

Christine Gyovai (00:08):

Welcome to the We Rise Podcast, where we are building collective resilience. I'm your host, Christine Gyovai, business owner, wife, mother of two, paddle boarder, and I love working with communities across the nation. Join me as I share stories and strategies to inspire action to build resilience and community transformation from the Navajo Nation to the mountains of Appalachia. Incredible work is being done by community members and leaders. I'm excited to share more on the podcast today. Welcome.

Christine Gyovai (00:42):

Welcome back to the We Rise Podcast everyone. I'm really excited to introduce you today to Jacob Hannah, who is just a delight to speak to. Jacob is Coalfield Development's chief conservation Officer. Coalfield Development is based in Huntington, West Virginia, and this innovative organization is working to rebuild the Appalachian economy from the ground up. Jacob is a core part of this precedent setting work in central Appalachia. Jacob grew up in a coal mining family in West Virginia and graduated as a first generation student in business management from Garrett College. And he holds a bachelor's degree in management for sustainability from Bucknell University. He also studied cultural sustainability in France and Scotland, and spent three years testing triple bottom line sustainability concepts for coal towns in central Pennsylvania and social sustainability programs in western Maryland. Jacob enjoys spending time writing music on his guitar and piano, getting lost in the woods, spending time with his family, and harvesting fresh Dan memes from the internet. Jacob is innovative, visionary, humble, and is really leading the day-to-day work, boots on the ground with many folks across Central Appalachia. Enjoy. All right. I'm so excited to introduce listeners to Jacob Hannah, to the We Rise Podcast. Jacob, thanks so much for joining. Excited for our conversation today. Will you introduce yourself and let us know more about your story and just who I have the delight of speaking to today?

Jacob Hannah (02:06):

Sure. Thank you so much, Christine, for having me. I'm really excited to be here. My name is Jacob Hannah. I'm the Chief Conservation Officer for Coalfield Development here in Huntington, West Virginia. Uh, I am one of seven siblings, uh, homeschooled, uh, not by choice, but sort of by, uh, necessity, uh, way out Wayne County, uh, in West Virginia. Um, my, my background is that I, I am the first of my family to, to, uh, go to college and, and get a degree in, um, business administration and then later on in management for sustainability. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and there's sort of a longer journey as to why those choices happened. Um, you know, sort of growing up in the coal fields of Appalachia, my dad was a coal miner. His dad was a coal miner. Um, just sort of having that permeation of the industry as a culture, which is an odd blend of those two worlds and seeing it evaporate, sort of left me with a lot of questions on what 1:00 AM I gonna do?

Jacob Hannah (03:05):

What's next for me? And so, um, really that, that sparked an interest even deeper into sort of this larger conversation here. A lot of times about every, every solar panel as a coal co-man job lost, you know, and my dad was one of those coal miners who lost his job. And so it made me at first like frustrated and confused as, as a kid, and not sure why this world had to be mutually exclusive. You know, good things had to create, you know, bad outcomes or bad outcomes, couldn't be good things. And, um, and, and how do I sort of understand more of this narrative of this thing that's supposedly pushing out opportunity in my community? How can I learn more about it to see if we can actually bring opportunity

in, in, in that conversation? Um, so it led me to a, a, a longer journey to figure out what does it, what does it mean to be sustainable?

Jacob Hannah ([03:56](#)):

What does it mean to be renewable? Um, and, and the interesting thing is too, everyone sort of been asking themselves that question for a long time in my family, you know, my dad worked in the mines, but he also would protest mountaintop removal when he could, uh, in DC mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So, you know, how do you sort of have your cake and eat it too a little bit? Um, cause Cole was the only game in town. It's the only job in town for a region. So how do you improve what you have? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and then we don't even have that anymore. How do you sort of launch from that to something new? Uh, and so how I sort of see it is that solar energy is really the, the evolutionary birthright of Appalachia to continue to produce energy. Um, and coal is just sunlight captured and stored over millions of years.

