



***Museums in Strange Places***  
**“Museum on Main Street: A Love Letter to Small-Town America”**  
**(S02/E09)**

**Episode Description:**

About half of all museums in the US are in small towns in rural America. Each of these museums holds stories and objects that are worth preserving and sharing, but they don't always have the funding and infrastructure they need to operate and innovate. That's where Museum on Main Street comes in. This Smithsonian program brings traveling exhibits to small towns for six weeks at a time. But the exhibit materials are just the catalyst for a much bigger experience, an experience that leaves these towns empowered to use culture to build stronger communities. In this episode, I hear from folks in DC, Massachusetts, Florida, Iowa, and Minnesota about the impact of Museum on Main Street.

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**Robbie Davis:** About half of the museums in the United States are actually in smaller communities in rural America, which is kind of a surprising statistic I think to a lot of people, but it's actually indicative of the fact that in every county seat in, in every little crossroads and business center, there are people who are interested in their community, and they set out to create these small cultural organizations that document that. They hold the key to objects that we don't even know exist or stories that we've never heard before.

**Hannah (Script):** *This is Robbie Davis. Robbie is passionate about small towns in America.*

**Robbie Davis:** They also represent a significant amount of this country's cultural wealth.

**Hannah (Script):** *If you live and work in a small town, you see first-hand the challenges your community faces and why it matters.*

*But Robbie \*doesn't\* work in a small town. In fact, I spoke to him in Washington, D.C., in the offices of the world's largest museum, education, and research complex...The Smithsonian Institution.*

*More specifically, I met up with Robbie in the offices of Museum on Main Street, a program that brings Smithsonian exhibits to the smallest museums in the country, empowering small-towns Americans to strengthen their communities through humanities programming.*

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*Welcome to Museums in Strange Places. I'm your host Hannah Hethmon, a consultant specializing in podcasting for museums, and in this episode I'm not just exploring one museum like I usually do; I'm taking a tour of the museums and cultural centers of 1,600 small towns throughout America...towns like Mount Vernon, Iowa; Sulphur Springs, Florida; Phoenix, Louisiana; Brunswick, Maryland; and Lanesboro, Minnesota.*

*What do these small towns have in common? They have all participated in Museum on Main Street, a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the division under which the Museum on Main Street program operates.*

*Museum on Main Street, MoMS to its friends, brings carefully curated exhibits to these towns for six weeks at a time, but the actual exhibit materials are just the catalyst for a much larger experience.*

**Brian Boyles:** It's required that the community builds its own component to the exhibition. So the exhibition cannot just come in, be there, and leave. There's gotta be one: some gathering of collection that goes on, which I can tell you for instance, being in Winnsboro, Louisiana at the old post office museum, and watching literally people walking in with old jerseys and pennants to be part of that I exhibit...you don't often get that sort of community cooperation and how you curate and build what goes into the museum. So that's a real opening of doors I think that's different.

**Hannah (Script):** *This is Brian Boyles. Brian is the head of Mass Humanities, the state humanities council in Massachusetts, but before moving north, Brian spent thirteen years at the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, where he played an important role in bringing Museum on Main Street exhibits to small towns in Louisiana.*

*That's another thing that's special about Museum on Main Street...the way it partners with state humanities councils to make community programs an integral part of the exhibit's time in each town.*

**Brian Boyles:** The other side is the public programming and many traveling exhibits, I think, uh, ask that the museums or libraries do some events around them. But what we do as Humanities Councils is support public humanities programming, and so through MoMS what we do is provide funding and a lot of thinking and training around what would be the good film screening, the good discussion, the good live or history project that people can do that relates. But also I think more than anything, again, opens

doors so that more people feel invested. So in a lot of ways, the exhibition really serves as a magnet for discussion and for program development. And I think that does set it apart from other exhibits.

