



**Straight from the Heartland
Coming of Age in Ellis, Iowa**

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Life Magazine recently photographed the residents of Greensfield, Iowa (population 2100) for a cover story celebrating “the joys of small town living.” Such enthusiastic boosterism, however, runs counter to the dire concerns of policymakers and researchers who warn that the romantic ideal of small town life is nothing more than an “illusion of American culture.”¹ With the 1980s farm crisis, the family farm suffered an identical fate of the corner store competing against big-box retailers. Agribusiness factory farms on a thousand acre spread now replace the family-owned farms working a couple of hundred acres.² Abandoned farms and dilapidated barns are to the rural landscape what decaying smock stacks and boarded up storefronts are to the inner-city.³

Now a rural “brain drain,” the mass exodus of the region’s single, educated twenty-somethings has made front page headlines.⁴ The problem is often explained, rather simplistically, as regional competition from “hipper” cities and more pleasant climates.⁵ On closer inspection though, the forces pulling some young people to remain and pushing others to go are far more complex and not nearly so benign.⁶ The loss of the Heartland’s most precious natural resource, its young people, is a tale of how inequality, opportunity, and the bonds of community shape rural youth’s transition from adolescence to adulthood. When we talked to a group of young Iowans about the twists and turns their lives had taken since high school, we found that the defining moment in rural young people’s lives was their decision to leave, stay, or return to the small-town where they had grown up.

One in five Americans live in nonmetropolitan areas, yet any quick review of the research on adolescence and community life reveals that most scholarly work documents the experiences of youth coming of age in urban settings.⁷ Following in the footsteps of Robert and Helen Lynd, the husband and wife ethnographers who studied Muncie, Indiana, for the landmark Middletown series, we moved our family to a farming community⁸ in the northeastern corner of Iowa, a town renamed Ellis to protect the confidentiality of its inhabitants. We wanted to learn as much as we could about how young rural Iowans navigate this new stage of life called “early adulthood” and about how growing up in rural settings structures young people’s life chances.

We surveyed 275⁹ young people who entered the Ellis Community High School between the years 1986 and 1988 and 1991 and 1993. We then followed up with 104 in-depth interviews

¹ Gallagher, Art and Harland Padfield. 1980. *The Dying Community*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

² From 1982 to 2002, the numbers of farms in Iowa decreased by slightly more than 20 percent, while the number of farms larger than 1,000 acres quadrupled. As one young woman, the daughter of farmers remarked, when she was growing people looked down on the poor farmers, and nowadays, if you are still farming, people assume you are affluent.

³ Such illicit activities include drinking, gravel traveling, partying and, for the most daring, cooking meth. Gravel travel is a term for a common activity among Ellis youth, driving a car very fast down the isolated gravel roads while the passengers (at the very least) drink. Partying is a handy euphemism for drug use.

⁴ See Stephanie Simon, “Exodus of Its Restless Young Makes Iowa Fear for Future Hoping to Stop a Brain Drain: the legislature is weighing a tax break for those younger than 30.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2005, p. A1. In analysis of the Census numbers from 1995-2000, researchers ranked Iowa as one of the top five states in the nation for the population losses among its single, college-educated workers.

⁵ Refer to census numbers here. For a more in-depth sociological explanation of the trend see McGrath, Daniel J., Raymond R. Swisher, Glen H. Elder Jr. and Rand D. Conger (2001). “Breaking New Ground: Diverse Routes to College in Rural America.” *Rural Sociology* 66 (2): 244-268.

⁶ Kefalas, Maria and Patrick Carr. 2005. “Re-seeding Rural America.” *Des Moines Register*, August 6. <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2005508060307>

⁷ For example, see Katherine Newman’s *No Shame in My Game* (2000) and Mary Patillo-McCoy’s *Black Picket Fences* (2000).

⁸ Because of our teaching commitments in Philadelphia, we flew back and forth to Iowa over a span of 18 months, our family lived full-time in Ellis for the summer of 2002.

⁹ The survey response rate was 81 percent of students who had entered the high school as freshman. We did not seek interviews with young people who moved away and completed high school in another community or visiting foreign

when they were in their 20s to early 30s. To capture a variety of life trajectories, we spoke to young people who had dropped out of high school, faced bouts of unemployment, married and divorced, spent time in jail, abused drugs, bore children as teenagers and outside of marriage, and relied on public assistance. To examine the role of educational and social institutions that train and educate young adults, we sought out Ellis youth who had attended four- and two-year colleges (whether they graduated or not), served in the military, and pursued post baccalaureate and graduate level training. To learn about work and economic opportunities, we spoke to young people employed in a range of occupations (from doctors working and living in Cedar Rapid's affluent suburbs to factory workers in the meat processing plants struggling to make payments on trailer homes) and to learn about family life, we talked to young people in various stages of family formation, from married couples and unmarried parents to unattached singles. While it might have been convenient to interview only the young people who had stayed or returned to Iowa, we made a special effort to seek out young people whose lives had taken them far away from the small town where they had grown up. By the time we concluded the survey and interview phase of the project, we had talked with Ellis youth living more than a dozen states across the nation.

Here, we discuss how the larger demographics and economic opportunities in Iowa shape young people's transition into adulthood, and specifically how the choice to leave, stay, or return to Ellis plays such a significant role in how their lives unfold. What forces push and pull some people to leave, while others remain? Why do some young people finish high school and achieve, at lightning speed, the trappings of adulthood: an independent household, a full-time job, and a family of their own? What lessons does this "traditional" transition into adulthood teach us about early adulthood in Ellis and the rest of the nation? What roles do individual choice (agency, planning, and emotional connections) and social structures (school, work, community, and social class) play in determining who stays, leaves, or returns to Ellis?

The Setting: Ellis, Iowa

Ellis, Iowa is located in the northeastern part of the state in Liberty County. Although Ellis does not have a stoplight – and any small-town dweller can tell you that the number of stop signs, lights, and gas stations is a way to take measure of small-town's smallness - it does have its own high school, two gas stations, a local grocery store, several churches, and two taverns. For a town with a population of just over 2,000, it sends an impressive number of its young men and women to serve in the armed forces. Joining the military is still one of the most important ways out of small towns like Ellis.

Ellis is neither noteworthy for its historical significance nor its scenic beauty. With a water tower bearing the town's name hovering just beyond Main Street, grain elevators, a John Deere dealership, and farms perched on the town's outskirts, Ellis has the look and feel of a farming community "with its roots deep in the land."¹⁰ But one must remember that Iowa's farming towns are not exactly what they seem since few people still depend on corn and soybeans for their livelihood.¹¹

Rural regions' economic backbones—manufacturing, agriculture, and mining—have been systemically challenged by global competition and technological change.¹² Since the downturns in the rural economy have seeped, rather than swept, through small town America, the

exchange students. We did, however, complete surveys with young people who dropped out of high school and completed GEDs.

¹⁰ Davidson, Osha Gray. 1996. *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press: 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Freudenberg, William. R. 1992. "Addictive Economies: Extractive Industries and Vulnerable Localities in a Changing World Economy." *Rural Sociology*, 57, 305-332.

“rural collapse has been largely silent because it happened so slowly.”¹³ The massive upheaval in agriculture has led to a widespread restructuring as towns like Ellis struggle to reinvent themselves and create jobs for their inhabitants.¹⁴

Although the economic boom of the late 1990s kept poverty in check throughout the nation, the 2000 census found that the percentage of people living below the poverty level is about 30 percent higher in rural areas than in urban ones. In addition, poverty in rural areas is more persistent, lasting more frequently over generations. With the recent economic downturn have come rising crime rates, fueled in particular by the spread of crystal methamphetamine.

