Street in
Wardensville, W.Va.
Above: Entrepreneur
Joe Kapp, left, visits
poultry farmer Josh
Frye.

the college, runs a 200-head sheep farm with his father. On this day, he and Kapp were driving out to visit a small brewery whose revenue Teets had helped double over the past year. "Quite frankly," Teets continued, "there's almost nothing you can't do from anywhere now."

"Assuming you have broadband," Kapp scoffed. Halfway to the brewery, he knew, they'd lose service.

"Before the 1930s, Appalachia didn't have electrification," Teets said. "And today we don't have Internet. It's the same problem."

Kapp shook his head. "You've got kids doing their homework in McDonald's parking lots. People in most of the country just have no idea."

Growing up, Kapp certainly didn't. He was raised in a middle-class North Miami Beach community, attended high school with the likes of author Brad Meltzer and Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and received his master's in government administration at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduate school, he taught himself to code and bounced between companies, including a large tax-audit firm and a corporation that did sales force automation. By 26, he was working with major clients such as Johnson & Johnson and ExxonMobil.

But Kapp wasn't happy. He didn't just need a more fulfilling job — he needed a mission. This hit home one weekend when a Ford Explorer crashed into his car and propelled it into oncoming traffic. Kapp walked away without serious injury but determined to change his life. He quit his job and fled to the Tibetan Plateau, near the Himalayas. On his journey he kept thinking about Gutierrez, his longtime partner and the primary stabilizing force in his life. Inspiration struck: He decided he would help other gay couples achieve a similar stability. In 2006, he co-founded a D.C.-based financial and estate planning practice focused on LGBTQ couples and, a few years later, helped build the Capital Area Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce out of a previously existing non-profit.

Before arriving in West Virginia, Kapp had only one experience at a community college: a summer biology class he and Gutierrez took for extra college credit. They treated it like a joke. While dissecting a fish, Kapp scooped out an eyeball and dropped

it in the animal's stomach. "Look!" he told the professor, thinking himself quite clever, "it's an introspective fish!"

So when Kapp volunteered to teach an entrepreneurship course at Eastern in 2012, it was mainly out of boredom. He hardly considered it a real job; the college could barely pay. "When you think of the way that community colleges have been viewed, it's sort of like the redheaded stepchild of education," Kapp told me. He now considers this ironic, because after completing an undergraduate degree in economics from Florida State University, he initially couldn't get a job. "After Hurricane Irma, the people who were climbing the poles and fixing the lights were the people getting their trade skills at a community college," he says. "It's unlikely you could take somebody from an Ivy League college and have them climb a pole after a hurricane."

At Eastern, Kapp was impressed by his students' enthusiasm and was surprised to learn that some of them, along with a number of staff members, had side hustles to make ends meet. "People in big cities call the 'gig economy' the new thing," Kapp says. "But it's been in rural communities forever. I'm a ditch digger, but I've got a vegetable garden market going." What they lacked, however, were the kinds of small-business development resources typically found in cities. Kapp believed Eastern, with its small size and lack of red tape, could be a hub for just that.

Chuck Terrell, Eastern's mustachioed, tattooed president, was amenable; getting students to enroll had been a struggle, and he'd been looking for ways to engage the broader community. West Virginia's community college system is just over a decade old and has some of the lowest enrollment rates in the country — only about 10 percent of high school graduates, compared with 50 percent of graduates nationwide.