**Hannah (Script):** *Before we get more into what Museum on Main Street does and why it's impactful, I want to share the story of how it began, the origin story, if you will. And for that, we need to head back to Washington, D.C., where I sat down with two of the people who make this program tick, Director Carol Harsh, and Program Director Robbie Davis.*

**Carol Harsh:** Back in the late eighties, SITES was a very different organization.

**Hannah (Script):** *SITES is the acronym of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the division under which the Museum on Main Street Program operates.*

**Carol Harsh:** Our organization was very international in focus, and we partnered with other countries and cultural attaches to um, to bring international exhibitions to American audiences. And then our role at the Smithsonian then was to take exhibitions abroad, and there was a great big emphasis on that. We began to realize that we really weren't serving the smaller of communities in the United States. And that really our exhibitions had grown in size and scope and price point, that smaller and mid-size museums weren't able to host them. And so we set about in the early nineties, to change that and did some experimenting, did some interviews, did some surveys with the smaller communities—in partnership with state humanities councils. And so we learned from that process. And then in 1994, the first of the Museum on Main Street exhibits, was fabricated in five copies.

**Hannah (Script):** *The first Museum on Main Street exhibit was Produce for Victory: Posters on the American Home Front 1941-1945. It used posters from World War II to explore the connection between the military front and the home front, where everyday Americans in small towns were asked to contribute to the war effort by boosting production at work and at home.*

**Carol Harsh:** And that exhibition went to five states, five communities in each of the states. It was jaw dropping. It was jaw dropping what happened. What we saw that we didn't anticipate is that the Smithsonian really matters to people, and that it brought the community together to look at the home front heroes around that exhibition about Produce for Victory. It's a production story. It's about a home front story. Each community has its own local heroes, its own very unique, something happened in that community. People came out in droves. The collections around it, the stories, the flyovers, the veteran reunions, the Rosie the Riveter look-alike contest. I mean, it was just, it was just amazing, and lots of energy, lots of engagement.

And we kind of collectively went, wow, you know, and in partnership with State Council said, you know, we've really, we're on to something here. So anyway, that was the, that was the beginning of museum on Main Street.

There were ups and downs along the way. We needed funding to support the costs of the exhibitions and were able to secure some of that in the earliest years. And then we were able to secure a federal

appropriation, that comes to the Smithsonian to continue this project in perpetuity. So the Smithsonian is committed to rural, to doing programming like this and in rural America.

**Hannah (Script):** *Since the Produce for Victory exhibit was created 25 years ago, the Museum on Main Street exhibits have traveled to 1600 towns in 50 states and one territory.*

*But the US has over 16,000 towns with populations under 10,000, so how are the communities who participate in Museum on Main street chosen and what goes into receiving and setting up the exhibit once they are selected?*

*Brian Boyles at Mass Humanities is the perfect person to explain how it all works, since humanities councils in each state are key to the whole operation. I asked Brian to use the example of one of the current Museum on Main Street exhibits, Water/Ways. Spelled, Water-slash-Ways, it is a core component of the Smithsonian's thinkWater project, and the exhibition dives into the environmental, cultural and historical impact of water.*

**Brian Boyles:** So the humanities council puts out word that the Smithsonian exhibition is coming, and it gives a description of what the content of the tour is and the specs for the exhibit. So museums and libraries have to have a certain amount of square footage, they need to have storage available, and they need to be able to staff the exhibit and be able to produce free public programming. In Louisiana, we would put that out, take in applications, and then had a unique partnership with Louisiana's Main Street Organization to really look and see, okay, which communities either have a great track record, could use some support, are good at partnering, or have a history that's particularly relevant to the subject of the exhibition.

From that you choose six sites. Each of those six sites receives a small grant from the organization in order to support the public programming and the travel involved in development of a local component to the exhibition. The great thing about MoMS is that there's a lot of training involved, and I think the argument that we've always made is that this is an initiative that gets some museums up on their feet for the first time. It also brings really, you know, a winning brand in the Smithsonian to places that usually don't have that kind of experience. And what that does is help bring in new audiences, and also, through the training, helps them to think a lot more about their publicity, about their outreach, about how they tell the local story in an inclusive way, all by integrating with the subject of that particular exhibition.