Jacob Hannah ([04:39](#)):

And so how do we just go straight to that sunlight now and, and capture it through, through clean energy? So, um, I say renewable energy instead of clean energy. I don't wanna correct myself because there is no such thing as a totally clean energy. And I think a lot of people, um, understand that. And that's where there was like a false politicization and narrative around, well, you know, nothing, nothing's clean. Well, yes, nothing's clean, but some things are renewable, some things are a bit more self-sustaining. So a lot of my work is, is sort of sitting down and having those conversations. Um, I have a training in, in MacDowell County next week, um, in Welch, West Virginia to sort of just go over the, the 101s the basics of, of clean energy, renewable energy. I keep on slipping up the saying it, cause it's, I'm having to untrain myself from it. Right. Um, cause it is, it's sort of like a, a trigger sometimes. Like, well, no, actually it's not clean. Well, you're, you're right. You're absolutely right. And here's why it's somewhat better than just burning the resource. Cause you can renew it, you can keep using it, you can keep recycling. So that's a long blurb there, but it's just sort of, uh, uh, why I, I'm doing what I'm doing and what I'm doing. It

Christine Gyovai ([05:45](#)):

So fascinating. I, I was recently in a conversation, Jacob, with someone where they were talking about how to create flourishing communities and the process of looking into possibility and what thinking about things with a positive frame is different than a negative frame. And you talked about your background in homeschooling mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And, you know, the friends of mine who have homeschooled definitely to some degree, have a curiosity and following questions is maybe a little bit more of a natural path for those who have homeschooled. I don't like speaking in generalizations, but that has been something that I've noticed with folks who've homeschooled what really allowed you, you know, to move into what could be possible for your family community, our region. You know, you talked about a lot of really poignant questions at the beginning of that introduction about like, you know, what could be possible. What really allowed you to move into this path from your background into what you're doing now? Did curiosity play a part of that?

Jacob Hannah ([06:52](#)):

Uh, I love that question and I think there is merit to some of what you're describing that it is, I do wanna be careful speaking of generalizations, but for myself mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, I resonate with a lot of how you're describing it. And I think a lot of it comes from scarcity. Mm-hmm.

<affirmative>. So I, I truly do believe that scarcity creates value. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, the less you have of something, the more, uh, um, exclusive it is. Um, and so for us, I I, I'm, I'm not being facetious when I say homeschooled, you know, not by choice, but by, by, by desperation. Uh, we, we only had one vehicle way out Wayne County. It's about an hour and a half to get to Huntington. And that's where my dad worked at the time. Uh, after, you know, the things that phased out, he tried to get employment in, in the city.

Jacob Hannah ([07:35](#)):

Um, that's where things phased out with the mines. And so one vehicle, you can't really transport your seven kids to the nearest bus stop, which is, you know, probably, you know, a mile and a half away. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, we live on top of the highest mountain in the tri, tri-state area. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, so it's either you walk down 1500 feet down the one lane road that's, you know, more crooked than a dog time leg with people flying up and down it, seven kids in a row. That's pretty dangerous. Or you're driving there and you drop 'em off at the bottom of the mountain and the bus picks 'em up. And we, you know, our parents had asked petition, you know, can you send the bus up to pick up all these other kids as well on the mountain? It's like, no, sorry, I can't do that.

Jacob Hannah ([08:14](#)):

And they said, you should try homeschooling. Um, and so I think from that, you know, we did, we didn't have internet, uh, didn't have a lot of resources, but my mom did get a temporary job as an encyclopedia saleswoman. And if she could sell five, five sets, she would get a set free. And so she, she pushed and pushed and enriched that goal like within the first month or so. Um, and, uh, and so that's what we learned from, we, we would just go through the different letters. Okay. Let's just go through everything that begins with the letter K today, uhuh, <affirmative>, and just sort of just learn and just read and absorb. Uh, and biology class was going out on the a hundred acres of, of land there on top of the mountain and just, you know, understanding the flora and, and fauna of the area, understanding what could be good for you medicinally, what you should not eat at all.

Jacob Hannah ([09:00](#)):

So it was very much a, it was, when you're looking on paper, it sounds very hippy and it sounds very like back to the landish, but it was honestly like, even further back than that. It's, it's like sort of like a Appalachian desperation. You, you just gotta use what you have around you. Yep. Um, and I think we just, we didn't really see ourselves as poor, uh, because there's all these re natural resources around us, but we knew we didn't have a lot. And so coming from sort of that background, seeing my dad, you know, not being able to be employed anymore in the mines and, um, trying to figure out, you know, every time we drive down a road, he'd point out, well, there used to be a grocery store there and there used to be, I, I remember so-and-so used to live here.

