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Boone: A Community of Peace? Part 2 – The Shadow Side

An inter-town bus pulls up to Boone's Hospitality House and unloads men, women and children from the surrounding five counties. Packed in their well-worn duffle bags and backpacks is a mix of hope and desperation. Through the services provided by this Ellis Island of the High Country, some will find a toehold on a new life. A few, however, will prefer to take their chances on their own rather than step into The System. Those clothed in the iron-willed pride of so many returning veterans might turn away from the clean, dormitory-style rooms in favor of living invisibly, housed in their tents in neighboring woods, winter and summer alike, while they look for work – and a new start.

Every Fall, a steady stream of mostly legal migrant workers flows into the High Country around Boone to prepare the area's fresh, fragrant Christmas trees for their annual harvest. Today, many work for reputable farmers who provide adequate housing and decent pay for these hard workers from south of the border. Not all are so lucky. Others take whatever work they can find, at any pay and at any cost, just to be able to send some hard-earned American dollars back home to feed and clothe their families. They keep mostly to themselves while they're here, separated by more than just a few miles from the big-shouldered ridgetop homes that command scenic vistas across the forested mountaintops.

An out-of-state car drives up a steep, winding dirt road, hoping to escape notice of the Sheriff's deputy driving by. They won't stay long. In just a few moments the cash and package will change hands, and this current cottage industry of the mountains will have generated a temporary income at potentially a long-term cost to its producers and customers alike. The product may change, but the demand never seems to end. Eighty years ago it was hooch. Today it's meth.

When I set out to discover for myself whether Boone was as peaceable as it appeared to be when I first moved here last summer, I thought the answer would be obvious: Yes, of course it is. As the investigative reporter in me warmed to the task, however, I found that not all was as perfect as would first appear. While it's true that much of what gives Boone its unique character enables a warm, mutually respectful rapport among its self-selected residents, a "hole in the doughnut" does exist.

Many come to Boone with great hopes and intentions of making this their retirement home, the place they will raise their family, or even build a new business or career. If they are fortunate enough to find an affordable place to live, and work that provides a living wage, they may be able to realize their dreams. In too many cases, however, they find Boone's appearance of being a Community of Peace is just an illusion. After a season or two of trying their best, they pack their belongings once more and move on. Boone will never know what they might have contributed if they had stayed.

"The issues we have in Boone are all linked together," observed Dana Crawford, Boone's Chief of Police. "Some people just don't want to look at the problems we have, so they won't see them. But our meth production problem is linked to people not being able to find good jobs. And jobs are linked to the

kinds of businesses that can get established here. Our two major employers, the University and the healthcare system, provide a range of jobs with some turnover, but not near enough to fill the need. ”

Todd Carter, Director of Development at Boone’s homeless shelter, Hospitality House, adds, “Our biggest need is having sufficient housing for low income families and the elderly. Few of them can afford to live in town where a typical rental costs four figures or more. So they live out in the county, but then they have transportation issues, especially in winter. The AppalCart bus system, which is a great addition to Boone, doesn’t extend into the mountains around us. So the poor have to choose between spending their limited money on a car or the other necessities of life.”

Many might find it surprising – even shocking – to learn that Watauga County has a very real and sizeable poverty problem. “According to the US Census Bureau,” Carter continued, “26% of our county’s residents live at or below the poverty level. That means a family of four lives on less than \$22,050 a year. But the annual cost of living here is \$52,500 for that sized family. When two wage earners can only find work at minimum wage, they will be making about \$32,000 a year. That earnings gap means that, all in all, half of our county’s neighbors are barely making it.” That portion includes at least 800 senior citizens in Watauga County who do not have the luxury of being able to live without working for their living.

While Boone may not be the Utopia it appears to be at first glance, there are commendable and even visionary organizations and agencies in our community who make it a town of continuous improvement. Hospitality House does not stop at providing food and shelter for the homeless that come to their door. “We focus on getting them remedial life skills training so they can become more self-supporting,” Carter said. “In many ways, the programs we have developed here in Boone have become a model for other homeless shelters around the country. We focus on their overall needs, regardless of what handicaps they arrive with – mental, social, emotional or physical.”

WE CAN, the Watauga Crisis Assistance Network - provides emergency financial assistance to families and persons in crisis. The program, which was started years ago as a coordinated benevolence effort by several of Boone’s faith communities, is now administered by Hospitality House. “We keep utilities from being cut off for lack of payment, or tenants from being evicted for lack of the ability to pay their rent on an emergency basis,” Carter reported. “It started out as a program funded by the pooled resources of Boone’s houses of faith,” Carter continued. “Today, however, due to changes in the churches’ leadership and priorities, WE CAN is now funded by only a handful of private donors. WE hope it will be able to continue, because the need it serves is not only still with us, but growing.”

In speaking with Carter, as well as with Linda Slade, Director of the High Country United Way, I was delighted to learn that Appalachian State University serves as an active partner with our community’s agencies to address the community’s needs. By providing after school day care for Hospitality House children, education and social science students gain direct experience in child development. Several of the university’s academicians apply their skills and knowledge in evaluating and planning effective community-wide programs. “The University has been of tremendous help to Boone,” Slade reported. , “United Way’s Vision Council brings together community leaders, including several advisors from ASU, to examine our combined visions, barriers and resources to address Boone’s needs. We meet every three months to work together on workforce development, housing, health and especially education issues as we pave the way for Boone’s future development.”

Adrian Tait, Director of the High Country Council of Governments’ Workforce Development Board, spoke of his hope for greater coordination among Boone’s various elements of leadership. “We do

strategic planning around workforce development in each of the seven mountain counties we serve,” Tait said. “The slow pace of accepting change limits the ability of some parts of our area from being able to attract employers who demand more technical skills. In Avery County, for example, only 40% of homes and businesses – even the care-giving agencies – make use of the Internet. We need to improve the way our towns communicate with their citizens, and the ability people have to build the technical skills required to have higher paying jobs in this area.”

Should Boone qualify, then, as a “Community of Peace” if such issues as poverty, homelessness, substandard housing and an inadequate supply of jobs with a livable wage exist here? I will share my own personal opinions on that question when I address the Boone Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at 11am on Sunday, January 27, in an interactive service. If you would like to be part of that conversation, stop by 381 East King Street.