Perhaps the most serious problem facing rural America is its aging population.¹⁵ The median age in Ellis, for instance, rapidly approaches 50. And between 1995 and 2000, the state of Iowa lost 22 percent of its single, college-educated population. In an extraordinary, albeit unusual, effort to reverse the trend, former Governor Tom Vilsack, hosted cocktail parties to lure back Iowans living in Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C.¹⁶

Despite the economic upheavals of the last two decades, Ellis seems to have weathered the storm well. Ellis is home to several factories, a small hospital and nursing home. These employers, along with a sprinkling of smaller construction companies helped wean the town from its dependence on agriculture. Also, on the plus side of the equation, Ellis has an extremely effective core of activists who have built a state-of-the-art public library and recreation center and swimming pool, and they have renovated and reopened the town’s movie theatre. As rural Iowa towns go, Ellis is in good shape economically and civically. However, as with other small and medium-sized towns throughout the Heartland, Ellis finds itself in a precarious position. If one of the major local employers were to go out of business, the impact would be tremendous. Also, despite the jobs in town, overall opportunities are limited. Most skilled and semi-skilled jobs are to be found beyond the town’s limits, and thus, for many of the town’s young people, their future lies elsewhere.

The Context for Coming of Age in Iowa

Much of the research on the life course has focused on how events shape people’s lives. The sociologist Glen Elder’s classic work on children coming of age during the Depression shows how social upheavals play a profound role in shaping the pathways of young lives. In the same way, we can point to several macro-level events that form the larger context in which these young Iowans have grown up. These include the farm crisis, the shift to a technology-based economy, and the rapid expansion of postsecondary educational opportunities, especially for women.

The groups of young people we studied have a unique perspective on the changes that have affected their communities. Most of this group was born during the 1970s and experienced the farm crisis during their teenage years.¹⁷ Jonathan, a 24-year-old college graduate, now working in Washington DC as a school administrator, came of age on a dairy farm. “The price of milk was always a topic of conversation amongst my parents,” says Jonathan. “When the price of milk was good, there was a lot of money coming in.” But if the price went down, “times were tough,” and necessities such as clothes “would have to last for a couple of years.” Similarly, Rose, a 30-year-old homemaker and school teacher now living in an affluent Maryland suburb recounts the devastating impact leaving the land had on farming families she knew growing up. “I had a

¹³ Egan, Timothy. “Pastoral Poverty: The Seeds of Decline,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 2002, B1.

¹⁴ Hobbs, D. 1994. “Demographic Trends in Nonmetropolitan America.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 10(3), 149-160.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The story about former Governor Vilsack’s cocktail parties appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* story by Stephanie Simon. Ibid. Also see Kefalas, Maria and Patrick Carr, “Re-Seeding Rural America” *Des Moines Register*. August 6, 2005. (<http://desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050806/OPINION01/508060307/1035/OPINION>)

¹⁷ See Elder, Glen and Conger, Rand D. 2000. *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

couple of friends whose parents committed suicide. [For these people], you grow up, you live there, you know nothing else [but farming] and then everything crumbles...you've failed and it's the only way of life you've ever known."

A second major event that has influenced their lives was the move to a technology-based economy. The digital age has not transformed the working landscape of Iowa in as forceful a fashion as it has in other regions, but the impact is striking nonetheless. Manufacturing jobs get eliminated every year, with a disproportionate amount of the nation's new job growth coming in the high tech and service sectors. In an economy that values specialized expertise, educational qualifications and certification become ever more important. Even semi-skilled and service occupations now demand basic computer literacy, and so preparation and exposure to personal computers has become a necessity. Many of the young Iowans we interviewed were in high school before computer classes were compulsory. For Trevor, a 26-year-old high school graduate who works around Ellis as a mechanic says one of the great regrets he has from high school is that he never learned about computers. The school "should have tried to make a computer class required. [If] you asked me anything about a computer, I wouldn't have a clue." Jasper, a 31-year-old machine operator with a high school education sums up the dilemma the digital divide means for younger blue-collar workers like himself, "Nowadays, everything is so much computer[s] that you either are going to be a laborer or your going to be on your butt behind a computer. You got to do one or the other. And if you're not good at reading and writing like I am you'd better learn some of those alternatives."

However, if digital technology changed how and what we learn, the realm of education has seen a more basic and profound change. Simply put, college enrollment has expanded dramatically in the past three decades. From 1976 to 2000, total enrollment of full- and part- time students in degree granting institutions rose nearly 30 percent. The timing is important because this growth took place just as the older group we interviewed was in high school, and therefore many of our young adults found the doors to postsecondary education thrown open to them. The growth of postsecondary education has been more marked for women than for men, with the number of women in degree-granting institutions increasing by two-thirds between 1976 and 2000. Women now outnumber men in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

The young people of Ellis showed great diversity in their postsecondary education. In fact, only about 18 percent failed to earn any kind of degree or diploma after high school. Most Ellis young people describe strong pressures from the school community, and their own families, to pursue higher education in one form or another. Even students with weak academic records often made an effort to attend a one-year program at the nearby community colleges.

As the entry into adulthood has become a more "gradual, complex, and a less uniform" process¹⁸, "the timing and sequencing of traditional markers of adulthood—leaving home, finishing school, starting work, and getting married, and having children—are less predictable, more prolonged, diverse and disordered."¹⁹ Yet, among the youth in our sample who either stayed in Ellis or returned after a brief foray in school or pursuing work opportunities elsewhere, we find they follow the speedy trajectory from adolescence to adulthood that characterized life half a century ago. A trajectory to adulthood Wayne Osgood and his collaborators refer to as *the fast-starters*. On average, these youth settle into long-term, full-time employment during their early twenties and establish separate households, very often purchasing their first homes by age 25, a time of life when their college-educated peers may be struggling to find their first full-time job.²⁰

The secret to Stayers and Returners' fast track into adulthood is that Iowa's economy depends on the blue-collar jobs of the old-fashioned industrial era, making young people's

¹⁸ Richard Settersten, Jr., Frank Furstenberg, Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *On the Frontier to Adulthood*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

¹⁹ Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005, p. 5

²⁰ While in New Jersey, more than half of 18-24 year olds live with their parents, in Iowa, the rate is closer to a third.

transition to adulthood today appear quite similar to the one their counterparts followed during the heralded post-war, marriage rush, baby boom years would have made.²¹ Full-time employment opportunities in the blue-collar economy, combined with the lower cost of living, means that a worker with a high school diploma can find employment that will enable them to achieve economic independence take on the responsibilities of adulthood.

Stayers and Returners' ability to move out of the family home and establish their own household is further helped, ironically enough, by the region's economic troubles; namely, depopulation and the aging demographics. The region's collapsing demand for housing and contracting economy have driven the median price of a house in Ellis to \$68,000, with some more modest homes –namely mobile homes in trailer parks - priced as low as \$30,000, not much more than the cost of a new car.²² Given that Ellis' Stayers and Returners achieve the economic trappings of adulthood so quickly, it should not be surprising that this group also looks rather traditional in another way: they get married. While the national average for age at first marriage has risen to 26 for women and 27 for men, and overall Americans will spend less of their lives married than at any other time in history, the average age for marriage among the Ellis young adults was 22 for women and 23 for men.²³ In one instance, a couple we interviewed recounted petitioning the county court to wed since the bride was only 17.