Jacob Hannah ([09:39](#)):

They're gone now and you just sort of live in the shadow of things that was mm-hmm. Um, and it's, it, it made me think a lot of just like post collapse Roman Empire. Right. You know, you see all these testaments and and infrastructure to things that were, and you wish that you could have lived during it, but you're also wondering how do you, how can you sort of turn it into something new? And so constantly you're thinking, oh, well, you know, I hear that used to be something. I bet it could be. Again, I bet if someone tried something different, it could be that again, um, whether it's a grocery store or a community center or a church. Um, so you're constantly thinking as a kid, how do you sort of, how do

you, how do you resuscitate? Um, and so that's how all of us kids grew up thinking we had to move away from the area because again, no jobs.

Jacob Hannah ([10:22](#)):

We had the very deep, well, the deepest private well in the area, it got damaged due to nearby fracking testing. Um, and then, uh, someone had stolen a vehicle, robbed it for parts and set it on fire to get rid of the evidence that started a forest fire burnt down our house and our barns. Mm. Wow. So, you know, three strikes and you're out. Um, and so we, we had to move away, moved up to the northern end of the state, um, near Tucker County in Tucker County mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, and just started, um, living in a small dilapidated house and just fixing it up, living in it, fixing it up, and then sell it. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and then jumping to another dilapidated house, living it, fixing it, living it, fix it, sell it. And so we sort of did that for a while. Um, and while I was there I thought, okay, you know, this area, it's, it's doing well with tourism.

Jacob Hannah ([11:03](#)):

Like tourism is now coming to itself. If you go to that community now, it's, it's hugely thriving with tourism. Um, and I thought, you know, what, if, what would attract people back home? I wanna go back home. What would make people feel like the quality of black back home? How can we sort of restore things that we're living in now mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and so I, I found a community college went to that studied business. Cause I thought, business is what's gone. Maybe we can bring that back, but mm-hmm. <affirmative> traditionally it's, it's gotta be something a bit more sustainable. And so I found a program for sustainability management at Bucknell University, which is really a huge blessing. And it was kind of odd at first because it's like, oh, well we're gonna teach you about nonprofit work through the lens of for-profit tools and vice versa.

Jacob Hannah ([11:45](#)):

And sort of blend these two models together. That's cool. So you're also gonna learn about these things that are like clean energy, like solar and wind, geothermal. And it almost felt like you're in the camp of the enemy a little bit. It's like, oh, mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I'm, I'm dealing in the dark magics here. The dark arts <laugh>, uh, what does this mean? You know, am I betraying my people and my family? And it was a long conversation of just like, help me mom and dad navigate this and like, feel like I can look into this freely. And they were a huge supporters of it. And they said, you know, just like, bring back what you learn. Teach us and teach the area and, and, and see if there's ways that we can apply it to help people. And so, yeah. Long story short, studied all that.

Jacob Hannah ([12:22](#)):

Came back, found coalfield. I said, listen, I love what you guys are doing as your mission. You do a lot of people work that also helps the planet, that brings about prosperity. I love that triple bottom line focus. Let's work together. And, and now I've been here for about five years now. Um, and it's been an awesome journey to see how we can really interweave those things and not make a mutual exclusive and depoliticize these things that have been used as fodder in these broader wars that people are fighting outside of our region over top of the battleground region of Appalachia to say, well, you know, you should not do this cause you're this way. You should do this cause you're not that way. And it's enough of all that <laugh>. Let's just, let's help people get back to work and do it in a way that helps others. So that's, uh, I don't even know if that answered your question <laugh>. It does. <laugh>. Okay.

Christine Gyovai ([13:07](#)):

Yeah. Beautifully. What I also heard, one of the threads, Jacob, that you talked about was that landing pad that your family provided. You know, you talked a little bit about how you brought kind of the, your making sense of the world through conversation with your family a little bit in terms of, you know, your academic training and the context and your family giving you that grounding. And, and it sounds like helped you, you didn't say this, so let me know if I'm off base here. But helped you see things from a both and place rather than an either or mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it's, you know, you've talked about things not being mutually exclusive a couple times. Can you talk a little bit about how that framing for possibility or both, and if that seems right to you, informs your work today? What does that look like in terms of your, your day-to-day life in terms of seeing possibility and things are not this or that, and then your work at coalfield?