So two trainings happen. The second training is actually to build the exhibit at the first tour stop. So a representative of Smithsonian will join a program officer at that site. All of the sites, will come to that town usually for a two day training, which is really also I think a good community building amongst those sites. And so you learn how to put the exhibition together, you hear what other folks are thinking about as far as their public programs. And you get to know another community and another museum. That part I think is always really festive.

And then the sites start to put on their programs. And so usually it's one free program a week bringing in people to tell their side of the story. People are extremely creative. And I think what I like about it is you're both giving them this excellent world-class piece of content, but you're also asking them to respond. And so you get a lot of grassroots perspective on what it means to live in that place.

**Brian Boyles:** In Louisiana, *Water/Ways* launched at a high school in Phoenix, Louisiana, which is very far down the river, where you get to a point where what is known as the boot really becomes more of a sliver, and there's just a little bit of land separating river from sea, and we have this really dire situation when it comes to coastal land loss. To bring *Water/Ways* there and to see at that opening a great crawfish boil being brought together in the parking garage underneath this elevated high school, which by need had to stand about 15 feet above ground in case flooding did happen, to screen a documentary film there that really has to do with their community. And to hear the parish president, the people of the school, the neighbors that came in talk about what that threat means to them. This isn't a conversation they're not having, but the fact that they're having it together in response to humanities-based content and they know that the Smithsonian and the state humanities council and I think the larger world cares about what happens to them. That's very, very impactful. And I think that *Water/Ways* is, unfortunately in some ways, relevant to so many different communities around this country, both coastal and inland because of what's happening with climate change. So you can see where an exhibition that looks at the spirituality of water, that looks at the economy of water, that looks at all the historical aspects of its role in our society takes on this real urgency as more and more events show us that we're going to need to deal with water.

**Hannah (Script):** *As you can probably tell already, what makes these exhibits successful is not just the training and materials provided by the Smithsonian or the support from state Humanities Councils, it's the passion and scrappy resourcefulness of locals who care about their towns, who know their history and culture is worth preserving and discussing, and who are willing to put in the work to bring Museum on Main Street to their community.*

*During my visit to the Museum on Main Street offices in DC, this is something Carol and Robbie brought up over and over. They wanted to make sure I knew that none of what their program does would be possible without the incredible people on the ground in each town who bring these exhibits to life.*

**Carol Harsh:** You know, there's an article in the paper in Seattle recently of "What can we learn from rural America," and what the editor talked about is civic engagement and how smaller communities have that in droves. I mean people are involved in every level of a community. They might be a city councilperson, but they're also handing out tickets at the theater that night, you know, are the barista at the coffee shop that in the mornings, but involved in all sorts of activities...just lots of people engaged and believing in the value of their town. And that's very impressive. And I think part of, part of the success of museum on Main Street is this national, state, and local partnership. But it's also plugging into that, plugging it into the energy and the civic engagement that happens, the community engagement and the belief and the community.

**Robbie Davis:** If you go 50 miles up the Potomac river to Brunswick, Maryland, which is a town of 5,500 people now. Brunswick has hosted two exhibitions, our *Journey Stories* exhibition back in 2012 and then *The Way We Worked* in 2017, and both of those exhibitions were a catalyst for local partnerships.

And I think what impresses me most there is how a very small local museum that applied for the opportunity to host the exhibition, recognizing that they did not even have room in their facility to house the exhibition, took that as an opportunity to basically build local partnerships and say, we got to do this even though we don't have room, we're going to make it happen regardless.

So what did they do for *Journey Stories* back in 2012? Well the storefront that had been the primary community department store for generations and had closed like in the mid-eighties had been empty. They'd had a couple of stores get going, and they could, they never survived. And it had been empty for several years. Really on a prominent corner in town and across the street from the museum. And so they, they talked with the owner and they said, help us make this happen. Partnered with the local library, help us make this happen.

So historically what the department store used to do was every fall before the holidays, right before Thanksgiving, they would put butcher paper over the windows and hide everything. And then they would build out little scenes in each of those storefront windows. And then the big thing the day after Thanksgiving was to tear the paper down and reveal what the big thing to buy for the holiday season was.

