

Overcoming barriers, building on strengths: Maine women look at aspirations

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This roundtable discussion was moderated and edited for the Review by Lisa Pohlmann, a research associate with the Maine Center for Economic Policy.

There is widespread belief in Maine that the aspirations of both young people and adults native to the state fall below much of the rest of the nation. Implicit in this perspective is the idea that aspirations must be raised if we are to prosper economically as a state. Yet opinions differ about the definition of "aspirations," whether that definition may be expected or permitted to vary by county or region of the state, what factors contribute to the problem being identified as a lack of aspirations, and whether rural parts of Maine and women are particularly disadvantaged. In an effort to further the dialogue on these issues, the Maine Center for Economic Policy convened a round-table discussion in June. The four participants are women who grew up in rural Maine and retain ties and allegiances to those roots. They have attained significant leadership positions within their fields and are respected widely for their many achievements and contributions to the public good. Their conversation was informal, candid, and spanned numerous issues. Here, their comments have been organized around a number of themes that emerged from the content of those discussions. It is hoped that by sharing these personal experiences and insights, a common ground may be easier to identify on which to move forward, overcoming barriers and building on the many strengths of this state and its people.

GETTING TO COLLEGE

How is it that residents of rural Maine, particularly women find their way to college. What are the influences? What sparks and maintains their interest?

Kay Rand: I grew up in Ashland, Maine, and graduated in 1973 from Ashland Community High School. I had two older sisters who were valedictorians and role models for me and they went on to college. At Ashland, college prep was more of a liberal arts curriculum, and by 1973 we had turned a corner and most of my class went to college, which was rare. I went to college in Portland, which was as far away as I could be and still be in Maine. I graduated from what is now the University of Southern Maine in 1977 with a degree in political science.

Laurie Lachance: I was born and raised in Dover-Foxcroft. I had a hard-driving father who always said, "You've got to go to college. You've got to have a goal." When I think back to how I ended up in the college I did it seems like a miracle to me. My high school sweetheart's family moved down to the Brunswick area and I had a chance to walk around Bowdoin. I thought it was a pretty place so I applied there and was accepted, having absolutely no concept of what this was all about or what it would offer to my future. I had no particular aspirations for a career.

Francine Stark: I'm from Chapman, Maine, and I graduated from Presque Isle High School in 1977. I'm the youngest of seven children and grew up on a farm where my parents still live. My father was an independent logger. My own journey to college was quite accidental. I never had a picture of what I would be when I grew up. In high school I wanted to study things that were college prep because they were the only things that were interesting. I loved math and science. The music and theater programs were also important to me because I had fun, felt like an individual, and had my talents appreciated. A guidance counselor who went to our church talked to me because I wasn't planning to go to college I had no idea what I would do and how I would afford it. He told me, "Just apply to one of the schools that has a lot of money and they will pay you to go there." I didn't want to go out of Maine so he put the Bowdoin, Bates, and Colby catalogs in front of me I picked Bates because it didn't have any fraternities. They gave me a scholarship, plus there was a big Pell Grant so it cost me \$300 for my freshman year. It paid to be very poor in the 1970s because there were a lot of federal grants available.

Gilda Nardone: I grew up in Presque Isle and graduated from high school in 1966. My father told me there were not going to be sufficient resources to support me going on to post-secondary education and that I needed to learn a skill so I could earn a paycheck. There were not a lot of career options available in rural Maine, so I transitioned into high school, partially in the business program and partially in the academic program. My father died suddenly when I was a senior, which changed our family situation, and I was able to get scholarships at Westbrook which was still a junior college then. My aspirations were not terribly high, so I completed two years in a secretarial program.

VARIOUS PATHS TO SUCCESS

After furthering their educations, how did these women come to positions of leadership in Maine? How were their paths marked with clear goals and coincidences?

Stark: After college I went into the Peace Corps and spent two and a half years in the Dominican Republic as a rural development extensionist and a volunteer trainer. I then went to Vermont and could only find a job as an administrative assistant for the Clinical Research Center at the medical school in Burlington, but I learned how to use a computer and manage a grant. I also wanted to connect with a community of women there, so I volunteered for the local domestic violence project I worked on that hot line for a year and a half and realized I loved that four hours a week more than the rest of my work. When I decided to come back to Maine in 1986, I got a job at Spruce Run, the domestic violence project serving Penobscot County, and I am now the community response coordinator.