Needless to say, under these conditions, there is little reason to live at home or put off marriage in an extended “adulescent” state, as *Time Magazine* called it. However, before the anxious parents of college-educated twenty-somethings ship off their “twixter”²⁴ offspring to Ellis, this happy picture is not what it appears. The kind of economy that makes such enviably quick transitions possible is driven by manufacturing, industry, and the low-wage service sector. In other words, young people who stay and return to Ellis find jobs working the line at the plant , as a nurse's aide at the hospital or nursing home, and doing construction. Earning \$6 per hour a job is not the high status and high paying career to which today's ambitious young people aspire.²⁵ Anyone with experience in these jobs could tell you that the work is tedious, exhausting, and downright dangerous. The work offers few benefits or long-term security. Most troubling of all, if any of the factories were to close or the hospital were to initiate lay-offs, these workers would find themselves on the downward track to the entrenched poverty that plagues so much of rural America. Except for the well-paying factory work, these are precisely the kinds of jobs that barely keep workers' heads above water. Indeed, these workers' average yearly earnings put them dangerously close to official poverty levels.

The Leavers, Stayers, and Returners

When we talked to young people about the twists and turns their lives had taken with regard to school, work, and family, we found that the most important moment, if becoming an adult can be conceived in terms of moments, took shape in the decision to leave, stay, or return to

²¹ Osgood et al. 2005 provide statistical evidence for this old-fashioned trajectory among working class young adults not pursuing higher education in a piece titled “Six Trajectories to Adulthood: Fast Starters, Parents without Careers, Educated Partners, Educated Singles, Slow Starters and Working Singles.”

²² Indeed, a glut of local housing makes landlords offer reliable tenants the rent-to-own option. Nearly every engaged or married couple we interviewed in Ellis and its environs was using this option to rent/purchase a home.

²³ Crockett, Lisa J. and C. Raymond Bingham. 2000. “Anticipating Adulthood: Expected Timing of Work and Family Transitions Among Rural Youth.” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 10(2), 151-172.

²⁴ Grossman, Lev. “Grow Up? Not So Fast,” *Time Magazine*, January 16, 2005: p. 42.

²⁵ Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson chronicle the high ambitions among today's young people in their work, a comparative historical account of the educational aspirations in *The Ambitious Generation.: America's Teenagers Motivated but Directionless*.

small-town Iowa.²⁶ The reasons that young people give for their trajectories reveal as much about their own circumstances as they do about their conscious choices. As we combed through the thousands of pages of transcripts, we identified five separate, but interconnected pathways. These are grouped around the distinct trajectories of whether people stay in, return to, or leave Ellis to pursue their adult lives elsewhere.

Leavers

Not all Leavers pursue the same goals when they move away. In fact, Leavers can be divided into two groups: *Leaver Achievers* and *Leaver Seekers*. Leaver Achievers are young people for whom the desire for professional and economic success takes them away from Ellis. They believe that opportunities in Ellis are too restricted. Most Leaver Achievers have at least a bachelor's degree, although many hold graduate and professional degrees. Leaver Achievers are either on track for a career in a specialized profession such as engineering, medicine, law or education, or they are already employed in another field. On average, Leaver Achievers make more money than Returners or Stayers, our other two groups, although a few have not yet seen the income returns to education. What marks this group as distinctive is how their lives are focused on the goal of achieving professional and educational goals, and that they firmly believe they must leave Ellis to do so. The very culture of small town's assumes that the talented and most capable will leave to have great success somewhere else. Ella, the 24-year-old daughter of farmers now earning her graduate degree in a large Midwestern city recalls how a wide assortment of people in Ellis encouraged her to believe her destiny would lead her beyond small-town Iowa.

I felt like I had a lot of people who were really hoping that I would go on and really do good things, and that I had a lot of potential and I think that really left a deep impression on me that I had been embraced by this community and kind of set forth to go do something with what I had been given.

Within the tight-knit social world of "the small town," a local kid's success is somehow shared by all. Ella continues: "I think that there's kind of a desire to help somebody from a small town make it big, and if they can be a part of that, then that would be just wonderful."

The second group we call the *Leaver Seekers*, those who leave Ellis in search of opportunities in a similar fashion to achievers. However, seekers do not place a primary emphasis on monetary or career success. Rather, they emphasize personal growth over material gain. Their primary goal is to move beyond the life they knew in Ellis. Many who join the military, for example, are Leaver Seekers. Several of the young adults who had military experience used enlisting as a way to get out of Ellis, since college, the other primary route, was not open to them. Twenty-three year old Cara, a naval nurse, stationed in San Diego, working towards her degree, says she joined the armed services because she did wanted to escape the life staying would have trapped her in. "I come home sometimes and see people that are not like done with school, living in Ellis, living in...an apartment or something, [and I'm thinking] what are you doing? Go somewhere, see something...Move away from home."

Other Leaver Seekers seem to hopscotch from job to job, accruing a variety of experiences, yet they are ultimately unsure about where they will end up. For a recent college graduate, a 24-year-old named Damaris, working part-time as a teacher's aide in New York City to pay her bills as she establishes herself as a painter, planning her escape from small-town Iowa was something

²⁶ According to an analysis of our survey of 275 young people who attended Ellis High School, we know that 43.3 percent of the young people surveyed currently reside in Ellis or a community within rural Liberty County (where Ellis is located); 26.9 percent reside outside of Iowa. Almost 30 percent currently live in Iowa, but not in the rural area of Liberty County. The migration pattern out of Iowa within the Ellis sample mirror the larger trends in the state.

that consumed her teenage years. Her job as a nursery school teacher most definitely not her career and simply a way to pay her bill, but for Damaris, having an established profession is secondary to her dream of getting out of Iowa. She explains, “The people were all very nice. You know I can’t say that they were, but I did want to get away from it. I wanted to see what it was like when I was not surrounded by Ellis.”

Leaving, of course, means giving up family and community support systems, and many Leavers we interviewed spoke poignantly about the first time they left home. Jerry, a 23-year-old finishing his graduate program in education, remembers why leaving Ellis was particularly traumatic for him. “I have a very close relationship with my Mom, my parents divorced when I was little and I lived with my Mom for the most part.” Jerry continues, “It took probably a good year to get kind of used to being away from home.” Though the transition was difficult, Jerry says getting out of Ellis permitted him to break free the insular world of small-town life and experience things he could never have back home in Ellis. Here he discusses his encounters with race and other matters of diversity. At college, “I’ve had black roommates, and [racially] mixed roommates, and it opens your eyes to how naïve you really are...It’s like a million things [I didn’t know about]. Just like how [African Americans] do their hair. I never knew any different that you don’t wash your hair everyday and that, you know, a perm isn’t to get your hair curly, it’s to get it straight. Just little things like that.” “Maybe it’s just not a race thing, maybe that’s a regional thing. The way people celebrate different holidays, different religions. You know,” he adds laughing, “Not everyone is Lutheran.”

According to 23-year-old Sonya, a married college graduate now living on the east coast, her small-town Iowa ways made her seem incredibly innocent compared to her friends for the suburbs of Minneapolis or Chicago. “I think [growing up in Ellis] kind of shelters you from some of the things that you are going to experience in college.” Sonya recalls her first encounter with drugs. “There were two girls down the hall that smoked a lot of pot. And I walk in and I’m like, ‘What is that?’ You know, I didn’t know, and my roommate just starts laughing and she’s like, ‘You don’t know what that is?’ I was like, ‘No, what is that?’” She’s like, ‘Sonya, it’s marijuana.’ And I was like, ‘Oh my God, they are smoking marijuana in my dorm room.’”