What they did, as the show was getting ready to open, they put the butcher paper back up in the windows. Outfitted every single one of those windows with local exhibitions. And all they had before that, when the paper was in the windows was the Smithsonian is coming, keep looking And then they had local kids in the windows on the day the exhibit opened rip down the paper. Here's what came to town. And people were in love because it was their children who were in these windows, you know? And so parents are out to see their kids involved in all of this work. And I wasn't there that day, but Carol was. But I think it was like there, you could not get a car through town. There were people everywhere. There was no where to park. It was just this incredible community outpouring of interest because they grabbed back into their own history to explain why this was going to be important.

Well fast forward five years, when they hosted *The Way We Worked*...again, they looked to young people in their community to kind of make something happen. Back in 2012, those kids who were standing in the windows had done 20 interviews of people in the community that they edited into a one hour and 56 minute documentary on the town's history. And in 2017 they went back to middle school students and did a documentary on, on the way people worked in that community and how their downtown area had fallen on hard times, and really looking, not just nostalgically, but also critically at why that happened and how the town could get out of that and how it could grow. They weren't afraid to look at things good and bad. You know, they can celebrate, they can have a good time, but they can also be realistic and up front about the things that haven't worked and how to change that in the future. And that to me is just incredibly powerful.

**Robbie Davis:** We have such a deep level of respect for those organizations. I mean, that's why I'm here, you know, is, is because I think that the work that people in all of these communities that host our exhibitions are doing is so indicative of their own individual passions, and they carry that into their communities. They're there because they care. They're not getting paid an incredible amount of money to do it. They're not doing easy work. Their jobs are sometimes more complicated than ours because they do everything. And then they blow us away, you know, and they have 5,000 people turn out in a six week period to see an exhibition.

**Carol Harsh:** I always tell people when I retire, I want to be one of them, right? I want to be, I want to be involved in a community in that way. It's infectious, and it's powerful. And many of us that live in big cities don't ever get to experience that. And we only see it when we drop into these communities in installation workshops or program planning meetings. And you hear these stories about communities and people coming together, and it's not, you know, sometimes they argue, sometimes it's hard, sometimes there's a difference of opinion, but they're creating something together. They're pulling together in a way as, as leaders of a community to leave their community better off as a result of having done this together. And that's just amazing. That's just flipping amazing.

**Hannah (Script):** *The word catalyst came up a lot while I was researching this story, and that's because Museum on Main Street taps into the existing energy and passion in each community and provides an impetus and structure around which the most motivated townspeople can rally.*

*The power of the Smithsonian brand is an important part of that, according to Alex Buell, Program Coordinator at the Florida Humanities Council. Alex and I spoke over the phone about his experience bringing Water/Ways, Museum on Main Street's water-themed exhibit, to small towns in Florida.*

**Alex Buell:** We've seen communities get together and build entire community centers because they knew that they were getting a Smithsonian exhibit and needed, you know, a better space for it or a venue to do programming. And this was the catalyst that the community organizers use to get some, some major projects done in their communities. You know, the Smithsonian name carries a lot of weight. They were able to galvanize their leaders behind the Smithsonian name and say, hey, look, we have this need and the Smithsonian is coming and we need to look our best when they get here. So we need, we need x, y, or z. And they, they, you know, use the Smithsonian name to leverage some, some big ticket projects. And sometimes it's worked out real well.

One of our communities who hosted waterways...the name of the community's High Springs and it's kind of in the middle of nowhere in north central Florida. But within an hour of High Springs there's probably 50 or 60 different free flowing springs. And that's the heart and soul of that community is the ecotourism that those springs provide.

Florida, we like to think of ourselves as probably more impacted by water than any other state in the nation. I mean, besides being a peninsula and being known for beaches, we're also, we have the highest concentration of a natural flowing springs in the world, which a lot of people don't know.

High Springs really used this opportunity as a way to showcase the springs. The springs are actually in danger of too much water usage as well they're having issues with algae. So as the agricultural runoff with the phosphate as well as people just fertilizing their lawns. It's causing algae blooms. The fish and turtles and other things that normally live in there can't survive with all the algae.