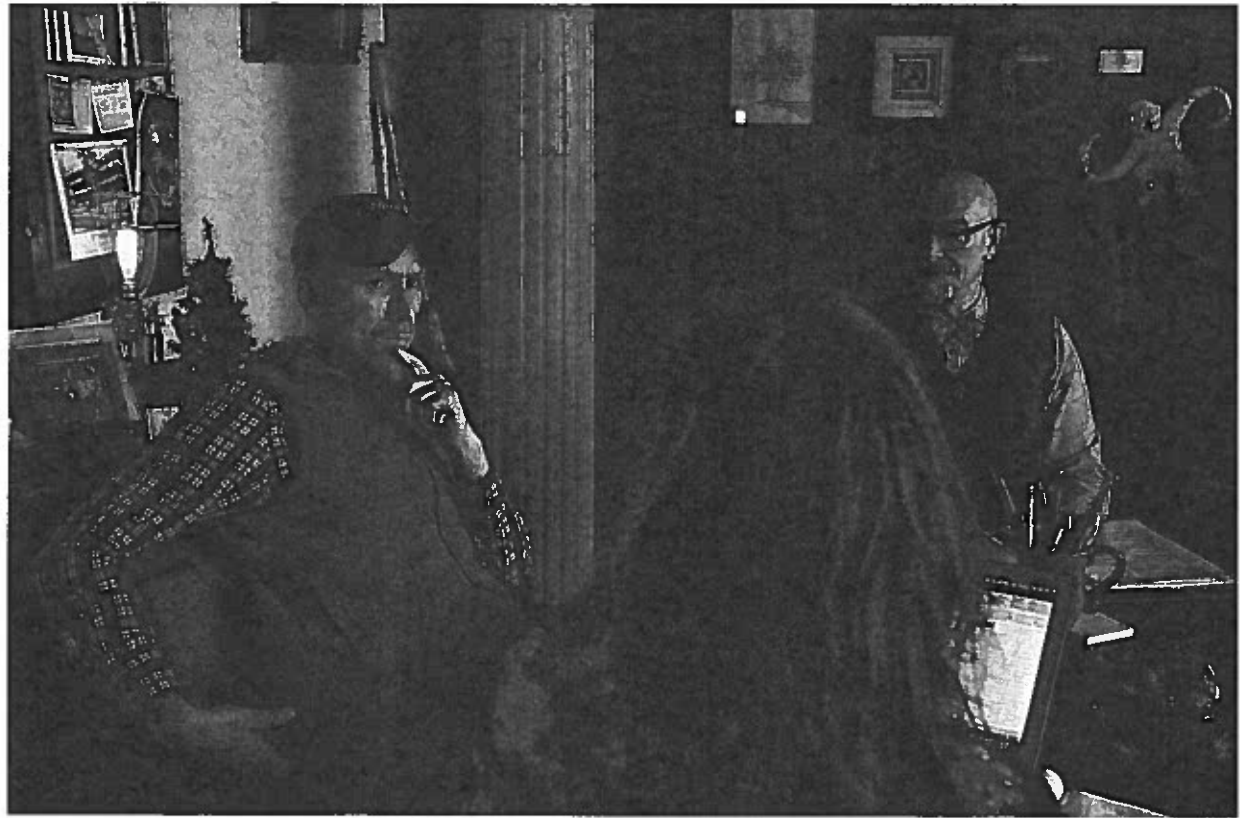
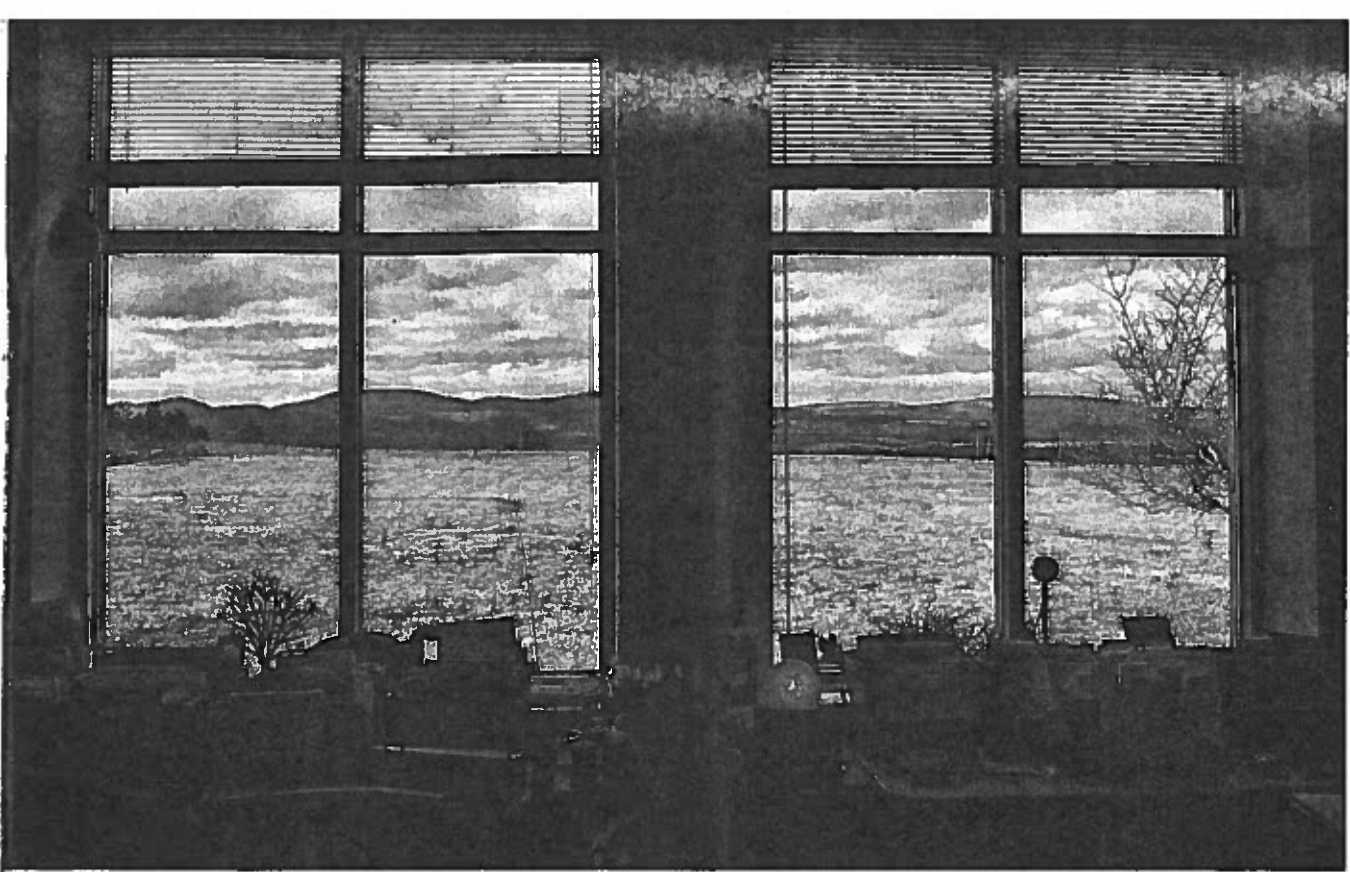
But the kind of economic development that Kapp had in mind wasn't part of community college culture. "That's more of a four-year college role," says Sarah Tucker, chancellor of the West Virginia Council for Community and Technical College Education. According to her and Terrell, community colleges largely put people to work by developing short-term training programs to meet the needs of specific employers.