Jacob Hannah ([14:02](#)):

That's, that's really one of the, the key questions in any work that's related to what we call a just transition. Uh, so an unjust transition is what we're living in right now in Appalachia. We've sort of pulled the rug out a, a mono economy and not replaced it with anything. And you have all of these stacking consequences, deaths of despair were the highest concentration of people leaving the state from being born. Highest concentration of overdose rates, uh, obesity and, uh, joblessness and, and all these negative factors. Um, and so what, what is a just transition look like? It's not just reverse engineering that it's, it's gotta be a bit more. Um, and so how we define it is that the first fruits of a new economy should first and foremost benefit those left behind by the previous economy. It can't just be a one-to-one, like every cold job lost has to be a clean energy job replaced.

Jacob Hannah ([14:54](#)):

It has to be a bit more diversified than that because we don't want to, uh, replace one mono economy with another mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and just by the way that technology has advanced, you don't have as many, uh, job openings for, for new technology as you would, you know, in, in 1960s. Coal mining mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, there's, it's less mechanized then than it would be as the world is today. So, um, how do we diversify and how do we understand that when we introduce those diversified assets and those diversified opportunities, that if people are hesitant and people are uncomfortable with it, that we have to be okay with that. And, and we have to see that as, okay, this is someone's, uh, historical genealogical trauma coming to the table right now mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and I can't bulldozer over that. You know, I can't try and just rush through that and say, well, it sucks that you don't see the big picture cause I'm gonna do what I want cause I know what, what's best <laugh>, you know, that's, that's not gonna work.

Jacob Hannah ([15:52](#)):

And in fact, that'll work against you because that's almost like a, a common enemy rallying cry to, you know, let's all stop this. Let's all stop the clean energy guy. And, and so you have to take your time and really unpack why this, this is an important tool, why it's important asset, and listen, and actually believe that the people you are talking to and listening to are experts. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> in, in their community. They're experts in their region. They're experts in their everyday issues and their problems. And they're your greatest asset, uh, for understanding how to bring about a solution. I can have the answer to the universe, but if it is, if it isn't grounded in reality and the everyday challenges of life there and the everyday needs of the people there, then uh, it's, it's a moot point that'll fizzle out. And we saw this in the sixties with the war on poverty when it was declared in the Forest County in America.

Jacob Hannah ([16:39](#)):

Fast forward today, all the millions and millions of dollar stone at it, that county has barely improved since then. So you can't just throw money at it. You can't just throw good ideas at it. It has to come from the ground up with the people. And so if you integrate and allow for that collaboration, it really, uh, not only allows for adoption and education for the community side, but really I think what's even more important, it allows awareness and understanding for the developer side as well, from Coalfield side, from our partners side, to understand that if we want success to happen, if we want projects to do well, we have to slow down. We have to listen. We have to really, uh, make it about the people. So that that's why we're doing the trainings in McDowell in Mano County. These are the most coal saturated regions in West Virginia. Let's start with the outreach theory and just have a dialogue and, and mm-hmm. <affirmative> and, and have a conversation. If you have questions or understandings or myths that you wanna talk about, let's talk about it and, and not try and pretend that everything's perfect. That's going back to like clean energy versus renewable. I'm not trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes here. I understand that everything's gotta cost. How can we choose the option that does the least amount of harm to everyone? Mm-hmm.

Christine Gyovai ([17:44](#)):

<affirmative>. Yeah. Absolutely. So can you talk, talk a little bit more about what that entry point is in working with community? You talked about, um, listening and creating the space for those ideas to come from within and that people are their own experts. But as you've already mentioned too, Jacob, when people are in a place of real fear, maybe about their future, you talked earlier about scarcity. Scarcity creates value, such a rich thing. But when you're in that place of scarcity or fear, it's hard to see possibility often. Sure. Even just from, you know, there's the neuroscience of being mm-hmm. <affirmative> in, in that fear-based place. How do you individually or through your work with coalfield build possibility? How do you listen so that you're not trying to impose an idea on people, but you're allowing their own wisdom and expertise to come to the surface?