So they use this as, as a reason to really highlight the why these springs are so important in their community...what's being done to hurt them and what's being done to protect them. They also created their own local exhibition where they fabricated the walls of an entire large room to look like an underwater cave. Part of these springs is a huge cave system that people can dive, and there's underwater cave diving as part of the eco tourism that I just referred to. So they, they made this whole room look like an underwater cave complete with like black lights. And they even got some aquariums with some of the critters that live in these habitats, see-through shrimp and all these really crazy critters. And it was one of the best exhibits I've ever seen. And they were able to do it on a shoestring budget and their whole community had something like 40 local partners. Clearly the whole community was behind this thing.

**Alex Buell:**

We had it in a community called Sulphur Springs, which is actually a neighborhood of Tampa. And Tampa is obviously not a small town, but Sulphur Springs is a predominantly African American community right along the Hillsborough river. This community has been sort of divided and isolated from the rest of Tampa by the river on one side and then when they built the interstate, they basically used that as a way to separate this community more from the rest of Tampa at large. You know, that was, that was done quite a bit in the South.

And because of this they've, you know, they've had an identity crisis. And there's also a number of springs, free-flowing springs, that were right in the middle of this community that are no longer there, but are still, there are still traces of them, and that's where they get their namesake. So they use this as an opportunity to talk about some of the challenges in Sulphur Springs being an underserved community within, you know, the heart of a bigger metro area as well as some of the springs that were in their community as well as the Hillsborough River.

**Hannah (Script):** *So far, we've heard some amazing stories of how these small towns have made the most of their six week Smithsonian exhibit, but I was curious about the long term impacts. What happens when the exhibit leaves? Does everything go back to the way it was before? Are the communities better off than they were?*

*To understand the long-term impacts of a Museum on Main Street visit, I called Shanai Matteson, an artist and cultural organizer based in Minneapolis. Shanai got involved in Museum on Main Street when the Water/Ways exhibit traveled to six Minnesota towns in 2017.*



*You've heard about how folks in these small towns get really creative in their programming partnerships, and it doesn't get much more creative than Water Bar, a public art studio and community space that Shanai co-runs.*

**Shanai Matteson:** Water Bar is a project that I started with my collaborators. It's really a space for telling and sharing stories about water. We are an actual bar, but all we serve is tap water, and we give that water away for free as a way to exchange stories. So it seemed like a natural fit when the *Water/Ways* project started traveling across Minnesota that we could set up these Water Bars spaces as one way to start to connect with communities and gather stories.

As part of the work that I do with water bar, I often am out in community, listening to stories about water. And when the humanities center here in Minnesota started working with Museum on Main Street to produce the *Water/Ways* exhibit, they asked me to be part of the team that would work with communities to gather water stories. So I was able to join other organizers and meet folks in communities across Minnesota. And I had the privilege of listening to some folks to tell me some really amazing stories about water.

**Hannah (Script):** *Since 2011, An important part of every Museum on Main Street exhibition is the Stories from Main Street initiative, which focuses on collecting short audio and video stories about life in small towns and rural communities across America. Shanai's skill in drawing stories out of people meant she was able to make quite a few powerful additions to Museum on Main Street's ever-growing online story collection.*

One of the things that I really loved about the exhibit is that, unlike some museum exhibits, it wasn't just about sharing existing content with the community. I think sometimes we think of museum exhibits as you know, we go to those exhibits in order to take in stories that are part of that exhibit. But the way that the *Water/Ways* project was developed, there was a lot of community participation in the development of that exhibit.

So there were pieces that came from the Museum on Main Street program. But there was also a big effort to gather stories in those communities. And I was part of that work. And it's really amazing what happens when people understand that you're really listening to their stories and you're not making assumptions about what's important, but coming in as a listener. And I learned so much. It was a really, really great opportunity to hear from people about their relationships with water in small towns, on farms, in tribal communities.