This January, for instance, Eastern will begin teaching industrial-maintenance courses to train potential hires for a manufacturing company called Automated Packaging Systems. The college's welding program also has an agreement with the Ironworkers Local Union No. 568. Students who complete the program are guaranteed an interview and can earn credit toward becoming fully skilled pipe welders.

Some community colleges have partnered with major corporations looking to hire many hundreds of workers. But that's not possible in low-density areas like the Potomac Highlands. "Everyone's talking about Amazon, but that's not the right way to talk about economic development" in a rural community, says Nathan Ohle, executive director of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, which focuses on communities of several thousand people. "That's putting all your eggs in one basket. You need to create an ecosystem that allows for small-scale manufacturing and innovators. Quite frankly, what works in urban and suburban places won't work in rural ones."

It's not surprising, then, that CNBC's 2017 report on "America's Top States for Business" ranked West Virginia 49th in three categories: workforce, technology and innovation, and business friendliness. The state's mountainous geography, its diffuse and aging population and its lack of services, including high-speed Internet, make it less than desirable for big companies. It can't attract enough outside job creators to replace the 33 percent of coal mining — and coal mining support service — jobs lost since 2008. And these jobs, though temporarily holding stable, will continue a gradual decline over the next two decades, according to John Deskins, director of the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at West Virginia University. "We have a desperate need for industrial diversification," says Deskins. "And the only way to achieve it is to foster and promote small-business culture."