Lachance: I'd never heard of economics until I went to college and fell into it because I couldn't get the math course I wanted. After I graduated, I ended up at Central Maine Power While I was there, I worked towards and got my master's [degree] in business through Thomas College. Then I got this opportunity to work as the state economist. It's been a wonderful path but it wasn't anything like my father tried to teach me, which was to set a goal and go for it.

Nardone: I worked for a couple of years after school, gradually got dissatisfied with the role of secretary and made a career shift in a day-care center. While I was there, I finished my bachelor's degree through the "University Without Walls" program through UMass-Amherst, which is why I'm very interested in alternative approaches to postsecondary education. I then went to Wheelock College in Boston for my master's degree in educational administration. I'm the current director for the Maine Centers for Women, Work and Community (formerly Displaced Homemakers Program), where I have worked for almost nineteen years.

Rand: My career has taken a lot of unexpected paths, though I've never strayed far from public policy. For twelve years I worked for the Maine Municipal Association, the last nine of which as its chief lobbyist. I left MMA to become a deputy commissioner at the Department of Economic and Community Development during the McKernan administration to design and implement the Growth Management Program. In 1991, I left to help start a new business advocacy organization. Then I became the campaign manager for the Angus King for Governor campaign, and I've spent the last two and a half years as his chief policy advisor.

THE WORLD OUT THERE

How do young people in rural places learn about life beyond their small towns? How do such experiences, or the lack of them, affect their aspirations?

Stark: 4-H gave me my only opportunity to travel outside the state, meet people from away, and have a sense of the larger world'. A farmer from India came and lived with us through the 4-H program when I was in first grade. He was always remarking about how magnificent it was that in America girls could go to school. This was my first jarring idea that there were people with dark skin and that there was some place in the world where girls couldn't learn to read and write.

Lachance: Between my junior and senior years, I was an AFS student to Austria. It was very eye-opening to see that there was a bigger world out there. Then I had the biggest shock of my life, coming from rural Maine to Bowdoin. I had never seen wealth like that. I'd never heard of a prep school or been exposed to differences in upbringing. Lack of exposure also makes it difficult for kids who are out there on the edge, not "normal"—as defined by the community—to see where they fit in. They don't understand that it's OK to be artsy and wear different clothes because in your town, everyone drives a truck and wears Levi pants. They may not find that it's OK to be the way they are until they live in different communities.

Rand: When you've been exposed to a lot of cultural opportunities and have learned how to deal with different environments, it builds your self-confidence, which is critical to aspirations. In rural areas, where there is not the occasion to go to a summer music camp or participate in an art program, there is not that opportunity to build up your confidence.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF ASPIRATIONS

Is attending college the only measure of aspirations? What can be said for people who make conscious choices to work the land, raise a family or continue the more traditional rural life in which they were raised?

Rand: There are some differences between rural and urban Maine but they're not just measured by how many kids go to college or by their level of pay. The differences have to do with the social ecology and culture of the area. I still have a lot of friends back in Ashland who chose different paths than I did. It's not fair to say that they don't have the same level of aspirations as I do because they didn't choose to go to college. It's an urban bias to measure aspirations that way. One of my best friends decided to get married during our junior year in high school. I thought she was throwing her life away, but she has made a lot out of her life. Her aspirations were harder come by than mine and she worked harder to get where she is. Some of the other people I went to school with who are still up in the County and didn't go to college are connected to the land. They're loggers. They supply pulp. They're brilliant people. They've learned about biology and natural sciences, not from a classroom but from living and working the land. It's harder for those people. Their resolve and creativity are much greater than mine. Maybe they didn't go on to college, but I have a hard time saying that their aspirations are lower than mine.

Lachance: In my junior year in college, I went to Wall Street with one of my friends. After that experience, I knew for sure that it was not what I wanted out of life. People ^ choose different paths. It doesn't mean they have worse or 'lower' aspirations. Many of the people who stayed in Dover-Foxcroft may have had higher aspirations than I have had. I can see aspiring to a small-town atmosphere for your children and wanting that feeling of community and belonging and the opportunity to participate. Even now, when I go to Portland I almost feel like a foreigner. Although it intrigues me and seems to be the "in" place, it's not really what I'm looking for. We have what we're looking for here in Manchester, where we live now.

A RURAL LIFESTYLE

What are the benefits of rural life and of growing up in a rural area of the state?

