

## *There's No Place Like Home*

It never fails; I'm up at 5 am everyday. No alarm clocks – just my internal clock. I guess that's what happens when you grow up on a farm; it's just part of who you are. I'm Mary Smith-Lopez from Estherville, Iowa. Growing up, my family was your typical Iowa corn farm family – which is probably why I couldn't wait to get out. I graduated from Iowa State University with a Master's degree in Finance and immediately moved to Seattle. I never planned to move back, but now its 2050 and I'm back on my family's farmstead with my husband Ricardo. We own Lopez Ledger, a wind-powered manufacturing plant that makes high quality notepaper out of hemp.

So how did I get here? Well the story starts even before I left. Beginning in 2005, the Midwest experienced a bioenergy boom. We saw over 200 new bioenergy plants for ethanol and biodiesel open within 10 years! They used corn for ethanol and soybeans for biodiesel, which was good for my dad and area farmers. The boom brought opportunity and hope to the communities and people in our area.

The bioenergy plants meant new jobs and new rural economic development. And since the GMO corn used for ethanol production was designed to produce specific by-products to feed hogs, cattle, chickens or turkeys, we also had a booming meat processing industry. The region saw an influx of thousands of immigrants, due in part to a new federal program that gave green cards to food industry workers. The immigrants brought with them a desire to be a part of our communities and entrepreneurial attitudes that revitalized small town store fronts and businesses. They also helped balance the population loss we were experiencing as the boomer generation started dying off.

In 2012, a new, fast growing hybrid corn was introduced and we had 300-bushel-an-acre corn! Sure there were consequences to the soil and the water, but when the money's rolling in, that's the last thing you worry about. By 2014, we even got two crops a year, since the summers were getting longer and the winters shorter. Some claimed it was due to climate change, but my dad just called it luck. Yet every year it got a little warmer and a little drier, so we needed to irrigate non-stop, which slowly depleted the ground water.

When I left for Seattle in 2014, I had high hopes. I had landed a job at a large financial brokerage firm and found a great apartment downtown. And back home things seemed to be moving in the right direction. Leaders in each state were aggressively acting on transfer of wealth studies that showed millions of dollars in assets, money and land that could be transferred out of the state as the boomers retired. Each state was creating tax incentives for contributions to community, county and regional foundations, which were building pretty large asset bases and using it for community improvement, scholarships and local entrepreneurship programs. But looking back, even that wasn't enough to save us: the boom was about to bust.

Starting in 2015, the drought arrived and it was severe and widespread. The whole region went ten years with virtually no rain. People really weren't prepared for this because they didn't think the effects of climate change would come so quickly to the area. In the western parts of the region, cattle began dying in pastures and ranchers had no choice but to leave them there. Here in Iowa, we had already used up the available ground water and had pushed production so hard there was no organic reserve left in the soil.

The second year of the drought my dad sold dried up corn stalks to feed lots to survive, but the third year we had to borrow from the bank just to put in a crop. Mom and Dad cashed in their life savings – their retirement money – to invest in a nearby ethanol plant, thinking that was a way to protect themselves financially. Dad stayed afloat until 2021. That's when the local ethanol industry collapsed. There just wasn't enough corn. The industry tried to survive by importing corn from other areas, but the cost was too high. And you couldn't rely on the federal government for disaster help. The national debt was just too big and the feds were focused on global geopolitical challenges and urban renewal. Our rural problems and the drought didn't even register at the national level.

The collapse caused many farm foreclosures, including ours, and led to the closing of most of the meat plants. Thousands of people were out of work with nowhere to turn. Amazingly, the new immigrant communities fared better than most. Who would have thought that their years of struggling for survival would make them more resilient at a time of disaster? For years the new immigrant communities had depended on a sophisticated underground economy and support network, which helped them weather much of the storm.

My parents lost everything. A few of Dad's friends even committed suicide. That's when Mom called me worried about Dad—and that's when I decided to move back. I know I said I never would, but I had to. This is my home.

When I returned in 2023, there was a lot of anger and resentment; everyone wanted someone to blame and even though they had helped revive our rural economy, the immigrants became a target. There were several racially motivated crimes and fights in the area, but when the Multi-Cultural Center in Marshalltown, Iowa burned down, that was the last straw. No one knows if it was an accident or deliberate, but it became a flash point for anger and violence in many communities. Soon after, what started as a street fight between two rival gangs in Omaha turned into a three-day clash between the police, state troopers and several gangs from outside the region who went to Omaha to spread trouble. It was a mess. Racial tensions across the region were higher than ever. Naturally, this led to national news coverage, which turned out to be a good thing. Many people who had left the region saw the need to return and do what they could to help.