In 2013, Kapp pitched Terrell on the idea of establishing an institute for rural entrepreneurship. No community college in the state had anything of the kind. Kapp helped Eastern secure a \$15,000 grant from the Coleman Foundation to set up IREED. Then, at an event for the National Association for Community College Entre-



From top: The view from the office of Chuck Terrell, president of Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College in

Moorefield. Kapp, left, with Terrell, right, and Tina Metzer, executive director of the New Biz Launchpad, a business incubator in Wardensville.

preneurship (NACCE), Eastern was offered the chance to apply for \$100,000, on the condition that it raise matching funds. When he heard this, Terrell leaned over to Kapp and said, "Well, we're out. I don't have a hundred thousand in our budget." Kapp replied: "The problem isn't the money. The problem is your attitude."

"I'm a college president, and we've got a little ego at times," Terrell said later. "Internally, I was like, 'Who are you?'"

As Tucker explains, community colleges, like many West Virginians, are struggling just to survive. "We've been hit with several budget cuts in the last two years alone," she says. "So it's easy in that context to just want to tread water, just do what you're supposed to be doing in the moment, put your head in the sand. To say, 'We've been cut, we've been cut, we've been cut.' But Joe doesn't back down from what he wants to do. He's going to find a way."

Eventually, Kapp helped raise over \$767,000 from a handful of private and public funders to support IREED initiatives. These included an entrepreneur-in-residence position for Kapp, which he assumed in 2014, and a Wardensville-based business incubator called the New Biz Launchpad, which opened in 2015.

Kapp had a new mission in West Virginia, but to him, it was simply an extension of his previous work helping LGBTQ couples and businesses find financial security. Though a secular Jew, he'd taken to heart a saying from Rabbi Maimonides: "The highest degree of charity, above which there is no other, is he who strengthens the hand of [the poor] ... till he is able to be independent." To Kapp, that meant helping marginalized people become self-reliant. And as a gay man, Joe Kapp knew from marginalized communities. Surely he could help the people of West Virginia.

Kapp did not come out of the closet until college, and when his parents learned he was gay, their primary reaction was fear. "They were really concerned that I'd be able to rely on myself," Kapp says. "They wanted to make sure that nobody would ever harm me or fire me from a job." Kapp understood their anxiety. "It's about 1989, and things were actually really, really difficult," he recalls. "You still don't have ubiq-

uitous Internet access. You're still in the throngs of the AIDS crisis, still having issues with homophobia, police raids of clubs. ... If I'd come out much earlier, my life could have been a lot shorter."

He was saved, in part, because of Gutierrez. Almost from the start, the two were exclusive. They couldn't have been more different: Kapp was a white, middle-class Jew, excitable, with a high tolerance for risk, while Gutierrez, a formerly undocumented immigrant from Colombia, was studious and cautious. But the couple found security and happiness facing a hostile world together.

After he launched his LGBTQ estate planning firm, Kapp says, some people responded with disgust. At industry conferences, people would hear about his clients and walk away. But the culture was shifting and, before long, financial planners were asking his advice about reaching an LGBTQ audience. By 2012, Kapp was managing more than \$45 million in assets and had doubled the D.C. Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce to over 450 members.

That same year, the couple achieved a long-held goal: saving enough money to no longer need full-time jobs. Gutierrez resigned as in-house counsel for Discovery Communications, a position he'd held for 13 years, and Kapp had sold his share of the estate planning practice. With no immediate plans, they moved to the cabin they owned in Lost River, W.Va., a popular weekend retreat for D.C. gay professionals.

From the start, small, albeit significant, signs revealed Kapp's ignorance about the region. Agriculture is central to the Potomac Highlands economy, but Kapp never considered that farmers might be IREED's target audience. Initially, he called the New Biz Launchpad an "incubator," not realizing that most locals associated this word with chickens. On one occasion, he admitted to colleagues at Eastern that he didn't know the difference between hay and straw. After they finished laughing at him, Tina Metzger, the Launchpad's executive director, just shook her head as though to say, "You don't have any clue."