Lachance: I grew up in a family that would likely be considered poor in Maine, but I never felt poor or wanted for anything. The community takes care of you, either through the church or neighbors. It may look like there's a lot of poverty in rural Maine statistically but if you look more closely maybe it's really the urban areas where true poverty exists. There it's harder to get good meals or to participate in other affirming activities. The poorer kids in my class had opportunities through sports and music to participate and learn that there was more to them than the house they lived in. One of my very best friends would have been classified as one of the poorest, but she gained strength from remembering what it was like and aspired for something better.

Rand: People are going to return to wanting to be part of a community that will make rural life more attractive and something to be aspired to. This gets into Evan Richert's theory about "sprawl." (See Evan Richert on sprawl in this issue.) For example, in southern and central Maine there are fewer real communities anymore. People spend all their spare time commuting to and from work rather than socializing in their communities or being a part of their kids' lives. And there's no time for civic participation like there still is in rural Maine. I also react a little defensively to the conclusion that if you grew up in rural Maine, you don't have the skills or abilities to compete in a global economy. Maybe they're not as prepared to communicate with Wall Street, but there are other ways to build confidence in a child. If I was in trouble there was a whole community willing to help me out instead of being only connected to my parents like my kids are. I had the confidence of a community that cared about me, and a lot of kids growing up in urban areas don't necessarily have that.

THE FUTURE OF RURAL MAINE

How do economic and social issues in Maine's rural areas impact the future of the residents there? What are the unique issues for women?

Rand: My father was a potato farmer, so I grew up understanding what it was like to have your economic future tied to the land. As more generations go by that don't have that connection to the land, we're going to see some growing disparity between rural and urban incomes and aspirations.

Stark: We are preoccupied with questioning the values and choices of the poor rather than questioning the value of the business people and policy makers who pollute their communities and export their jobs. You have to take the bigger context into account. Every time I hear discussions of aspirations in rural Maine, it's as if the kids who grow up there fail to have enough dreams and fail to go to college so the population dwindles and all the farms die, rather than seeing it, in part, as the closure of Loring Air Force Base and the failing potato market and dairy industry. It has been shortsighted to keep so much of the state's economic health dependent on defense spending when so much of our livelihood in the County was dependent on being able to feed people in Maine. No one ever did a major investment to make sure that the food people ate first in Maine was the food we grew here. We've got the best food in the country but people couldn't keep farming because we were shipping it all in. When we talk about people's aspirations, we have to take into account what is being done to those people and what's being done to the environment.

After my high school graduation, people scattered because truly there was nothing in Aroostook unless you were going to stay attached to the land. But it was clear in the late 1970s that farming wasn't a practical option because, at that point everybody was selling off their farms to conglomerates from outside the state. To be employed meant being a teacher—and all those jobs were filled—or starting your own business and selling to your own friends and family which was a small market. I don't know of anybody I knew in high school who's even in Presque Isle now. It's very sad. When I go home, all the people I recognize are my parents' peers, not my peers.

Nardone: Poverty is a significant framework for looking at gender differences. Who is poor? Who is still seen as having the primary responsibility of child rearing? Why is the work women do in the home and community unpaid, and what does that say about how it is valued? What are the jobs that women are moving into? What is the potential for advancement in those jobs?

Stark: Boys grow up knowing that they must have a career and support themselves. But girls grow up thinking, "I may or may not have children. I may or may not stay home for some of my adult life, which means I may or may not have a job or a career." A job and a career are different things. The ability to support yourself is different than having a vision of your life that includes always working in something that feels value-created and like an extension of yourself. My father was very direct with his daughters, that we all needed to be able to have a job in case our husbands failed us or got killed rolling over the tractor. But my brother was the only one my parents were clearly invested in going to college. The rest of us were encouraged, but it was not necessarily important for us to go.

Rand: Growing up in Aroostook County, I never experienced much in the way of a gender gap. Perhaps it's because my mother did all the same things my father did on a potato farm. She could drive the tractor and roll barrels, although she also played the role of the woman and cleaned the house and cooked. Never once did it occur to me that I couldn't do something a boy could do. We've all been exposed to gender differences in our professional lives, where we have encountered people who had different expectations for women than they did for men. But I've never felt real limited by those expectations.

Lachance: I've seen a real difference for women who choose to raise children and not to work. They become much more vulnerable to economic swings and it puts them in a bad situation if anything goes wrong, like the loss of a spouse or a divorce.

