

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

MEADVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

Meadville is a college town in western Pennsylvania that was once known as home to the first and largest zipper manufacturer in the country, Talon Zipper Company. In its heyday, a quarter of the working population clocked in at Talon. Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, Talon withered as manufacturing moved to Mexico. As Talon's fortunes shifted, so did Meadville's.

POPULATION:
12,721

CHALLENGE:
Revitalizing local
economy,
increasing civic
engagement

FOCUS:
Revitalization

KEY TOOL:
Community
Network Analysis

The town has struggled with downtown vacancies, a low percentage of owner-occupied homes, and lackluster economic development.

Meadville “by the numbers”:

- 57% of Meadville housing stock is rental.
- 1,400 data points collected via various story gathering and engagements methods as part of Community Heart & Soul
- 21 community gardens planted across the city, inspired by stories gathered and planted across the city, inspired by stories and gathered through Community Heart & Soul.
- 2018 – the year Meadville’s Community Heart & Soul project won an award from the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Planning Association.

Local conditions:

In the early 20th century Meadville was booming, so much so that the Great Depression passed it by. The thriving local economy was driven by zipper manufacturing, which spawned a tool and die industry, earning the town its moniker Tool City. The local radio station call letters were WZPR.

Meadville's history is also marked by notable courageous individuals. Richard Henderson, a former slave, sheltered more than 500 slaves in his home as they fled to freedom. Muckraking journalist Ida Tarbell got her start as a reporter here.

In the 1980s Talon began to shift manufacturing out of state, and the unemployment rate soared. Today, 57% of Meadville's housing stock is rental. Median income is \$34,826 compared to \$45,637 in the surrounding county. With anchor stores J.C. Penny and Montgomery Ward long gone, a once thriving downtown has struggled.

"There was definitely this defeated mentality. Stuff has left. Jobs have left. Companies have left. Money has left, and there was a sense of being overlooked. No one cares," said Autumn Vogel, an alumna of Allegheny College who stayed in town after college.

Volunteer and Community Response:

Residents came together and, through Community Heart & Soul, discovered what matters most to them. Momentum started to build.

"We've gotten creative and scrappy and pulled some things off that made it cool to be in Meadville again," Vogel said.

Here are some examples of positive change happening:

- Five \$10,000 grants were given to businesses starting, relocating, or expanding in town. Grants have supported a vintage clothing store, a game shop expansion, a restaurant, and a painting contractor relocation.
- More than 21 community gardens have been planted in neighborhoods across the city, providing a way for residents to get fresh produce.
- A Teen Lounge was established by teens with volunteer construction help from local contractors.
- A low-interest loan program was established for fixing up historic buildings.
- Tarot Bean Roasting Company raised \$10,000 through crowdsourcing and moved downtown, which gave the shop the nickname "10K Cafe."

