

J. D. VANCE

J. D. Vance and his publisher hoped that Hillbilly Elegy, his memoir of growing up in Appalachia, would attract some niche interest. The first print run was 10,000 copies. They did not foresee that one year later it would have sold nearly a million copies.

But the story struck a chord. His upbringing illustrated the traumas of addiction, the costs of family breakdown, and the economic problems of unskilled and disorganized workers. This depiction came just as the rest of the nation was awakening to the anger and despair of working-class America, and unlike sociological books by Charles Murray and Robert Putnam that sounded the same alarm, it came complete with a gun-toting grandma and an inspiring personal journey to a better life.

Although Vance's pathway took him to the elite stratosphere of Yale Law and Silicon Valley, he's now moving back home to Ohio to invest in local businesses and start a nonprofit to tackle the opioid epidemic. Philanthropy spoke with him about these plans, and about the internal and external barriers that prevent many Americans from achieving success today.

Philanthropy: Economic mobility is a many-layered challenge. Talk us through it.

Vance: Although we all love the fact that in America a poor kid can rise through his own ability and work ethic, we know that in a lot of areas of our country, that isn't as true as we would like it to be. In the places where I grew up, in the South and Appalachia and the Rust Belt, poor children are much less likely to live the American dream than in other regions.

There are a number of factors that make it hard for poor kids to do especially well. The one that gets talked about the most is the decline of regional blue-collar economies. Coal-mining jobs have been shuttered. Manufacturing jobs in steel, paper, and other fields have disappeared or moved overseas.

But today's mobility issues can't be attributed purely to the decline of local economies, or people who can't find jobs. Sometimes people *can* find jobs, but are so consumed by the disorder in their lives that they're unable to work successfully. This is a problem of *culture*, of family breakdown.



J. D. Vance travels between two worlds that are increasingly separate and foreign to each other: working-class America, and the rarefied professional sphere. He hopes to open lines of communication.

When kids grow up in very unstable families, they are more likely to bring instability to the next generation when they make their own family. They're less likely to graduate from high school, and less likely to be employed as an adult.

Philanthropy: At the end of your book, you say, "No policy can fix the problems of the working class." How does your answer change if the question is what civil society can do to fix the problems of the working class?

Vance: I'm not a total policy skeptic. I certainly think that there's a role for smarter policy. But actions through civil society are so important. It worries me that when you talk to smart people about these issues, both liberals and conservatives often immediately presume that the only way to solve them is through government. We ignore the fact that there are other layers of society, other institutions with vital roles to play.

Where civil society can be most helpful is in giving people real networks and social groups that can support them when things are tough—offer them access to better opportunities, to jobs, to activities in their community.

Philanthropy: There's this Gordian knot of family dysfunction, substance abuse, and lack of economic opportunity that all

negatively reinforce each other. So where do you begin?

Vance: You're right, these problems are intertwined. If you think about addiction, in some cases it's a straightforward question of medical treatment. But it's also related to chaos and trauma in certain families. That's in turn related to the fact that economic opportunities and jobs are harder to come by. If we're going to make any headway on these problems, we have to tackle each simultaneously.

But if I had to pick a single trend that worries me the most, it's definitely the breakdown of the family, because it's in the family where kids get dealt their biggest setbacks. Education starts in the family before children ever get to school. It's in the family where they're either supported in their pursuits or where they're dragged down by neglect and abuse. It's in the family where they either learn good values or destructive values.

The very first layer of civil society is the extended family. When nuclear families break down, it's the most important social-safety net. That's especially true in homes that are working class or lower income, like mine. My aunt and uncle were really positive influences in my life, and as I've often said, my grandmother truly saved me.

But because of the addiction epidemic and the increasing numbers of families breaking apart, some grandparents like

interviews

mine are stretched to the breaking point. They were counting on a retirement budgeted for one person, and now they're taking care of three or four people.

Philanthropy: The culture you describe is so loyal and insular. No matter what goes on behind closed doors, you band together against the outside world. So even if we can all agree that the family is the most important thing to focus on, how likely is it that those families would be willing to accept help or outside intervention?

Vance: It's certainly a challenge, and it is definitely the case that a lot of these families view outsiders with mistrust. But I don't think it's impossible to pierce through that. It's just something to be cognizant of when we think about interventions.