Nardone: We have seen hundreds of women respond to expanded opportunities, both for themselves and their children. Having mothers become learners and go to school has had a very positive impact on their children. One young girl said when she grew up she wanted to be a "displaced homemaker" because she saw her mother become positively engaged through our program. We chuckle about that! I do have a concern about the cost of education. The direction of welfare reform, for example, will impact whether poor women can aspire to go to postsecondary education. I am afraid that we are going to see another swing where education is for the elite. I am really committed to that not happening.

Stark: In reference to welfare reform, the difference between how people from Aroostook, Washington, and Piscataquis counties will experience going from welfare to work as opposed to Portland and other southern areas needs to be taken very seriously. This is not going to be a statewide, uniformly effective kind of policy. And in those very rural places where you need to have the most creative policy developed, there may be the least number of experienced and knowledgeable people to help create those solutions because they are the ones who have left. There are some great people in those places who have great ideas, but the fora are not yet present to bring those ideas to fruition in these times. I'm scared about what rural Maine is going to look

like in the year 2000. I'm terrified by the increased gap in people's incomes and the sense that there is no abatement to the amount of sexual abuse and violence that continues to thrive, destroying people for a long time and certainly interrupting their aspirations.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

How are aspirations tied to feeling empowered about the direction of one's life? What has hindered or helped rural people to become actively engaged in decisions that impact the futures of their children and their communities?

Nardone: One of the courses in our program helps women learn how to influence the economic decisions that affect them. We see women learning to trust their own information base, which gives them the confidence to move into arenas that have felt removed from them. Initially, it was a greater challenge in the County to help women create their own answers than in other communities around the state where we have done the course. My experience of Aroostook County has been that there is a culture of not engaging in public policy discussions or challenging the people who are in political decision making because it is perceived that they have more information and authority. I'm not sure people have known how to influence the economic development decisions that have affected them. I still see decisions being made by a fairly small group of people—not an inclusive, grass-roots decision-making process.

Rand: I don't agree that people in Aroostook County are somehow not responsible or had no choice in things that have happened to them. They have choices and they make them. But we've got to respect the choices instead of saying those aren't the choices we'd make and therefore they're either victims or don't have the same values we have.

Stark: I have such a strong belief in people's ability to act on their own when they have the necessary information. My parents made the best choices they could given the information they had, but they didn't have the amount of information available to them that I got growing up. During their generation, one trusted one's leaders and their decisions.

Nardone: I was so disappointed when the comprehensive planning process was cut off. That kind of community capacity building is about figuring out ways for people to be involved in decision making at the community level. In this era of devolution, how can we empower communities—both geographic and other kinds of communities—to care about each other and to care about this state that we love? I am choosing to put my energy into giving people some tools to do that effectively.

Rand: We've got to develop a culture of policy making in which we're confident enough to respect the regional differences that exist all over the state. We design economic development programs with a set criteria, and the criteria are always easier for urban locations to meet. It's very different for a policy maker from Augusta to say to Dover-Foxcroft or Presque Isle that they can do something different for them than for Scarborough, whether it's funding, economic development strategy or public facilities.

Stark: On the state level, the process of public hearings and work sessions is unfriendly and unfair, because if you're from Presque Isle and you want to have an impact on public policy you've got to get a motel room. And being at a public hearing means nothing because all the work happens in work sessions. You have to have a kind of wizardry to stay on top of a bill through that whole process because of the hours that the Legislature and the committees keep. I have great respect for the challenge legislators have, but it certainly has come a long way from being a citizen legislature and community process. The only reason I've been able to do legislative work in the last couple of years is because my husband is now at home taking care of our daughter. The inaccessibility of the process has an impact on whether you have more men or women engaged in that work and also which kinds of women can engage in that work.

Nardone: We had a really contentious school committee issue in Freeport and our family stayed for the meeting. My thirteen-year-old son was able to observe public policy in process and to see people mobilize around an issue. He also could see how the school committee had already made up its mind before the public process happened! It provided a wonderful opportunity to talk about how these decisions get made and how to influence them. My son also participated in a "Day in the State House," shadowing his senator and representative. We've been to [Washington] D.C. and spent some time in Tom Alien's office. These kinds of experiences provide an opportunity for involvement and for aspirations.

LEADERSHIP IN MAINE

Who has really been providing leadership in Maine to date, Maine natives or people from away? How can we dispel the perception that Maine people do not have the skills to lead themselves, and how can we support their leadership aspirations?