Jacob Hannah ([18:40](#)):

It's a word that I've learned since I've been at Coalfield. It's a French word. It's called charette, and it's a French word describing, uh, I think it was like architects in, in France back in the day with, with will out a cart, uh, with designs of, of projects that they would do and they would have like a town hall around it and, and gather input and ideas and share what they're hoping to bring to that, to that town. And so that's what we do as well. And so we go and have a town hall style meeting in some central location in the community and the host of Charette and come to the table offering these are, you know, sort of our assets. These are the things that we're looking to leverage. Here's the grant we're hoping to pursue, and here's us as, as you know, people that hopefully you feel, uh, that you can trust.

Jacob Hannah ([19:26](#)):

And I think that that trust and relationship is a key component to that. Um, here's something that maybe is, isn't as easily replicable. I'm, I'm born in Mano County. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I'm from West Virginia. My dad were coal miner. My dad was a coal miner. His dad was a coal miner. Uh, you know, pe when people meet you, they don't ask who you are. They ask who your family name is. So they have a better understanding of, you know, what your legacy is and if they should even bother chatting with you. So that is tougher to replicate if you're an outside developer. You know, that's tough to sort of just jumpstart years of generational understanding and knowledge and, and social capital there. So I

think that's where we have a lot of, um, uh, pencil strength, uh, in, in communities is that, you know, there's, there's, um, accountability there.

Jacob Hannah ([20:16](#)):

There's familial accountability, there's community accountability. Um, and, uh, I think folks know that I'm not coming in there with an agenda to just push something from some outside developer, because that's happened with coal, that's happened with gas, with wood, with big pharma now. And even with tourism, you know, there's always some outside force wanting to consume something and take it with them. Um, and so it, it helps when you have someone that has to live in the same community that they're working on. Um, because I, I'm, I'm in it with you. I'm here with you to focus on that. So I think establishing that provides this, this open air platform where people can vocalize and communicate their thoughts and questions and their, their inputs on, okay, well I understand your grant is bound by certain parameters. They have to build X, but is there a way that you can incorporate y you know, I, I really think y would do well here.

Jacob Hannah ([21:11](#)):

Um, and so it's, it's a dialogue. It's sort of a, uh, a negotiation in the confines of certain parameters, but it is a negotiation. Um, and, and one that isn't just to appease, but really to incorporate again, that, that adoption. Because if, if I'm over here in Huntington and there's a flood like we've been having recently in Mingo County and one of our projects is at risk of getting damaged mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I can't get there as quick as someone who lives in, in Williamson. And so to have those relationships and those understandings of folks who are gonna be there and, and have your back, if anything does happen, it is just in incredibly valuable to the work, to the projects and to the community as well. Cause they, they wanna protect it cause it's gonna help their community as well. So it mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it's all about really just opening up the conversation and not trying to have it my way or the highway. Sometimes there are things that are non-negotiable, but the things that are negotiable, let's talk about 'em. And the things that are non-negotiable that just seem damaging, just don't pursue, that's just sort of, you know, the, the cut and dry of it there.

Christine Gyovai ([22:12](#)):

So it sounds like that you talked about relationships and trust, which are so essential, but, you know, having that connection point initially is really key, it sounds like. Yeah. And the building, the we through being in it together, shared background, shared history, continued commitment, are also really key to build that initial trust for people being willing to come to the table to engage. So to broaden it out a little bit, Jacob, when you think about Mano County or Tucker County or the state, or even the broader region of Central Appalachia, what are some of the changes that you're seeing? You know, what's really helped create? And and I think also importantly, you know, I ask people often about creating a sense of belonging. Cuz I really firmly believe that it's through a sense of belonging and through working together, finding allies, working together, what whatever it might be, that's what allows people to grow stronger. So what changes have you seen? What have what has helped the community be create a sense of belonging and become more strong over time?

Jacob Hannah ([23:13](#)):

One of the largest changes statewide is that our, our our most robust economy now is no longer coal. It's tourism. Um, and so that has created a new lens of innovation that I haven't seen in the last five years, since the last five years. Um, there's been more innovation the last five years than it has been in

the last, you know, 50. Um mm. Yeah. For, for folks to, for, and, and to clarify for folks who are local and independent to create their own economic drivers. There's been innovation industrially from outside forces that has fizzled out. But now you're seeing a groundswell of a lot of local, uh, engagement and, and, and participation in the, in the creation of this, this new market sector for, for tourism. And so that's really exciting. And you see a lot of people looking to things like abandoned strip mines as potential assets rather than liabilities.