The most successful outside help—things like Nurse-Family Partnerships, for example—presume that parents want the best for their children and try to help them think through how to achieve it. Are they raising their voices too much? Are they reading to their kids? Offering that sort of support can be pretty effective. In contrast, families are not going to be very welcoming to state child-welfare services coming into their homes and poking around, when they know this could result in their kids being taken away. But if you approach children's services in a more cooperative way, including both the nuclear family and the extended family, that helps you get around this fear of outsiders.

While promoting “family values” is going to be difficult, we promote values in our culture all the time. It's a question of what values we're promoting and how aggressively we're promoting them. I don't see any reason why we couldn't have serious conversations about the family.

Philanthropy: Both you and your grandparents experienced upward mobility in your lives. But sandwiched in between there's a story of extreme downward mobility in the person of your mom, with drug addiction playing a major role. Sadly, she has lots of company these days.

Vance: Last year, opioid deaths killed more people than AIDS at the height of the HIV crisis. This is now the most significant

public-health crisis in the United States of the past three or four decades. And just like family dissolution, it isn't just kids who are traumatized by addiction—lots of adults and entire communities get damaged. And it doesn't just have effects in the moment; it creates negative results far downstream.

We often approach drug crises through the lens of treatment and cures, and that's obviously important for the people who have already been ensnared. But my worry is that we're not thinking enough about how to prevent people from getting access to this stuff in the first place. And how to prevent them from wanting it. One thing we could emphasize more is drug-prevention programs in schools, with a good hard look at which ones are effective. People don't like to admit that current programs don't necessarily work, but you have to be rigorous about outcomes.

When it comes to treatments, those that have worked best are drugs that actually make it easier for people to resist their cravings for illegal substances. Those are effective in an immediate way. But of course you have to take them.

The other big determinant is a life that's going pretty well, and a supportive community. People often turn to drugs when other things are going downhill. If they have a supportive social network, if they're active in their neighborhood, if they have a good job, they're much less likely to either start or relapse.

The combination of pharmaceutical therapies and having a life that's going in the right direction are the two things that have been most effective in my experience. Of course, this brings us back to all the other challenges of mobility.

Philanthropy: You've noted one problem that really compounds addiction: addicts who are told their addiction is a disease are then more passive in the face of it. It may be medically true that it's a disease, but in this case the truth does not set the person free. It gets in the way of solving problem through volition and choices. Help me unpack that irony.

Vance: This is true not just in addiction. It's true in a lot of other areas of life, where the recognition that you face some real barrier—whether it's economic, biological, etc.—can

become self-defeating. It's really important not to look at your life and say, “Well, I was dealt a terrible hand, so there's no use in even trying to play it well.” That's one of the essential messages I'm trying to convey, that while we recognize that life can be unfair, we must still take responsibility for the many things in our lives that we can control, must recognize that we can make a difference even if the deck is stacked against us.

That's something we're not especially good at talking about in our politics or in our culture—that twin recognition that life can be unfair, yet you still need to make efforts to better yourself and accomplish certain things. We tend to split that conversation. Some people talk about how “life is unfair.” Other people emphasize that you “should take personal responsibility for yourself.” Yet very often both can be true at the same time.

When you grow up in a community that's struggling, where you only see people failing to get ahead, you start to think that's normal. You start to think of success and achievement and happiness as things that belong to people unlike you. That is certainly how I thought of the world. I thought that people who were happy and did well were just genetically different from people like me and my family.

You cannot have that attitude and successfully fight against all of the other environmental effects of your community. If you think that the deck is hopelessly stacked against you, then you start to lose the one thing that can allow you to have any hope or promise: The belief in your own personal agency.

Neighborhoods stacked with hopelessness drive agency out of children, and make kids think they have no control over their own lives. Unfortunately, elite culture also often reinforces that. On both the left and the right, you can hear people talking as if the only thing that matters is the economy, or well-designed public programs. Those things matter. But floundering families hear, “The only reason your life is a struggle is because of things beyond your control.”

Philanthropy: The antidote to that is something that you call “learned

willfulness,” which was instilled in you by the Marine Corps. How do you learn willfulness? Are there other institutions besides the military that are effective at teaching it?