And then Kapp made the fateful decision to open IREED's New Biz Launchpad in Wardensville — a small town populated by families whose lineage reaches back generations. (Josh Frye can trace his ancestors back to the 18th century, and he lives in

the house where his own father was raised.) Kapp didn't choose the location by chance. Two years before the Launchpad opened, Donald Hitchcock and Paul Yandura, domestic partners whom Kapp knew socially from Lost River, had spotted a business opportunity in Wardensville: Why not make the place — located along the road from Northern Virginia to Lost River and other points in the Potomac Highlands — a charming stop-off for weekenders and tourists? There were a few restaurants, but most of the storefronts were shuttered. So the couple purchased a handful of properties on Main Street, including a home, and opened a real estate agency and the Lost River Trading Post, an espresso-wine-craft-beer bar and crafts store. They persuaded a handful of friends and acquaintances from the District and Virginia to invest as well. Local and D.C.-based media noticed, and Yandura and Hitchcock became eager spokesmen for the town's revitalization.

Kapp hoped to capitalize on this momentum, using Wardensville's success as a way to pitch both IREED funders and Launchpad clients. He also bought two buildings on Main Street, where he opened the New Biz Launchpad, a student-run store and a gallery space.

"Wardensville became this petri dish of all these new creative ideas, and you had creative people like Paul and Donald and Joe, and that creates synergy," says Terrell. "When you bring together that diversity, does it create conflict? Sure it does. But that's part of a community evolving."

But Kapp didn't fully grasp how much resentment Hitchcock and Yandura were causing, nor did he realize, at least initially, how different his mission was. Yandura was hoping to play up Wardensville's "old school, authentic feel" and thereby create "something new and different and higher-end" for weekenders and tourists. They could brand it "the smallest town in America with a Main Street," he says. But for this to work, Yandura told me, they needed to persuade urbanites to visit a community "in the middle of nowhere that nobody wants to come to." Which meant overhauling a town government that the couple considered to be dysfunctional and nepotistic. "There needed to be adults at the table," Yandura says.

Locals, not surprisingly, found this atti-

tude condescending and worried their town would become an Epcot-like attraction for city folk. "West Virginia has historically been played upon" for outsiders' commercial gain, says Lindsey Teets. "We're really leery as a people of someone coming in and saying, 'I've got your fix.' You get someone to move in here that's relatively rich, and they can buy whatever they want. They can use their money to bully [people] out."

Hitchcock and Yandura — whose tense dealings with locals became the subject of a 2017 story in *Washingtonian* magazine — say they were honoring the town's roots by refurbishing buildings instead of demolishing them and by filling their shops with old-timey music and decor. They point to the Lost River Trading Post, which sells only American-made and local crafts, and the Main Street Initiative, a nonprofit umbrella group they founded for Wardensville businesses. They would also go on to open a nonprofit garden market and bakery, staffed primarily by local teens. Still, many townsfolk believed the couple was obscuring a unique identity that reached back generations. Textbook gentrification. To make matters worse, the couple's development efforts were supported by the newly elected mayor, a woman who quickly lost support among some residents for the reforms she was enacting.

Kapp was easily lumped in with Hitchcock and Yandura. Some of this was stereotyping. And yet he, too, was giving press interviews, talking about how much the town had improved. He'd also befriended the new mayor, using his financial planning and auditing skills to tackle the town's messy finances. When the mayor offered him an unpaid position as head of the Wardensville Development Authority, Kapp accepted. The woman he replaced was a local business owner and sixth-generation resident.

In early June 2015, about six weeks after the Launchpad opened, Kapp learned that someone in town had started an anonymous Facebook page called Good News Wardensville. "We live in a growing, changing community," the first post read. "And ALL change is good, right? Let's find out together."

Kapp was overseas at the time and paid it little attention. But he returned home to discover dozens of posts. "Good news, War-


densville!" the anonymous administrator wrote on June 20. "It's WEST VIRGINIA DAY! And we need to celebrate our state's rich history, where for decades outsiders have come here to grab our land & resources, line their pockets & tell us what to do, all for our own good."

Kapp grew concerned. Later he would come to see that his mission — which was really Eastern's mission — was not the same as Hitchcock and Yandura's. "It's one thing to have a bunch of people come from the outside and start businesses," he says. "It's another thing to help bring communities together and create capacity and really hear about the issues." Tina Metzger, who grew up nearby, is even more blunt: "We don't bulldoze our way in."