Stayers

Stayers are young adults who never left Ellis, and do not intend to do so. Although Leavers, like Damaris, Cara, and Ella, have a pronounced sense of why they left or had to leave Ellis, Stayers often cannot explain why they have remained nearly as coherently. Many Stayers spoke of Ellis just being their home, all they have known. When we asked them what might have them leave Ellis, the response was usually “Nothing.” They are more likely to describe “country-living” as comfortable and familiar, in contrast to the world beyond, which seems so overwhelming and unpredictable. Stayers do not go to college, the primary route out of Ellis. In many cases, they do not pursue higher education because they did not do well in school or they had no interest in that direction. They settle down in the area and, for the most part, they move into low-paying, low-skill agricultural jobs that have endured in the wake of the farm crisis, or they are employed in semi- and unskilled positions in the local factories, hospital, or in construction. Many Stayers come from Ellis’ less affluent families. They enter full-time jobs and marry earlier than their peers and, as stated earlier, mirror a more “traditional” adult transition.

Thirty-year-old Casey, a factory worker with his GED talks about what keeps him in Ellis: “I think we’re gonna stay here. I like it in Ellis and it’s a nice quiet town and I get along with everybody and we have our jobs established here.” Similarly, 26-year-old Trevor, whom we heard from previously, insists he is “staying here until the day I die.” Other Stayers are more ambivalent about their prospects of remaining. Twenty-nine-year old Dave, who has a high school diploma, tells us he might consider moving to a larger city, but he feels bound to Liberty County because of his children and family. “As far as, like, the kids in school and stuff, for that

reason, you know, I want to kind of stay here. But for me personally, I wouldn't. Moving would not bother me, I mean, I probably would rather move myself if it was just me..."

Returners

Some Leavers eventually return to the region and join our third category: Returners. For this group, life beyond Ellis did not live up to its promise; in other instances, personal ties and opportunities may have pulled them back. The first type of Returner is a *Boomerang*. This group shares a comparable profile to the Stayers.²⁷ They are from similar social, economic, and educational backgrounds to the Stayers, and as full-time workers they have similar occupations to the young people who never leave. However, they are slightly more likely to have completed some form of postsecondary education or training, which is usually the reason they first left Ellis. Boomerangs are of two main types, those who left with a firm notion that a move was temporary, and those who started out as leaver seekers, but decided that life away from Ellis was not for them.

Many Boomerangers, for example, describe obstacles they encountered in postsecondary education, or having gone away for school, decided that it wasn't right for them and then returned. For many of the Ellis youth who left the town, the obstacles that they faced in some ways paved the way for them to return. Twenty-nine-year-old William, a high school graduate who served a short stint in the air force, recalls his time at a community college:

Like I said, going to your first year of school, [you] get out there and get on your own and do the partying thing...so I did that. I did really well my first semester at college. I was in the threes as far as academics. Then when I turned 19 and you can get into the 19 bars and everything down there so that just kinda went down hill. I ended up with dropping half my courses so that [semester] just went "bye-bye" and I went through my third semester down there and didn't go to class at all and I came home and told my folks that "college isn't right for me right now." They said "all's we're doing is dishing out money for something and you're not getting nothing out of it."

The second group of Returners is called *High-Flyers*. The group is small and consists of young people who return to Ellis after completing training in a profession or to become successful entrepreneurs or business people. The High-Flyers usually have backgrounds high-status fields such as medicine, teaching, business, engineering or the law, and nearly all have bachelor's degrees. Paula, a 24-year-old education student finishing her master's degree at Iowa State says that living away from Ellis is right for her now, but when she gets married and starts her family, it would be her dream to start teaching at Ellis. "If the opportunity came up to teach and coach in Ellis and I was feeling like you want to settle down, and you know I had those experiences [in larger cities] to build on, I would come back...The community, its very involved with the school. So if you have kids at the school, or if you've gone to school here and you were in activities that's what I think is so great. Right now I'm teaching at another small school but just the support Ellis gives to its kids and, you know, the activities that are going on. It's amazing, the support that they have. I'm just like working at this other school and I'm like: "Where are all the people?" But in Ellis, everybody's there and getting involved with each other and it's just really, they do develop strong foundations for young people to help them."

²⁷ Sometimes Leaver Seekers boomerang back home for a period, which is in keeping with the hopscotch pattern of their lives. However, the periods back home are always temporary and can be viewed as a type of scaffolding exercise. See L. Vygotsky, *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

The High-Flyers return to Ellis because they can have a good life and career. Many are the children of the town's elite professional class of teachers, doctors, lawyers, and business people. High-flyers tend to become involved in the civic life of Ellis, and in part, they are attracted to Ellis because a small town offers a pleasant, affordable lifestyle. However, as noted, the young people who return to Ellis to carve out a middle or upper class existence are few and far between. By and large, those who remain and return to Ellis face considerably more modest prospects. The boomerang category captures the interconnections and permeability of the boundaries between these trajectories. Often, a young adult begins taking a certain pathway and over time changes course.

Beyond the retrospective rationalization that people give for their choices, several forces push and pull them as they mature. To understand fully what sets a person on one of these five trajectories, it is crucial to know what it is like to grow up in Ellis, the influences on these young people, and the elements that not only shape the decision to stay, leave or return, but that help determine which particular pathway they will take.

Working Your Way to Adulthood

One of the ways we can start to unpack the process that sets a person on a particular pathway into adulthood is to pay close attention to their formative experiences with work. Work is a central part of life growing up in Ellis. Historically, the young worker had been crucial to the operation of the family farm, but over time, the trend has been to excuse and exclude children and adolescents from work.²⁸ Surveys show that about four-fifths of teenagers work at some time during their four years of high school.²⁹ Ellis youth are no different in this respect from their peers across America, where the work experience differs is Ellis' young people work alongside full-time adult workers on family farms or in other jobs -rather than other teenagers working part-time- which means that early work experiences socialize young workers into the demands and expectations of full-time employment more naturally.

Jeylan Mortimer, in *Working and Growing Up in America*, examines how work prepares young people for adulthood by looking at the hours spent on the job, but also at the intensity, duration, pattern, and quality of work.³⁰ She makes the distinction between high-intensity work and low-intensity but steady work. When high school youth work more than 20 hours per week in paid employment, this is high-intensity work. Most national studies, and Mortimer's own work, find that the average number of hours worked increases substantially between sophomore and senior year in high school.³¹ By contrast, low-intensity work describes a young person working fewer than 20 hours per week during the teen years. We explore below some of the implications of high- and low-intensity work, and its affect on how young people make the move from adolescence to adulthood.

Mortimer demonstrates the significant consequences associated with the decision to work, she finds that young men and women with high-intensity jobs workers during high school are less likely to earn college degrees, while those who had steady, but low-intensity, work were most likely to earn a college degree. Among young women, non-workers were the most likely to finish college. Work patterns also carry implications for development. The youth in high-intensity jobs were more likely than the steady workers to be married and have children within

²⁸ Some excellent accounts of the historical place of work for children include Joseph F. Kett, "Curing the Disease of Precocity," *American Journal of Sociology*, 84 (1978), pp. 183-211. Jeylan T. Mortimer also offers an excellent synthetic discussion in *Working and Growing Up in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

²⁹ See Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor. *Protecting Youth at Work: Health, Safety, and Development of Working Children and Adolescents in the United States*. Washington: National Academy Press, 1998. See also, Mortimer, note 5 above.