Rand: I've never thought there was a dearth of leadership among Maine natives. I can think of dozens of people in leadership positions who were born and raised here. Bill Cohen, George Mitchell, Olympia Snowe, John Baldacci, Jock McKernan—they are all Maine natives. Margaret Chase Smith grew up believing Maine people could do anything. I get angry when people judge me based on where I was born, so I don't judge others based on where they were born. People from Maine as well as from away positively affected my aspirations during my childhood, and I am grateful for that crosspollination. It creates diversity. If Aroostook County ever got locked off from people from away coming in, it would be the end of it.

Lachance: Recently, I was speaking about a potential opportunity I had with a legislator who said, "Well, it might be an issue because you're from Maine and a lot of people don't think people from Maine can do anything." I have noticed this in the company I worked with and even in state government. We seem to trust consultants more than our own people. Somebody from outside must have a better way of doing things.

Nardone: Maine people don't see themselves as leaders even though they are very bright and creative. There's a mystique about what leadership is.

Stark: When I think about leaders, I think about who's the minister in the church, who's the superintendent, who are the principals of the schools, who owns the supermarket. We have magnificent political leaders from Maine, but when I was growing up if you aspired to leadership, you were going to do it someplace else. And people who were leaders from my town were from someplace else. I hear a lot of rural Mainers putting down our skills, although the reverse is true as well. I think it is a more common thing among people from Maine than, say, people from New York state. I agree that it's overstated. Perhaps there's a mythology that has emerged that we should champion bringing down!

Nardone: As I've been involved in national forums, I have come to value what Maine has and how progressive we are. It's wonderful to come from Maine and to be in a leadership role at a national level. One of the key areas that other people are astounded by is how accessible our policy makers are, both the administrators and the legislators. They can't believe that people really respond to us both on state and federal levels. More could be done to acknowledge where Maine really is a leader.

STEPS FORWARD

What changes have been made and what further steps can be taken to support a sense of pride in Maine's accomplishments and to build on the aspirations of Maine people?

Lachance: The academy in Dover-Foxcroft now has a tech-prep program aimed at keeping more kids in school who have aspirations to stay connected to the land. They have just opened the first-ever high school forestry curriculum, and they've got kids working with farm tractors. The message is, "Hey, if that's the way you want to go, that's super. Let's make sure you have the skills to manage the farm and do it safely."

Getting the Internet out to every school is another step in the right direction. When I go back to Dover-Foxcroft, I hear parents talking about how their kids are wizards on the Internet. It's opening up a new world for them, and it will definitely enhance aspirations by the mere exposure to all kinds of different information. Telecommunications will unite us because we are so geographically dispersed. It will enable people in different parts of Maine to live in a place they want to live and still carry out their aspirations by being able to do the work they want to do.

Nardone: The Freeport school committee has been very intentional about honoring kids for sports and art as well as academics, which has been a nice way to encourage all different kinds of aspirations. They invite kids and their parents to their meetings to be honored, and it is videotaped and put on cable television. Stark: I never thought we would have classrooms with twenty-two kids in 1997. It's very important in this aspirations discussion because it has to do with the quality of all the children's educations. I want teachers to have classes not bigger than fifteen students. We would see a change just by a simple reduction in numbers, which would allow teachers to really focus on each child.

Lachance: There is a lack of understanding of basic economics. We need to empower kids with a knowledge of the economy and how they can find their place in it. They need to understand how you can be entrepreneurial with your own talents and succeed. Fortunately, economics is now in the Learning Results. I've been involved with the Maine Council on Economic Education, a small organization that reaches more than 10,000 students every year.

Nardone: The interactive television in the university system is a major policy decision that has made postsecondary education much more accessible to the rural areas of the state.

Lachance: Perhaps we spend too much time trying to figure out how aspirations are affected by income level and by rural versus urban and Maine versus Boston comparisons. Maybe it all comes down to whether you've been fortunate enough to have a supportive, loving family or an individual in your life, often a teacher or church person, who has taken enough interest in you to inspire you to be the things you can be. Maybe our policy should be more focused on creating and empowering teachers to touch lives in a better way, or to help families stay together.

Stark: Maine has been and continues to be a very caring, human place. We are way ahead of the nation so often in our process. We respect our people and our environment. In terms of aspirations, kids and adults need to have that information so they can have pride in what we've accomplished. People's aspirations have a lot to do with how they're treated as human beings. I think that's precisely where the policy should go. We have a wonderful state, and the more we have the chance for people to talk with each other in casual ways instead of over contentious issues, the better things are.



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