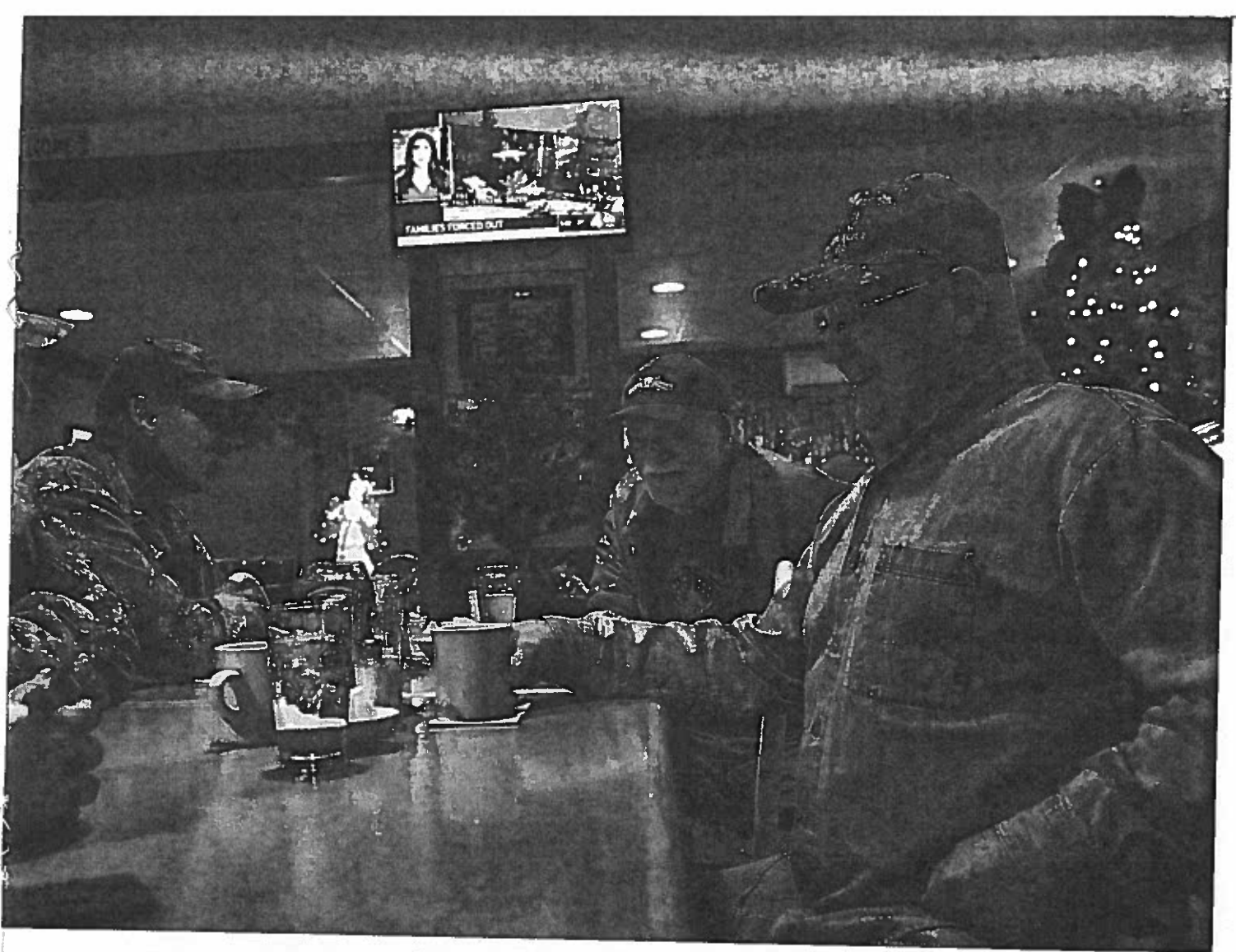
But when Kapp first arrived in Wardensville, he wasn't working with native West Virginians like Metzger or Lindsey Teets. He was fumbling in a foreign environment, unable to understand why the Launchpad had so few clients and why everyone was so hostile. Kapp followed Good News Wardensville obsessively, trying to make sense of it all. "I felt obligated," he says. "I never wanted to do anything that would damage the reputation of the college."