³⁰ Mortimer, note 5 above.

³¹ See Committee on the Health and Safety Implication of Child Labor, note 6 above.

seven years after high school. Although Mortimer's study is geographically limited and may not be applicable to the wider population, it does offer insights into the links between work and development during the transition to adulthood.

One of the more striking themes that emerged from our interviews with young adults in Iowa was the valued place of work in their lives. Our respondents spoke proudly of their strong work ethic, something they viewed as a legacy of the small-town, farming life. For example, Mark is a 30-year-old Returner who dropped out of high school and later completed a GED has worked steadily at a succession of low-paying jobs. He says, growing up on a farm taught him

that if I need stuff, I got to work hard for it, if I—I don't know how to describe it. I think it taught me good work ethics because my dad, he don't miss work unless he absolutely has to, and I am that way too. I don't miss work unless I absolutely have to. That helped me out, taught me that.

Ella, the graduate we met earlier, also speaks about the grounding in hard work she received growing up on a farm:

There are a lot of skills that I think I learned at home and most people never have taken lessons about you teach a really strong work ethic compared to other people's. That had a lot to do with our family and our upbringing, and even though we grew up on a farm, we didn't have a lot of []toys. We were expected [to work], I helped out a lot around the house, and those are the things that I think really helped shape me and continue to shape me in ways that I think I don't, that I'm not really conscious of, but that I'm really grateful of.

The central role that work plays in preparing young people to face the demands of the wider world is underscored by Larry, a 30-year-old Leaver Achiever with a professional degree who works as a software developer at a multinational company. When asked about working during high school, he said:

I mean I had a lot of my friends, lived on farms too so that's part of the nature. And then, you know, a few of my friends in town all had part-time jobs and that kind of stuff. But to me, in general, where I grew up, there's a lot of hard working people and that was kind of the work ethic. That's how you got things done. You worked to get whatever, wherever you were going.

The prominent work ethic and the way young people growing up in Ellis appropriate it offer a way of understanding how youth there begin their journey through adulthood. The role of work, in combination with other influences, helps explain how our respondents adopt certain trajectories. Maye, a 30-year-old schoolteacher now living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says that growing up on her family's hog farm meant that work was "an everyday thing." By the time she was in high school, she knew she wanted a different life for herself.

I looked at farming and it was too much work.... My parents were probably more strapped than they let us know....But I could tell, you know at times when the family was really struggling....I always knew about the problems. And I think that's why I wanted to go to school and better myself just so I could say... "I got out."

For Maye, the experience of growing up on a farm and the realization that, in terms of farming, hard work did not equate with economic comfort, prompted her to strive for success away from Ellis. She has worked hard to be a leaver achiever and explains how she got out in terms of her wanting to do better than her parents.

To many readers, the discovery that young people like Maye want to leave rural life would hardly seem remarkable. Generations of young people have left their families and the small towns behind in search of something else, something more exciting, something better. What is surprising about this modern-day version of this rural-to-urban migration tale is how young people do not leave or stay for clear-cut economic reasons. Other formative influences play a role for these young people at the societal, community and individual levels. The complex mixture of forces pulling some young people to stay and pushing others to leave have important lessons for policymakers and social scientists about the subtle interplay of opportunity, social reproduction, and agency in how young people make the transition to early adulthood.

For example, Ellis High School and the teachers and counselors who work there are critical players in the lives of the young people growing up in Ellis. The school's teachers, administrators, and staff play key roles in setting young people on their pathways to work and school. Teachers and other school official actively encourage and support some young people to go to college while others are not. What may be just as important as the advice that is offered are the words of support and encouragement that are not to the young people not on the higher-education track. For every young person who was pushed to go on to college, there are many more who allowed to drift through the high school years and make the incremental that result in them pursuing work, not school, and keep them on track to stay in Ellis. The Ellis guidance counselor, Leonard Tighe, spent almost three decades in the position, and several of his former students recalled how he tried to steer them away or towards college. By his own account, 29-year-old Jacob was an average student not involved in school activities. Jacob remembers a conversation between Tighe and himself back in high school:

We had to take these aptitude tests where you know [if] you should be placed here or here or here. The counselor told me, to my face, that I shouldn't go to college. I should probably get a job in the factory in town or something like that because I wouldn't make it.

Jacob did not heed this advice and graduated from a local university and now works as a police officer. One could speculate that had Jacob followed the counselor's suggestion and taken a job, he may never have left Ellis. In terms of the trajectories we outlined, we can see how some Stayers are allowed, in some cases actively encouraged, to take the path to early employment. Their trajectory is often reinforced by their own unwillingness to leave, a preference for work over school, and a desire to earn money instead of pursue extracurricular interests that colleges require for the college bound.

Among these Iowa young adults, we saw a pronounced pattern of high-intensity work.

Opportunities abound for manual labor in and around farms. Because the nearest mall is 25 miles away and the closest McDonald's is 15 miles away from Ellis, most young people looking for a part-time job find work on the big farms. Two of the most common summer jobs are de-tassling corn and picking rock. Busloads of young people work from dawn to dusk removing rocks and boulders from fields or removing the seed tassels on corn to prevent carefully engineered feed corn from pollinating. In many other regions of the country, migrant workers hold such jobs. The work is dirty and exhausting, but the pay is good, especially for a teenager looking to earn money for the school year. Casey, a 30-year-old factory worker with a GED living on a farm just outside Ellis, recounts how work was an integral part of his days throughout his teenage years:

I worked for a service station in Ellis and I did that until I graduated. And I did that for 3 years....[And] I was always looking working for a few farmers, picking up rock and bailing hay and just odd jobs around the farm and delivered newspapers for quite a few years....I worked quite a few hours while in high school cause there was nights when I got off at school, I'd get done with school

at 3:30 and I'd work one job 'til 5:30 and then I did mowing and stuff for yards and raking leaves and stuff so there were nights I'd work 'til 9 o'clock at night.

Casey is a typical Stayer; his experiences as a high-intensity worker during high school and has now become led to factory jobs and a variety of unskilled occupations since high school. At present, he tells us he has no plans to leave Ellis or pursue any further education.

How much students work and the types of jobs they hold often reveal important clues about their futures, as well as what the adults in their lives expect for them. During the high school years, two broad tracks seem to emerge, one where youth prepare for college and an exit from Ellis, and another where young people start work early and ready themselves for quick entry to full-time employment. Each group comes with different expectations for what types of capital they should be acquiring. The college bound, both from affluent families and those who excel academically, do not generally work as much as those who have no college aspirations. For them, work experience and the skills and abilities associated with it are not as highly valued as are good grades or excellence in sports, drama or music, any combination of which can ensure a smooth transition to a good college. The converse, meanwhile, is true for those in the early work track. Though many of the young Ellis adults who did not do high-intensity work during high school were from a solidly middle class, and thus financially stable, backgrounds, some were of more modest means. For the latter group, the choice to not work was more deliberate and calculated. When we ask Casey about his interests back in high school, it is revealing that he equates work with the conventional school extracurriculars. "I never did band or sports or anything like that. *I was more the work type* I always had a job after high school. [I would] ride around for a paper route...[I did that] for a few years. I worked for different farmers, baling hay and picking up rock and stuff."