Vance: The Marine Corps is obviously important, and the military plays a critical role in the lives of kids who grow up like I did. I’m not sure there’s any institution that teaches that willfulness quite as well, at least on such a large scale, but there are a number of smaller organizations that try to help. One category that jumps out are the organizations like Big Brothers/Big Sisters that take children from troubled families and connect them to a caring adult who can not only help them directly, but also indirectly expose them to a wide variety of backgrounds and lifestyles in the process. I’m also a big fan of some of these groups that take lower-income children and connect them with college opportunities—not just by providing funding, but also by providing kids with mentors and support networks as they progress through their education. I think what Byron Auguste’s TechHire initiative does is really interesting, in that it’s trying to fix local labor markets by giving people hard skills, but in retraining people for entirely new professions—in transitioning coal miners into software jobs, for instance—it’s implicitly teaching a certain amount of willfulness.

Philanthropy: The military also provided you with a new community that taught life skills—things like knowing how to get a decent car loan. You had someone in your corner teaching you how to navigate adulthood. What other organizations can offer that sort of support?

Vance: I learned a lot of things in the Marine Corps—soft skills, financial management, how to show up to work on time, how to maintain a professional image. Some people learn these skills in their families or wider communities, but I didn’t.

In addition to what I *didn’t* learn at home, there were things I *did* pick up that I needed to put aside. When you grow up in a tough community you learn pretty quickly that if somebody insults you or your kin, you have to punch back, sometimes physically. You develop an attitude that conflict is central to survival. But if

you exhibit those traits when you’re an adult in a corporate boardroom, or in marriage, you run into problems. It took me a while to realize that many of the survival modes that were necessary when I was 11 years old don’t translate to being a professional adult.

On both a tactical and emotional level, this is one of the areas where philanthropy can make a significant difference. I’m talking about access to community organizations and places that provide social and emotional support, networking, access to opportunities. I mentioned Big Brothers/Big Sisters, which provides excellent mentorship. The strength of Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous is the personal support and reinforcement they offer.

Obviously, churches are one of the main venues where people can be part of a community and build social capital. But many lower-income families, even though that claim to be Christian, are falling out of active church participation. We should be worried about that. We know that people who go to church are more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to have gainful employment, and have more wholesome lives in other ways.

The areas where church participation has declined the most are places like Appalachia and the Rust Belt, where upward mobility is lowest. States like Utah and Kansas where upward mobility is strongest are, unsurprisingly, places where churches are still a major force in civil society and in people’s lives.

Part of the problem is a declining number of active churches in working-class areas. Bringing active brick-and-mortar churches, and responsible churchgoers, back into working-class areas is a great place for philanthropy to help. Low-income areas that would have had lots of churches four or five decades ago are missing those institutions today.

Philanthropy: Tell us about the nonprofit that you’re starting, Our Ohio Renewal. How is that going?

Vance: We’re focusing on the twin questions of the opioid crisis and workforce development—two of the most important issues for the state, and they’re interrelated.

On the opioid-abuse front, we’re identifying the things that have been tried, from prevention programs to physician training to treatment options, and trying to understand how well they are working. This information will be useful in redirecting resources to what actually succeeds. We’ll identify a couple key strategies we can stand behind, and then try to get community buy-in.

In workforce development, there’s a retraining component. It has always been the case that the American economy is changing, with new technologies creating new jobs and destroying old ones. Workers adjust, so I’m not a cynic about these trends. Creative destruction opens opportunities for people to do new things, to contribute to the economy in new ways, and to have new jobs that are just as important and just as dignified as the jobs that people had years ago. But when we talk about education, high school, or college these days, we rarely think about the next generation of working-class jobs. We need to have plans that include trades jobs, and advanced manufacturing, and manual work of many kinds.

In my other life as an investor, I’ve teamed up with Steve Case to inject venture capital into these overlooked areas. Honestly, I think some of the most important institutions in our society are businesses. It’s not just that businesses provide wages and work; they also provide a sense of community. They give people a place to come together, and to support one another.

We don’t have enough venture capital flowing into the areas that have been hit hard by the decline of the industrial economy. Around 80 percent of venture capital currently goes to just three states—California, New York, and Massachusetts. I look at that and see a market opportunity, because I don’t think that 80 percent of the good businesses and good entrepreneurs are concentrated in those three places. That hasn’t been my experience as an investor. So our “Rise of the Rest” initiative is going to funnel venture capital into some of these overlooked companies and communities. It’s not just a winning social-impact opportunity, but a winning business opportunity. **P**