Jacob Hannah ([24:07](#)):

They're seeing that, okay, you know, this thing that has sort of left a left behind scar of a previous economy could actually have a, a lodge on top of it and, and could actually be, be restored to have, uh, uh, sort of what we call ag agritourism element where we're planting orchards or lavender on top of it. And folks coming to stay in the lodge for the trails. They can pick their own food and, and, and have sort of like a local experience where mm-hmm. <affirmative> they're contributing to the local economy, but also, um, having this authentic kind of connection. Uh, and that isn't extractive, um mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but, but it, it's, it's an exchange. Um, and so that's really beautiful to sort of see how we're, we're understanding and, and, and allowed to see that the things that would be liabilities are now opportunities.

Jacob Hannah ([24:58](#)):

That's, that's really moving for me. On the flip side of that coin. I think a lot of other people are seeing that as well. Um, and so we're seeing this, especially since covid a, a ground swell of outside folks wanting to come Appalachia. Cause people wanted to get outta cities during covid, um, and work remotely. And so you have a, like areas like Fayetteville, West Virginia, America's newest national park, uh, the New River Gorge, the housing has gone through the roof since that's been announced. Uh, uh, properties have been bought up probably a fifth or maybe even a third of housing there is, is now sort of, you know, seasonal housing. And so it's almost like a Halloween out of a community by, by, by wealth rather than by dilapidation, uh mm-hmm. <affirmative> similar impacts. Um, and it drives up the cost of living. So how do we make sure that, again, a just transition, the first fruits of a new economy should first and foremost benefit those left behind by the previous economy.

Jacob Hannah ([25:54](#)):

How do we make sure this new economy is, is just, and sustainable and, and lifts up the people who have been here for generations, stewarding these communities and these towns and these haulers and these mountains. Um, and that's what we're trying to do as well. Hopefully, you know, for a long time we've done solar, we've done reclamation, we restore buildings and restore brown fields, and we do workforce development, and we do agriculture and local food systems and textiles recycling. And now we're looking at this massive elephant in the room and saying, okay, tourism is something we should try and make sure there is a conscious conversation around it. How do we prove a model that shows that it can be sustainable? Um, and so now we're developing a, a tourism, um, integration with a high wall restoration site out Domingo County that has a ground, ground mounted solar array on top of it to sort of show that blend between, uh, clean and renewable energy and, uh, and, and coal and how those two can intersect together.

Jacob Hannah ([26:54](#)):

And there's a sort of wellness center designed for the top of it as well, for folks to come in and sort of, uh, in their recovery journey, sort of recover with the land as well and be a part of that restoration all



the while, uh, having sort of this economic driver proposed to come and visit and learn and see what that restoration story looks like. So trying to intersect all those models together and see how we can end the excitement of this new growth and this new innovation. How can we make sure we're showing models that, that, that at least have a way of doing it, right? We're not, we're not gonna assume that we're doing everything right, but here's a way of doing something sustainable for a no time. So I'm really excited about that. It seems to localize a lot of communities. A a lot of communities are now resilient.

Jacob Hannah ([27:37](#)):

I'm hearing resilient be used a lot more than sustainable these days. And, and I like, I think it's an appropriate descriptor. Um, so communities can depend on themselves, especially with supply chains going, how they've been going throughout the world. Um, so that's really exciting too, that Appalachia is getting, its, it's, its sort of independence back. Its its identity back in a way. And, and it's being known as a region where you can, um, really create, innovate, but also just, you know, just be, you can just be here without any sort of, uh, precursor or, or expectation they have to be a minor or you have to be someone who's just got no other option and has to stay here. You can just be and be happy here. That's, that's what makes me excited.

Christine Gyovai ([28:21](#)):

Building collective resilience looks different in different places. What stories and strategies inspire you? Share your ideas with us on social media and check out our website@yeswerise.org to find the show notes, interview videos, and the links mentioned on the podcast today. Can you say a little bit more about that, Jacob? Specifically? What is that? It makes total sense. I, and I was gonna ask you next what makes you excited or what, what are you really hoping to see in the future? But can you talk a little bit more about those spaces of just being, what does that look like? How does that happen?