Other pathways from work into adulthood are less cultivated and seem to occur because young people preferred spending their time working. For example, Robert, a 24-year-old mechanic with a high school diploma and a certificate in automotive training recalls that by the time he was a junior in high school, working at his dad's backyard auto shop structured his daily routine far more than being a student. "I usually got home from school and went straight out there [to my father's auto shop] and worked until 10 PM. I worked every Saturday from 9 to 5 PM. So I worked a lot of hours." If he had homework, he would "try" to take time off from work or "go in early to school and do homework there." Looking back, Robert freely admits, he "didn't put [...] much time into studying;" at the same time, Robert says his Dad never encouraged him put his job in the family's auto shop before school. To the contrary, Robert insists, his parents would have been happier to see him spend more time on academics. Robert believes he bears all the responsibility for his disappointing high school record. After all, the poor grades, were "my own fault." These days, Robert works at a large auto dealership. While he finished his technician course, right now, he has no plans to further his education. Robert was not steered into his pathway. He chose it, and he seems content with his life choices. It seems fair to say that he prepared himself for his working life with high-intensity employment during high school. Though Robert lives an hour away from Ellis, his life feels very like much his friends who have stayed in Liberty County.

Other Ellis youth have more compelling financial reasons to work long hours during high school. Twenty-nine-year-old Skyler, a truck driver with high school diploma, is a Boomerang. As the only child of a single mother unable to work full-time because of a disability, he believed he had to help his family make ends meet, so he went to work:

I worked at the bakery, well the bakery's closed now but I was, you know, early morning, I worked before school. Yeah. Like from two until six, [then] get ready to go to school. But like I said, my mom, you know, we didn't have a lot of money. I started out with paper routes and, you know, field work and then got a job. Mom wasn't going to buy me a car so.

Marie, a 24-year-old high school graduate, recalls how, by the time she was 12, she used her babysitting money to buy her own clothes and that by the time she 16 years old, she worked 30 hours per week at the nursing home caring for patients. This left her no time for sports or other extra-curricular activities, but the long hours at her job made it possible to afford “a really nice car with a really high payment” and “cool clothes.” She “loved the money” and “loved the job” since working was something she was good at doing. “I took care of people who couldn’t take care of themselves and made sure they were healthy and made sure they were eating and bathed and dressed them and did all that. And to me, I thought that was a pretty grown up job, so I felt pretty grown up at the time and I had a lot of freedom.” As work started to overtake Marie’s commitment to school, neither Marie nor her parents seemed too concerned. She went from being an honor student to being content just “getting by.”

Trevor milked cows every morning before school when he was a teenager. Long hours worked on a dairy farm made going off to college an impossibility. To Trevor’s way of thinking, though, holding down a full-time job more than compensated for his failing grades in school. “My parents weren’t going to baby me,” he recalls. Mike, a 28-year-old construction worker with high school diploma currently living in Ellis with his girlfriend and their young son remembers that by his senior year of high school “I’d probably say I worked 35 hours per week...doing construction.” Such economic independence at an early age emboldens young people to go out on their own when many of their peers in suburban and urban settings must still rely on their parents for college tuition and housing. Peter, a 29-year-old high school dropout and Stayer, says he left high school because he was drawn to the freedom a job and money offered. “School, it was all right. I guess as far as what I was thinking. I thought of more important things to do than school...cars. [Dropping out] was something I just decided to do and I thought it was best to be on my own.”

In Ellis, if you are a 17-year-old high student not focused on college and willing to work hard, the money you can earn from the night and weekend shifts at the nursing home or in construction can be very appealing.³² Offering young people the opportunity to work in such a setting gives them vocational training and socializes them for full-time work in a way that part-time service sector jobs cannot. Among those destined to stay in Ellis, working alongside mature adult workers in these part-time jobs teaches them some of their most important lessons about the place they will inherit in the economy.

Stayers maintain a strong sense of continuity between the early work experiences and their later adult years. The jobs they hold at 16 or 17, particularly for many young men, are not very different than the ones they might have in another two or three decades. Sam, who spent time in the military and finished a vocational degree, notes that for his friends who stayed in Ellis. “The jobs they had in the summer was the job, or the job they always did every once in a while, they’re still doing it, or something similar. Just a different look. I’ve had so many jobs and I prefer it that way. I don’t wanna be a farmhand for 40 years. I was a farmhand and I’m not saying it was a bad job, it’s nice to be in nature, but 40 years.”

A crucial aspect of this link derives from the local economic opportunity structure. Because the work is the well-paying, blue-collar job that has become so rare in the postindustrial, global economy, news of an opening at the local ambulance assembly or the electronics plant is a carefully guarded piece of information. Most young people lucky enough to work there first get their foot in the door through a tip from a friend or relative before the job is even posted. Stephanie, a young single mother with a high school diploma, describes the difficulties she faced in getting a job at the electronics factory. After graduating from high school, she worked as an assembler part-time on the second shift until she was laid off. For the next year, she bounced around from job to job. She worked at Burger King and as a supermarket cashier. Of all the jobs,

³² Mortimer, note 5 above.

she enjoyed the cashier job most, but with a baby on the way, she knew she must find work with far more security and benefits. When she tried to look for a job at the electronics factory again, she was told there were no openings. Her mother, however, who worked there at the time, spoke to some friends in human resources. “And she was like, ‘She’s already worked here for a year, you had no problems with her, why not hire her back?’ So they hired me.” Stephanie admits it was her mother who pushed her to go back to the factory. “My mom really wanted me to have a good job.” With no reliable employment for more than a year, Stephanie understood that a job as an assembler meant she could afford her rent, child care, and be home by 4:00 p.m. every day. Most important, earning \$8.20 meant that Stephanie and her son could stay off welfare. There is no question a high-tech, service-sector economy is tough the sorts of workers wearing blue-collars, but in isolated rural areas like Ellis, things somehow seem a little worse. “Your opportunities for doing anything in a small town are zero,” explains a construction worker named Sam who spent time in the military before settling in Decorah, Iowa. “If you’re not a farmer, then you’re gonna work in some [factory]...John Deere in Waterloo was where, I swear, where half the town worked and they drove more than a hour to get there just because they knew they could get a job. And that doesn’t seem very promising. When I moved back to Iowa and I had no job and I knew I’d get one cause Decorah is a larger town than Ellis. I’m smart enough, I can do stuff. I don’t have to worry about it. If I was moving to Ellis, oh man, I don’t know what I’d do.... I don’t know how they can stay in a town like that, it’s strange.”

Although it is an oversimplification to claim that those who stay in Ellis are destined to do so, there nevertheless seems to be a powerful case for a social reproduction in who stays and who goes. The Stayers and many of the Boomerangs are from less well-off families, and through a combination of push and pull factors, tracking in school, available paid work during high school, and opportunities to work and make a decent living after high school, they end up in more or less the same social class as their parents. For most Stayers and for many Boomerangs, the horizon of opportunities is limited, the familial and community (including at school) encouragement to further their education is sporadic, resulting, ultimately, in a very limited set of alternatives.

There are, of course, exceptions to a class reproduction argument. The High-Flyer group is, for example, the complete opposite, where choosing to return to Ellis as a professional or successful entrepreneur is a pathway that solidifies elite status. For the most part the High-Flyers are themselves the sons and daughters of local elites, though some Ellis High-Flyers are upwardly mobile.