Good News Wardensville ridiculed Kapp for running a "pop-up" shop at the art gallery, a popular urban concept that Kapp thought would help business owners test out their ideas. He was likened to Scrooge McDuck and Mr. Haney, the con man from "Green Acres." But there was worse. In reference to Kapp, Hitchcock and Yandura, a local man posted a photograph of a human-sized inflatable penis with a smiley face and arms. The caption read, "New Friends' Mascot." Someone referenced Sodom and Gomorrah. And Kapp was frequently called the "Wiz of Biz" and "Whizzy Bizzy," homophobic, "Wizard of Oz"-inspired slurs. One post about him featured an 1872 caricature of a carpetbagger. It may not have been the poster's intention, but the image had stereotypical anti-Semitic features.

Good News Wardensville racked up 756 likes, roughly 500 more people than actually lived in town. Not everyone who followed the page supported it; plenty of residents called out the anonymous administrator and his or her supporters as mean-spirited bigots. Yet critics of Good News Wardens-



From left, Gary Dalton, Colin Perry, Dennis Torboli and Bob Arbaugh at the Kac-Ka-Pon Restaurant in Wardensville, where roots run deep.



ville could be mean-spirited, too. "You are all no better than ISIS," one commenter wrote. "Just pure hate and spite," wrote another. "Join the 21st century, people."

Gutierrez watched all of this unfold with dismay. He'd looked forward to relaxing with Kapp; now he was having to manage his partner's anxiety. "Joey tried to keep a strong face about it, but it really affected him," he says. "We had [Facebook] notices set up every morning. And every time something came up, my heart would sink. It's hard to get beat up when you're trying to do good. It made me question a lot of what he was doing there and why."

Kapp insists that he never asked himself the same questions. He'd made a commitment to help the college, and he was going to follow through. "I'm a hopeful and eternal optimist," he says. "I think every entrepreneur is, because you wake up every day regardless of how bad it was the previous day and think, *Today's going*

to be so much better."

And so, he says that when an elderly man tried to trip him at Town Council meetings — something that happened a couple of times — he'd simply step out of the way. And when someone threatened to burn down the Launchpad, he bought more fire insurance. He never posted on Good News Wardensville and, unlike Yandura and Hitchcock, he never got into shouting matches at Town Council meetings. Instead, he started his own Facebook page. He called it the Wiz of Biz — an attempt to claim, and thus defang, the slur — and uploaded a goofy photo of himself in an emerald green top hat. "The people attacking me want nothing more than to keep people in poverty and to maintain the status quo," he posted in September 2015. "They are all to [sic] happy to use fear, lies and insults to keep things the same. The result are no new jobs in WV."

Kapp and Gutierrez have both concluded

ed that the enmity in town wasn't fundamentally about sexual orientation. "There were people who were openly homophobic, but I think the creation of the [Facebook] group was about outsiders, and the outsiders happened to be gay," says Gutierrez. "Some people who have power in the community were scrambling to hold on to it."

But this wasn't just about petty small-town politics, Kapp realized. It was about a deeper cultural fissure. As the presidential election approached, Kapp told his friends, "Trump's going farther than any of you think." "They'd laugh at me," he says. "And I said, 'I don't think you understand how frustrated people are.' And I had to stop talking to my friends, because they'd just start yelling at me."

The anonymous administrator stopped posting on Good News Wardensville in May 2016, purportedly because someone threatened to expose that person's identity. Since then, Kapp has taken a hard look at

himself. He now says he never should have advised the mayor or joined the development authority, no matter how noble his intentions. He should have reached out to community organizations, such as churches, from the get-go. And he should have asked what the locals wanted and needed from the community college instead of showing up to announce what they could get.

Kapp also wishes he'd connected with Teets and Metzger far sooner. Metzger, in particular, "helped me understand what my own failures and faults were. If we're going to be successful, you have to have a greater cultural competency with the communities that we're working with."

Kapp can be reckless for the sake of his cultural education. In early October, while visiting a defunct coal mine with Josh Frye, he ventured to the edge of a river swooshing with toxic runoff. Between 1 million and 6 million gallons of this polluted water flowed into the Potomac every day. "If they didn't use lime dust to treat it, the Potomac would be dead," said Amo Oliverio, coordinator for Eastern's biological and environmental technology program, who was showing the men around. "Part of this place is like the surface of Mars. There's nothing."