**Shanai Matteson:**

We actually continue to work with the communities that we connected with as part of the *Water/Ways* project. And the number of those communities have incorporated Water Bar into their community programming. One of the things that's unique about our project is that it doesn't only happen when myself and my collaborators are there. We like to help communities use the storytelling tools and strategies that we've developed through the Water Bar in their own engagement.

So a number of the organizations that were part of the *Water/Ways* exhibit ended up using Water Bar to connect more deeply with their own community. The impact of the exhibit continues. The communities that hosted continue to do work around water...different kinds of things with artists, with community organizations and then also *Water/Ways* really helped us connect with organizations and with individuals in a number of communities and a number of those are folks that I still connect with and still am working with.

In some cases it was organizations that I encountered because they had a water story to share, and so I went there and gathered that story, and in the process learned there was a deeper connection that I could make that would carry on. In some cases I'm still connected with those folks around producing Water/Bar projects. I also have followed up with a number of those people and have continued to do organizing. One of the communities I worked in was Sandstone. I ended up connecting with a group of artists and activists in that community and now we're continuing to do work that isn't even directly related to water, but the relationships that we built in that project helped new collaborations along.

**Hannah (Script):** *In Minnesota, Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways exhibit created new networks and connected activists and artists around shared cultural work.*

*In another Midwestern town, Mount Vernon, Iowa, the long-term impact of the Smithsonian visit is even more tangible. In fact, that long-term impact is currently sitting on shelves in JoAnne Gage's classroom.*

**JoAnne Gage:** My name is JoAnne Gage and I teach high school English and journalism at Mount Vernon High School in Iowa.

**Hannah (Script):** *When Mount Vernon, a town of less than 5,000, was chosen to host Hometown Teams: How Sports Shape America, the local Museum on Main Street coordinator reached out to JoAnne to see if her video journalism students wanted to participate by making documentaries about the history of sports in their town. As part of this smaller project within the larger suite of programming around the exhibit, JoAnne worked with the local coordinator to get an equipment grant for her classroom.*

**JoAnne Gage:** That grant allowed us to purchase a lot of technology that it would have taken me years to get for my classroom, that we continually use today. It was for \$5,000, and right now in my classroom I have a student who is setting up a lighting kit to do an interview for another journalism class. And so we are continuing to use the cameras, the microphones, the kindles, the SD cards, all of these different pieces of equipment, the backdrop that we have... it's really helped out our class here.

**Hannah (Script):** *JoAnne's class received a Smithsonian Youth Access Grant that enabled her students to participate in the Stories: YES program. The YES stands for Youth Engagement and Skill Building. It's a focused educational initiative within the larger Museum on Main Street program that increases youth and educators' awareness of local cultural resources and equips youth, like JoAnne's students, with the "real world" skills they will need to succeed in college and in the 21st century workforce.*

For my students, having the Smithsonian put on this exhibit gave them an audience, an audience broader than our local community or just our classroom. It was a purpose to do high-quality professional level work because they knew that lots of people would be viewing these videos that we were creating, so it was really just a purpose beyond our own classroom.

This exhibit has a lasting impact on the community. For my own classroom, the things I learned, the equipment I was able to purchase, the attention that it drew to my classroom has benefited me personally a lot and my students. There are videos that we created that I was then able to enter into local, state, and national contests for journalism, and they won awards. One placed first in a national contest. It just was a lot of fun for students.

Having the Smithsonian come to Mount Vernon was a really exciting thing for us. We thought it would draw a lot of people to the community, and just having a national program like that come to a small town—you know, we're under 5,000 people—really is an exciting thing. It's something the whole town was involved in.