With a job, and Iowa’s low cost of living, many Stayers quickly take that next step on the adulthood path: marriage and family. In fact, a striking feature of Stayers is that they follow the idealized 1950s patterns for marriage and family, while their counterparts in more urban areas of America experiment with cohabitation and struggle to form relationships. In the case of Ellis, half of the young adults we surveyed were married, and the average age at marriage was just 23 (three years lower than the national average). Ellis’s young people’s traditional orientations toward early marriage seem almost anachronistic at a time when so many of their counterparts across the country embrace the “freedom” associated with this time of life to experiment with relationships and pursue other goals.

Romantic relationships, in fact, are another factor binding young people to the area. Young people who begin romantic relationships in high school may find they have been together with the same partner for several years by the time they are in their early twenties. In a town whose total population is smaller than most college campuses, young people have few opportunities to meet new people. The insular social world makes them more willing to commit to early marriage. For Sue, a sales clerk and part-time college student who married her husband at the age of 20, the desire to marry at an early age is a “small town thing.” Many relationships start during high school and if young couples can stick together until their twenties, then “you might as well marry her because you guys have been together for so long and it’s not gonna make

a difference.” Sue continues, “It’s kind of like the concept around here. It’s either you get married or you leave them because they don’t see the fun in dating for a certain amount of time.” Even though Sue married her high school boyfriend, she believes that if she had taken a different path and left Liberty County to attend college, she would not have married. “If I would’ve went to a bigger university and went and stayed in the dorm, I would’ve met other people...I would’ve wanted to be free and just have fun and do the whole free spirit college thing.”

A social context in which marriage in one’s twenties is such a prominent rite of passage contributes to the practical and symbolic significance of marriage as a marker of adulthood. In Ellis, young people, especially Stayers, view marriage as normal and expected, more of an obligation than a preference. Relationships that endure over a period of time—especially during one’s twenties—move toward marriage because it is a part of a natural progression for such relationships. If a couple has achieved financial stability and completed their education, marriage is the next step. According to 23-year-old Tom, who started dating his future wife when he was a senior in Ellis high school and she was a junior, getting married is part of a “schedule” of goals “that people are supposed to follow.” When Tom explains how and why he decided to get married at 22, there is no mention of finding a soul-mate or of seeking personal fulfillment through marriage. After dating for five years, Tom and his girlfriend felt it was time to get married because, “I was finishing school and had a job.” He continues:

I mean it’s kind of a dumb thing, but I mean, I took pride in [the fact] that I had a schedule that I thought was a smart way to do it. I thought I would graduate from high school, graduate from college, have a job and then get married and then have kids, two, three, four years later. I took pride in that. You know, when I see a lot of people in college and [they] get pregnant and then get married you kind of have everything all messed up. So I thought [mine] was the schedule that people are supposed to follow.

Preparing to Leave

The trajectories of leavers differ from Stayers in some fundamental respects. Leavers are either consciously preparing to depart Ellis, as in the case of Damaris, the artist quoted earlier, or circumstances align to allow a person to leave. Leavers are either cultivated, in the sense that parents, teachers, and mentors help them obtain the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to make a smooth transition, or they get the chance or break that they need to move on. The majority of Leavers, whether Achievers or Seekers, experience leaving as a process rather than a snap decision. Thus, there is a sense in which Ellis youth prepare themselves to move on, and in many important ways, they are aided in this preparation by parents, teachers, and community members, even though many realize that such action can have repercussions for the future of the town.

Anyone spending time in Ellis can hear residents wonder aloud if their town will be around in 20 years.³³ Ellis high school has amalgamated with their counterpart in neighboring Douglas, and local leaders worry, most acutely, about the future of the town’s professional class. A healthy town needs business owners, teachers, lawyers, and doctors. Thanks to the nursing home and hospital, there are enough patients to keep doctors serving the community. One of Ellis’ doctors quietly hopes his youngest son will find the right girl and settle down in town and ultimately to take over the practice. Although community activists have raised funds to build a

³³One strategy in Iowa has been to actively recruit immigrants to these depopulating regions. In places such as Postville, Iowa, the influx of migrant workers from Mexico combined with the Jewish workers from Israel and Russia to work in the kosher slaughterhouses has raised complex issues of integration and the meaning of community. See Stephen G. Bloom, *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, New York: Harcourt, 2001.

new pool, library, and community theater to make Ellis attractive to homeowners, one cannot help but wonder if such efforts will be enough.

An exodus of Ellis' most educated young people means the town will be left to deal with the most troubled and disadvantaged inhabitants. The ones who remain, or bounce back to Ellis, will be trapped by poverty, a lack of skills, education or, all of the above, and in some of the more desperate cases, by drugs and crime. One teacher admitted he resented how his best students "would go off and be a success some place else." The "brain drain" is sapping the communities' most important resource, its young people.³⁴ "How do you keep your town healthy?" if "the better ones" continue to leave, he wondered.

The pathway to leaving can be viewed through a similar lens as the one we used to disentangle the Stayers' trajectories. The decisions that the youth take in high school, whether they engage in high-intensity work or not, and the degree to which significant adults invest in them, all combine to set young people on a trajectory to leave Ellis. Although not all Leavers are the sons and daughters of the well-off, the Ellis youth from privileged backgrounds have a leg up, so to speak, on their peers. For example, 23-year-old Sonya, the daughter of college-educated professional parents, who herself became a Leaver Seeker and attended the University of Iowa, says she and her siblings did not work because her parents wanted them "to spend their time studying." Twenty-three-year old Angela, a recent college graduate, who is the youngest daughter of working-class parents, says that when her oldest sister attended the University of Iowa, it was just "assumed" that she and her sister would follow in her footsteps. One way her family and teachers cultivated those ambitions was not allowing her to work. Angela explains:

My parents never expected [my sisters and me] to work in high school cause we were involved in so many sports, so that maybe kind of steered us a little more towards college as opposed to kids that, you know, find a job...and they stay [t]here [in Ellis] and do that.

Certainly gender is also important in these work decisions; there seemed to be less expectation from family that young women would work during high school, with one result being that they simply had more time to devote to studies and extra-curricular activities.³⁵ The subtle steering that Angela speaks of was notably absent in the stories of many uninterrupted stayers and boomerang returners.

A dense network of social connections coupled with the high level of community involvement in education also means that talented youth with ability and ambition find support and encouragement from a variety of adults outside their family. Ellis in many important ways triages its talented youth, nurturing them and building their skills over time so that they can go out and be a success. It is this very success that leads many of Ellis' most talented youth away from the place that played such a pivotal role in cultivating these talents. According to 24-year-old Jonathan, a typical Leaver Achiever we met at the start of the chapter, the extraordinary efforts of one of his teachers made it possible for him to earn scholarship to study in Germany. The experience abroad turned led to his majoring in international business and his present career path. Mrs. Pilsen, Ellis high school's reading, English, and German teacher, recognized Jonathan's facility with languages early on, and when the high school eliminated the German program for budgetary reasons, Mrs. Pilsen tutored Jonathan privately for a year, making it possible for him to earn his scholarship. Ella, a Leaver Achiever, who was the valedictorian for

³⁴ See Stephanie Simon, "Exodus of Its Restless Young Makes Iowa Fear for Future Hoping to Stop a Brain Drain: The legislature is Weighing a Tax Break for Those Younger than 30." *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2005, p. A1.

³⁵ Mortimer (note 5 above) also finds that young women are more likely than young men not to have worked during high school.

her class remembers: “There were a few key teachers who really seemed to think that... I was especially gifted or could do really great things.” Ella’s academic abilities meant she was, “treated differently.” She explains:

I guess we were kind of singled out and set on a special track, which I think was really good overall, because I was able to be challenged in ways that I wouldn’t have been able to in the ordinary, completely integrated setting....The teachers worked with us a little bit extra or gave us extra opportunities. I think that there’s kind of a desire to help somebody from a small town make it big, and if they can be a part of that, then that would be just wonderful, but I guess I was maybe somewhat oblivious to some of the stuff that went on. I wasn’t always sure whether I really deserved some of the special treatment that I got, even though people have told me time and again that they thought I did.