As it turned out, Frye had a potential solution to the runoff problem — one that was less expensive and more permanent than lime dust. About a decade ago, he discovered that the special machine he'd been using to heat his chicken houses could be reconfigured to create poultry biochar: a black, sandlike substance made from chicken litter, whose chemical properties both improved deficient soil and trapped heavy metals. Biochar can be created from a variety of materials and is used in industries like agriculture and landscaping. But after reading a U.S. Department of Agriculture white paper on poultry biochar, Frye realized that it could help clean up mines, which often leached heavy metals into the surrounding environment. He buckled down, became a self-taught expert in the molecular composition of soil, and spent years talking to government agencies, universities and companies, trying to find partners and

clients for a poultry biochar business. The project consumed his life and ran down his bank account.

Frye's current distributor, a fertilizer and soil amendment company called Southern Organics & Supply, says that to its knowledge, Frye is the first person to turn poultry biochar into a business. But Frye's formal relationship with Southern Organics is recent. For many years, few people took him seriously. "You got something that no one has ever produced, and it's made out of s---. And you've got to tell people how great this s--- is and make them believe it. If I go to the city," he says, "there's a lack of respect."

In 2012, the machine Frye used to make poultry biochar fell into disrepair. With no money to fix it, he was ready to give up. As a last resort, he called the Launchpad. He'd heard plenty about Kapp, of course, but he decided to withhold judgment. He had nothing left to lose. Kapp, meanwhile, says his "mind was blown" when he heard what Frye was up to. "I realized how many Joshes there are in other states, struggling for access to capital and resources."

Kapp, Metzger and Frye began meeting weekly at the Launchpad. Kapp helped Frye develop his business and reach both investors and clients, including state and federal institutions. Frye gave him a new way to think about economic diversification in the Potomac Highlands. IREED's main goal should be to help the agricultural community think of itself as entrepreneurial — "one of the biggest challenges for individual farmers," Kapp discovered. And so IREED created a centralized online marketplace, now in beta, where farmers can connect with buyers; it runs conferences where farmers scout and present new technologies; and it hosts monthly workshops with the West Virginia Department of Agriculture on topics from public relations to aquaponics to agro-tourism. As it turns out, a lot of area farms want to open their doors to week-enders and tourists — the same people that Hitchcock and Yandura hoped to lure to Wardensville. But the approach matters. "The big piece is that it all has to be locally led," says Ohle of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership. "Give the community a playbook and allow them to drive that."

Kapp may not be a West Virginian, but he is now shouldering a lot of their indignation.

At one economic development conference, an audience member questioned Kapp's decision to work with community colleges, calling them "the lowest common denominator." At another, Kapp was talking about the challenges of rural entrepreneurship, and someone countered that it was easy to drum up "a few million dollars" in business investment. The problem, Kapp says, is that elites have not invited the rural working class into their conversations. And that needs to happen, not just to achieve economic equality, but to close the cultural gap.

There's another shift happening these days, too. Since the election, Kapp says, a growing number of funders, foundations and corporations have come to him about reaching rural communities. Kapp is developing a program that will allow community colleges to offer low- or no-interest microloans, around \$5,000, to aspiring entrepreneurs. These individuals would then take entrepreneurship and business-development courses at the lending college. "A bank might say, 'This guy's too risky,'" Kapp explains. "But a community college can say, 'I know this guy. We work with him. I am vetting and validating his ability to be able to pay back the loan.'"

Last fall, Kapp, NACCE and the National Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education won a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission to introduce entrepreneurship education in eight community colleges across coal-mining-affected areas of Appalachia. The grant also provides curriculum resources for 28,000 K-through-12 students. The hope is that some of these students — perhaps many — will feel newly empowered to look beyond the fading economy that sustained their grandparents and parents. But, Kapp warns, they must feel supported — and respected — along the way. If not, the fissures between rural and urban, and working class and elite, will only keep growing. ■

Jennifer Miller is a writer in Brooklyn. Her most recent novel is "The Heart You Carry Home." To comment on this story, email wpmagazine@washpost.com.



Kapp at his home
in Lost River, W.Va.
He and his partner,
Carlos Gótiérrez,
moved to West
Virginia in 2012.