Jacob Hannah ([28:54](#)):

It's, I, I don't know if I've ever had to describe it. So it's a good question though. I, I think for myself there, there's historically been two groups of people in Appalachia, those who are trying to lead and find better opportunities because they have to, I had to leave for a while and go to school in Maryland, in Pennsylvania mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And then there's the people who are desperately white, knuckle, crippling, trying to stay, um, and trying to find a way to, their way of being is it takes so much effort and energy that every day is like a battle, uh, to make sure you stay alive. You're, you're, you know, fighting off dilapidation, addiction, uh, crime and poverty and extraction, contamination and pollution, like every day is a battle. And, and so hopefully, what what really encourages me is that we are creating opportunities for communities to just not have to worry, you know, when they wake up about like, okay, what is, what's tomorrow gonna look like?

Jacob Hannah ([29:50](#)):

You know, am I gonna be able to have a running car? Am I gonna be able to have the opportunity to get my kids to school? Cause, you know, the roads washed out from the flood. You know, how can we eliminate some of those things, or at least mitigate it to where life can just be a, a, a net positive for folks in Appalachia because we, we just haven't been afforded that for a long time. We've, we've been exclusively, uh, uh, a sacrifice zone and extraction zone. And with that comes all of these, these burdens that you're just not allowed to escape because you've been deemed this sort of backyard of America where it's okay if we put in a chemical plant upstream from your drinking water. Um, it, it's okay if we pull back on some of the regulations because the rest of the world needs what you're doing.

Jacob Hannah ([30:36](#)):

The rest of the world needed coal for a century, and that's why we produce, and now here's sort of the next thing where we wanna throw on you. So what makes me excited is that we're, we're calling that out more, and we're sort of standing our ground saying, we're captain's of own ship. We've, and the world has left us behind, and so we're taking over, um, and this is how we, we demand it to go. This is how we demand it to be, and, and we demand better and we deserve better. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and now there's tools to make sure that comes into play. You know, there's community of benefit agreements there, there are, um, coalitions and networks that the, the whole is greater than sum of its parts for these coalitions. You know, our recent initiative to, for the build back Better Grant pulled down 88 million of federal money into 21 West Virginia counties.

Jacob Hannah ([31:20](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Uh, so being able to, as local agents, local leaders, to say, this is what we know the money needs to be spent on, trust us with that. Here's our record to prove that we're not just blowing smoke here, but we're gonna do what we've been doing for the last 20 years. And it happens. Um, and that's what makes me excited, that we can actually be our own change agents, be our own leaders, and, and bring along others with us on that journey. And, and not just sort of wait for the next, you know, billionaire to come in and promise something that doesn't manifest, you know? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, there's been so many projects that have been promised in the last 10 years that just nothing happened. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> <laugh>. And it's just a pulling us by our heartstrings and, and just, you know, we just sort of wait and wait and wait.

Jacob Hannah ([32:03](#)):

And now we don't have to, we can actually start doing something ourselves. And that, that gives me hope. You know, when I first came back to Huntington after being in Tucker County in, in Maryland, there was a lot of anxiety for me, uh, that okay, you know, what's the quality of life gonna look like for me? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, I'm, I'm deliberately choosing to come back to the town that has the highest concentration of opiate overdoses in all of America. Hmm. I'm bringing my new wife with me that I've been married to for years. She's from Seattle. What's that gonna look like for her? How's she gonna death? How's she gonna make friends? You know, all these things went through your mind. Do I wanna raise a kid here? Yes. To all those things. It's, it's the how is where I get some of the control back. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, I can control how that happens, how that looks, um, and, and I can sort of make my own manifest destiny. If, if there's not a river trail, let's sit down with the city and talk about a river trail. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, if there's not a wellness center, let's talk to some of the agents about making a wellness center. Let's talk about the festival for this culture. Let's talk about X, Y, and Z. We can, we can do this folks, we can do this. And we're proving that we're doing it.

Christine Gyovai ([33:03](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> beautiful. So what I hear both of the, your own individual family scale, but also broader is not waiting for anything, not waiting for anybody else, but saying, this is what we are doing. Standing, standing on our own ground that really we've stood on for generations. And I also hear that, that space to just, you talked about being, but also just breathing, you know, not needing to run away from, not needing to run toward, but just the, like, the pause and being able to just Yeah. Not look over the back or have to plan for the future Exactly. But to just be in a place, um, and be reflective. Peaceful, yeah. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Jacob Hannah ([33:46](#)):

Just be

Christine Gyovai ([33:46](#)):

Beautiful just to be. So, um, what, so I wanna ask one more question about the broader community and then bring it back to you a little bit for, as we get ready to wrap up with some of our quick roller questions in a few minutes.