Homecoming, the holiday choir performance, and graduation are community events that involve the entire town. When the basketball or football team has a winning season, all of Ellis, regardless of whether they have children at the high school, follow the team and cheer them on to victory. In a small town, star athletes and exceptional students are celebrities of sorts. The community as a whole shares in the promise of the town’s best and brightest. Gifted youth not only receive attention and resources, they get special treatment. Twenty-four-year-old Abby, a member of the basketball team from her days in Ellis, admits that she consistently avoided getting into trouble because she was the Lady Hawks’ leading rebounder. “I got pulled over during [basketball] season going fifteen over the speed limit. [The police officer] basically just told me, ‘Oh, no. Cool it down,’ and let me go. That was it.” It did not hurt that the sheriff’s niece was a ball player as well. “It was to my advantage to be in that many activities because you knew everybody. I was a waitress [and] somebody would come in that liked basketball, [and they would] leave you a huge tip. ‘There you go, kiddo. Good luck tonight,’” Abby remembers. For the brightest students and the most talented athletes in town, in Abby’s words, Ellis’ local citizenry “had your back. They wanted you to go on.”

Other Leavers find the help and support they need closer to home. According to 27-year-old Marcy, a graduate student now attending a prestigious east coast university, the impetus to leave Ellis came from her parents, namely her mother. “Definitely, my mother always wanted me to [move away]. She’d always say, ‘Don’t stay in Ellis.’ She would always tell me that. I think that for her too, she always felt confined and a little bored by her life there...I think she knew I was missing opportunities and that there was more to offer in other places.” For 25-year-old Jack, the University of Iowa law student, his academic abilities identified him as someone who was destined to leave Ellis, even though his family’s economic position and his siblings’ experiences in school meant that they would never leave. Jack explains how he ended up on a different trajectory to his siblings:

Basically, it’s one of those stories where I nailed every test growing up, and my brother struggled. So it was always kind of predetermined that, no it wasn’t predetermined, it’s just wherever we wanted to go, and [my family] kind of understood that my interest would take me away, while I think they understood that my brothers and sisters would stay there.

For the young people whose academic abilities and athletic achievements do not offer them a path out of Ellis, the military promises a chance to create a different kind of future. Twenty-five year old Jason, a Navy seaman with a high school diploma currently stationed in Virginia, freely admits that he never excelled in school. Back in 1995, the Navy’s recruitment message of “getting some money for college” and “seeing the world” appealed to him. Jason enlisted just two weeks shy of his eighteenth birthday. Had he not found a way to get of town, he knows the turn his life would have taken. He says:

If I stayed in Ellis...I would have done the same thing [as the guys I grew up with] and married the girl down the street or one of my classmates from a grade below or above. Every time I come home to visit when I have a leave, I see my classmates doing the same jobs they were doing in high school, living in the same place—they haven't done anything. I've been halfway around the world a couple of times. I've done all kinds of different things and lived all over the United States. Been and done so many different things that these people will never do.

Nearly all the Ellis young adults who were in the military could be labeled Seekers, given that their primary reason for leaving was to explore the world outside Ellis. For 25-year-old Beau, a high school graduate, enlisting in the Marines was the chance to get out of a dead-end construction job and, like Jason, escape the life that seemed to trap his friends. He says:

I was 20 years old, I wasn't in college, but I wasn't really happy owning the construction company that I did and so I [realized] I need[ed] to be on a good path, a better path...something more controlled. So I figured I could either go to college or join the Marines. Then I decided to join the military after talking to the town's police chief about what it takes to be a cop. He said, "You could go to college for two years or you can join the military and get the experience."

Beau currently lives in Virginia and undergoing training to become a U.S. Marshall, and has no thoughts of ever moving back to Ellis. His journey began as a Seeker and now he is firmly on a Leaver Achiever pathway.

In terms of relationships, Leavers marry much later than Stayers and have a less traditional view of relationships. Some young people from Ellis insisted that they fully intended to follow this "traditional" route to marriage until they left Ellis and came into contact with the more pervasive norms about marriage. Jack, the law student, explains:

I always thought growing up, oh 22 or 23 years old [is the time to get married] and now it's like there's so much more that I want to do. I think that's something about Ellis; people that stick around there tend to get married a lot quicker, a lot more quickly and we were just talking about this last night. We have a friend who came down to see us. She's got it in her mind that she needs to be married now, or engaged because all her friends are. I'm just like, you came down here to go to school and with women getting more education now and everything, it's not 20 year olds getting married anymore.

Some Leavers see the difference between themselves and Stayers in terms of having settled down. As Jonathan says:

When I come back home, even when I was home for Christmas, you run into people. You know, especially the people that are home, but there's a lot of people still there. You know like I walked into Thompson's [the town grocery] and Tina was working there in the deli. And she's like, 'Oh my gosh, I haven't seen you in so long.' It's like, hi, what you doing? You know, and they're married and have kids. I went to TA's, which is the bar, you know, it's like one of the very few in town...You walk in there and there's Stephanie and like all these people. You know everybody I went to high school with...And they're saying, "Oh, I am married and I have a kid." Mike Traitor, I saw him, and he's married and has like two kids and lives down the street. And I was like, oh wow.

Although Leavers typically have more education than Stayers, not everyone experiences smooth sailing during their college careers. For example, Dominic, who was 24 when we interviewed him had hop scotched across several colleges before finally being on the threshold of completing his

bachelor's degree. It took Dominic six years to get his degree mainly because he has had to work practically full-time to pay tuition. However, he feels that the work experience he has gained is equally as important as his degree.

Conclusion

Coming of age in Ellis, as evidenced by our interviews with more than 100 young adults, is a complex and often difficult process. The Ellis story is one that takes form around the decision to leave, stay, or return to Ellis. Within the broad categories of Leaver, Returner, and Stayer, we have identified five specific trajectories that these young adults occupy, and we have illustrated the influences, circumstances, and life events that act together to set these young people on a particular trajectory. Their early work histories, their family, teachers and guidance counselors, and their own ambitions, abilities, and proclivities all come together to shape these decisions. For their own lives, the decisions can mean a more traditional route through young adulthood, as evidenced by the stayers and their nearly lockstep path through the markers of adulthood: finishing high school, leaving home, finding a job, marrying, and starting a family, in that order. For those who leave, the decision can lead them along a more circuitous path that more closely mirrors the path taken by many young adults today, as documented by other researchers from the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood.³⁶ However, as the five paths themselves reveal, all of these youth, because of the many more options available to them in today's world, and paradoxically, because of the region's own economic and social traditionalism, pull and push them in different directions, along a variety of paths. Perhaps the complexity of the pathways that face the young Ellis adults we interviewed is best summarized by Jack, the Leaver Achiever who has recently accepted an associate position at a Chicago law firm. He concludes his own interview by saying:

It's just something drawing me out of the state, and I don't know what it is. It's not Ellis' fault, it's not Iowa's fault, it's just not for me so I'm on my way out. That's all I can say. But I might be back, who knows?

³⁶ See Richard Settersten, Jr., Frank Furstenberg, Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *On the Frontier to Adulthood*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.