With these people moving back, young leaders from the immigrant, Native American, white and faith communities saw potential to positively change the region. In 2025 they hosted a civic dialogue in Des Moines. This dialogue became a learning and reconciliation process which was called the *Building for 2050 Initiative*. Over 1,000 people from throughout the region came to the meeting, 300 of whom were teens who came with their minds set on

making a difference by moving thinking beyond the societal and economic barriers that existed in the region. The group discussed many difficult issues facing the region and decided that the way to a peaceful and prosperous future depended on overcoming the many 'isms' dividing them. The attendees became a powerful, unified force for change in the region.

The meeting sparked similar dialogues around the region. People of all colors, classes, ages, religions and power began talking and learning to appreciate the uniqueness of each person. These important dialogues received strong support from local endowments that joined in partnership with statewide foundations to help our region come together. I took part in some of these talks, which is where I met Ricardo. Even though he and I had such different upbringings, we cared about the same things. What can I say? It was love at first sight.

The civic dialogues had incredible results. In 2027, the Governors from North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska issued a joint statement stating that each of them would dedicate personal time and resources to build reconciliation. This led to a regional meeting of legislators from the five states to identify ways to collaborate on regional issues. They decided to focus on energy independence, social services and entrepreneurial opportunities as key leverage points for change, which led to the passage of several multi-state acts that had a big impact on the region.

This positive, collaborative work brought a new sense of hope and opportunity to the region. Most of the counties in the region had reached local foundation endowment levels of \$10 million or more which was used to improve community life and support local entrepreneurs. Closed businesses started reopening. New ethnic restaurants sprouted up. Restaurants began purchasing their meat and produce locally from organic farmers. The tribal nations initiated programs to help people reconnect with the land and started the *Seven Generations Project*, which was a series of community dialogues about our long-term future. But most importantly, decisions were made with every generation at the table, all sharing equal voice. The wisdom and experience of the elders were respected and heard along side the creative and energetic voices of the youth, and all ages in between.

We couldn't help but jump on the bandwagon of development by starting our own business. Ricardo and I started Lopez Ledger after hemp was legalized as part of an effort to diversify the crop production. The business really took off and I was able to fulfill one of my dreams, I bought back my family's farmstead. Not the whole farm mind you, I figured I'd leave the farmland to be bought by a new, young farmer.

Farmers were using sustainable methods of farming that improved the health of the soil. A new hybrid corn was developed that needed less water, which helped restart the ethanol industry. Farmers were also pursuing decentralized energy systems such as wind energy, ethanol from cellulose instead of corn, and solar power. The number of young farmers was increasing because of some innovative programs to help start-up farmers and they were strong advocates of the new practices. Many of the immigrants were also able to buy acreage and helped create a growing, vibrant, local and organic food system.

But the changes didn't stop there. By 2035, state and local economic development initiatives shifted almost entirely to entrepreneurship programs. In fact EE (Entrepreneurship Education) became part of all K-12 curriculums. By 2037 the region led the nation in small business start-ups and by 2039 it led the nation in small business survival rates.

Even the health care system underwent big changes. In 2035 state law required that private insurers cover holistic health care and traditional healers. The entire system shifted to a focus on preventative care and therapies like massage, acupuncture and herbal treatment therapies. We have become a people with healthy bodies, minds and hearts.

Then in 2040, the region started getting some major attention and acknowledgment. First, we were recognized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as a global model for sustainable agriculture and, as a result, became a major destination for farmers and agriculture scientists from around the world. Then the National Governors Association recognized the region for its multi-state collaborative leadership; and the National Council on Foundations established the Community Culture of Philanthropy Award to honor what our region had accomplished.

Two years later UNICEF recognized the region's elementary and secondary schools as international models for holistic and experiential learning. Our students take a range of classes including music, math, art, science, philosophy, literature, writing and social studies, which give them the ability to think in a systemic way. This form of education makes them great creative thinkers and problem solvers and is grounded in a strong connection to community and family. In 2043, a senior at Standing Rock High School in North Dakota was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his collection of short stories about life on the prairie. Word about our education system spread like wildfire. Young families were moving into the region, causing the average age of the region to drop to 42.

I'm still amazed to see how much change and progress those initial dialogue groups created. Who would have thought talking could have such an impact? But it has and the *Seven Generations Project* has dialogue groups across the region that continue to keep us working together on our future. I'm proud to say that today, through a program of local food systems, education, and community gardening, we have ended hunger in our region and have hope that our ideas will spread nationally. We have an incredible regional commuter rail system that connects every city with a population over 20,000. Our air quality is the best in the nation. Civic participation is at an all time high - this last election, 92% of regional voters cast a ballot! And because we have become a place that welcomes new people, our population is on the rise for the second decade in a row.

We have done it! We created a place where diversity is celebrated, where everyone has a voice, where people are choosing to live, where a biofuels industry is thriving, and we did it when all hope was lost.

I guess it just goes to show that Margaret Mead was right when she said "Never underestimate the power of a few people to change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has."