

My name is Shannon Hayes, and I live in the hills of Schoharie County, up against a 2000- acre state forest, five miles from my family farm. I am a child of the farm crisis. It forced youth out of my community like weeds in the spraylines of pesticides. It was whispered among the halls of my school that only the losers stayed after graduation. Everyone else fled.

Dutifully, I went away to college, but I came home every other weekend. I loved being on my family's farm, and I hated to be away from the dirt roads, farm-grown food, woodlands, neighbors, pastures and stone walls that defined my world.

I eventually earned a Ph.D. in sustainable agriculture & community development from Cornell. My husband and I were qualified to take on careers at any of the land grant colleges around the country. We weren't readily positioned to find employment in our beautiful, albeit economically depressed area.

But we didn't go job hunting. We bought a cabin up in Middleburgh Telephone Company's service area; as opposed to my parents' farm just a few miles down the road, which was serviced by Verizon. I told my parents after graduation that I had come to one certain conclusion:

Our family couldn't afford to lose us, and our community couldn't afford the continued loss of brains, creativity and energy of the next generation. And, the idea of commuting to an office filled us both with abject misery.

So we stayed put, lived cheap, and started working with my parents to grow Sap Bush Hollow Farm. A few years into our adventure, Bob and I had an opportunity to cash in on our cabin in the woods and buy a farm next to Mom and Dad.

But if we moved, we'd be giving up our local provider and moving into a Verizon district. By that point, I was the primary communications person for our business. Moving our home offices would put us on the service fringe of an urban phone company. That area had long suffered from telecommunications neglect. But a few miles down the road, Bob and I had the benefit of being covered by a company that specializes in rural telecommunications. I felt like we had a fighting chance going forward.

At that moment, we had to make a choice about the future of our farm: buy more land to increase production, or guarantee our telecommunications. Without good telecommunications, we would lose marketing opportunities. We would lose the ability to be in contact with our customers, to handle our financials efficiently without constant trips to town. Without the ability to order supplies online, we'd have to lose a days' work to drive to Albany. We would lose out on access to online veterinary diagnostic resources, the ability to network with other farmers about changes in the industry, and the ability to participate in online professional development opportunities, like seminars for improving our grazing practices, for learning more humane and ecologically responsible growing practices.

We chose to stay put. And instead of buying farmland, we made a radically different choice. We bought our community's post office building and former firehouse and moved our farm's center of commerce into the heart of our rural hamlet. Part of this decision was to give the community an economic jump-start. Part of it was because Bob and I had this cockamamie idea that we could open a farm-to-table cafe and espresso bar in the middle of nowhere and really rake in the farm profits. And the final reason? The internet there was decent. Our industry is changing fast with online developments, and if we don't keep up, we will lose our farm, for all the reasons I mentioned above

Throughout this time, we had started a family, and chose to homeschool our daughters. Our oldest daughter practically taught herself to read. She could absorb anything. But daughter number two, Ula,

would pick up books, and hold them the wrong way. She bumped into things. She confused people's names and faces. We eventually learned she was legally blind in one eye, the other eye was visually compromised, and she has a condition called Cerebral Visual Impairment. Though smart and motivated, Ula was severely academically learning disabled.

Our rural school did its best to help us, but it didn't have all the resources we needed. We faced walking away from my family's business, shutting down the farm and relocating to Canada or Boston, where there were special schools that could help us to the tune of 40,000 dollars per year...Far more than our annual income.

But what if we could get our learning environment equipped to accommodate her? If we could outfit our house with fast internet, I could make huge academic inroads with my kids. If we could equip our proposed community cafe with good internet, we could become a hub for our other neighbors in the hills in the Verizon area who lacked adequate service.

I called Midtel and asked for help. A week later, I was sitting down face-to-face with Jason Becker. We joined forces to organize the community and find the resources to run fiber through West Fulton.

Within a year's time, our rural hamlet had better internet than downtown Albany.

My oldest daughter enrolled in online learning classes. My youngest daughter got enhanced visual access to any book or audiobook in the world. She became an avid fan of science podcasts. She has gone from being a child they didn't think would read and write, to an articulate, funny and artistic pre-teen.

And the cafe? We open on Saturdays only, and our parking lot is jammed. Folks come for food, to socialize, and to check their email and download media. Since we worked our arrangement, Sap Bush Hollow has experienced 100% growth through our cafe, farm store sales, farm market, and online sales. A small eco-resort opened in the area, and our community has gained a farmstead cider tasting room, two local arts groups, and a yoga studio, each of them certain they could move forward with rural businesses because they could be guaranteed high quality internet. There's talk around the county that West Fulton is pulling itself up by the bootstraps. We've started a new Air B&B above our cafe, coaxing tourists to our area to experience the waterfalls, farm fresh food, and the hiking trails (yet still have hi-speed internet). We've been booked all summer.

Best of all, I can say with confidence that with the help of the internet, Saoirse and Ula are getting an education that rivals that of any private school. And at the same time, they're working in a growing family business tied to the earth and our community.

If you ask them about their futures, they don't give a hoot about moving to cities and chasing jobs. They see opportunity right here, in their own backyard, not a thousand miles away.

They are growing into smart, confident and creative young women, devoted to their community and the land that sustains them.

The rural brain drain in our town is getting plugged. And I'm deeply thankful to our local provider for their willingness to invest in us, so that we could make it happen.