**Hannah (Script):** *It wasn't just JoAnne's class that benefited from Museum on Main Street in the long run. The exhibit was held in the gym of the old Mount Vernon middle school, which the town had previously converted into a small business incubator. But the gym itself was in bad condition. Because it had to be fixed up to hold the "Hometown Teams" exhibit, Mount Vernon was able to get the resources to transform the gym into a permanent exhibit space where the town could come together around culture long after the Smithsonian had moved to the next town on the schedule.*

*Museum on Main Street's staff realized early on that infrastructure improvements were an important part of the program's impact on each community they visited.*

**Robbie Davis:** One of the other things that the *Produce for Victory* experience revealed is that the Museum on Main Street experience also had the power to lift those organizations in ways that perhaps they had not even considered. And through that, improving their technical and professional capacity to be able to duplicate that experience in the future. But also to even build up their own infrastructure. My favorite stories are always like, we got bathrooms out of, you know, bringing the Smithsonian to town or you know, the local school district said absolutely every fifth grader in this county needs to see that exhibition and makes a financial commitment to ensure that that happens.

And what that does for a small organization that is all volunteer operated or maybe only has one or two staff members and a very limited budget for programming, that lifts an organization in a way that's really kind of incalculable. You know, you really, you, you can't from this perspective put a measurement on that. It lifts them in, in amazing ways.

**Hannah (Script):** *If you've entered the job market for the first time recently, you'll appreciate the analogy I'm about to use. When recent college grads are applying for jobs, they often face the frustrating reality that you need experience to get jobs, but you can't get experience without the job.... that you need experience to get.*

*It's the same for a lot of small towns in America. They need support from the state and federal level to build their community's cultural infrastructure, but often they don't have the experience and existing infrastructure needed to qualify for that support. That's where Museum on Main Street really fills a gap. Here's Brian Boyles at Mass Humanities again, explaining more about how this works.*

**Brian Boyles:** Too often, grant funds, which is what is traditionally done by state humanities councils and the NEH, follow infrastructure. If there is not an organization on the ground that is sophisticated enough to write those grants, bring in scholars, do all the things needed to do, the funding is not going to reach those rural areas and that can't happen. That's unfair.

So turnkey programs like Museum on Main Street basically help those organizations, through a live development of an exhibition, learn how to write a grant application, do outreach to their local media, work with a national partner. It's a building up of infrastructure by saying we're not going to just take a "if we build it, you will come" attitude about funding. We're going to say we want to go out there and target these communities, and we're going to help you bring this great thing here together. And when we leave something lasting is going to be there. You already have this fantastic history, which is worth everything as much as what's represented in that exhibition. But now you have a little bit of a leg up to go back and find funding and other ways or find traveling exhibitions and other ways because you have this gold star experience with Museum on Main Street.

**Hannah (Script):** *What can we learn from the success of the Museum on Main Street program and the 1600 communities that have poured so much passion and time into bringing Smithsonian exhibits to life in their hometowns?*

*I think there's three lessons to be had here. First, humanities matter. Brian Boyles is the humanities advocate, so I'll let him explain why:*

**Brian Boyles:** I think the big issues are calling for the humanities. I think that the big issues demand critical thinking skills and historical perspective and civic dialogue. And the humanities have more of a place now than they ever have in the public square. And in small communities that one: are going through really big changes, but two: are often isolated, the humanities can give a wider perspective. It can also give emphasis to the perspectives that are there on the ground to make sure there's some continuity between what people are going through in their daily lives and what folks have gone through in other areas or a century before in that same town. It also shows people that to get together and talk is okay and that we can have respectful dialogue together. When you bring folks around a book or around a film or around an oral history, things are stirred up that just frankly don't happen as easily if we're just talking about the local news.

*The second takeaway comes from Museum on Main Street Director Carol Harsh, and it's that museums matter.*

**Carol Harsh:** So museum on Main Street is an important initiative because museums matter to communities. Our project focuses then on the local museums and that local history and culture that they represent. So even though it's a national project from the Smithsonian, it flips it and the focus of the project is about local history and culture. And that will always matter to people.

**Hannah (Script):** *Lastly, ending where we began this episode, Robbie Davis reminds us that Rural America matters.*

**Robbie Davis:** Rural America matters too. And there are stories there that people across this country have never heard before that we can empower people to talk about. And I think that that's, that is really an enormous opportunity and an enormous responsibility. I think that that is really a core element of this program and makes it so exciting.

**Hannah (Script):** *Thanks for listening to Museums in Strange Places.*

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