Jacob Hannah ([33:59](#)):

Just one by,

Christine Gyovai ([34:00](#)):

I know <laugh>, um, what are you really, what are you really hoping to see Jacob in the next like 5, 10, 20 years? Like, what's really your vision for Appalachia? You're working at a big scale with a lot of partners. You have tremendous grounding and experience. What are, what are you personally really hoping to see, you know, again, five, 20 years or, or even 50 years And, and how, how do you see to get there? That's a big question.

Jacob Hannah ([34:24](#)):

It's a big question, but I thought about it a lot. I wanted to, I want to be put out of a job <laugh> <laugh>. I want no longer to, to need to be the bottleneck for hope. And, and I feel that way sometimes that a lot of folks look to coal for development in the budget of other nonprofits. That these are the only options for good things to happen. I think it is currently one of the main arteries that's pumping blood back into West Virginia and Appalachia, but it doesn't have to be. And we're trying to, uh, lead the leaders and, and bring about more folks to where it's not just bottlenecked us. We're, we're investing in other partners through our seed program. Um, reaching out and, and helping other entrepreneurs and innovators and nonprofits sort of come up to scale, to be able to capture these large grants and survive an audit that comes along with it mm-hmm.

Jacob Hannah ([35:13](#)):

<affirmative>, um, and just really help to replicate the model and expand for others to, to do the work in their communities to where 10 years down the road, my work's not needed. You know, because the, the, the economy, the market, the communities, the culture, it's all integrated into that resiliency. Um, and it's, it's all, uh, just commonplace to where I can do what I want to do now and just go back to that mountain that I grew up on and just be a Herman. That is my lifelong goal. It's like, you know, I loved, I loved growing up there as a kid and just having no responsibilities and just picking memorials and, and, and hunting and just running through the creek. And, and I wanna do that now. Um, and, and so I'd love to go back there, just build a cabin and just sort of absorb, be I want to be mm-hmm.

Jacob Hannah ([35:58](#)):

<affirmative>, you know, um, that's, that's what I'm longing for. Just the ability to, to be, um, cause this place is so beautiful, spiritually, emotionally, physically, uh, it, it, it resonates deep inside a person. And that resonation can be scary if you don't have resources, or it can be so fulfilling if you do. Mm. Um, and so I, what I would love to see are, are resilient communities that have their own agency, have their own vision for what they want and, and have their own autonomy to execute on it. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Um, and I think we're getting there. We're getting close. We're bringing the resources, the funding, the partnerships, uh, to the communities, to the region. I think we're, what really excites me about being in the nonprofit sector is that we can take on the risk that others don't and prove the proof of concepts of things that have only been talked about, like solar on my lens.

Jacob Hannah ([36:51](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> like, uh, like, um, micro hydro or aquaponic centers, or things that sound cool, uh, and you associate with the European country or something. Um, but that we could never have, quote unquote, I, I wanna, I wanna prove those things can take root, and that's what we're doing every day. And that then influences legislation that influences governance, adaptation, uh, city adaptation. Uh, we're doing a, a rain, uh, water capture system in our headquarters here that captures our own rain and, and diverts it away from the overflow of the storm water system, the sewer system. And that's got the city excited about replicating that model. So how do we sort of prove that these things are our tools that we can use and they're not expensive, and that here's the resource we can pursue to get it mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and so after we have showcased that and after we prove those things, we can, we don't have to be the purveyors of that we can pull back and, and let folks just sort of manifest their own destiny.

Christine Gyovai ([37:49](#)):

Yeah. That's gorgeous. Uh, random question, is that land that you grew up on, does your family still steward it or is it a place that you're able to return to

Jacob Hannah ([37:58](#)):

Now? We still, still, we try and go back every like month or so and just, you know, keep the weeds down so there's not another forest fire that's Yeah. Potentially starting. Um, but, uh, we're trying to go out there more and more frequently and, and, um, just vision, just vision. What, what, what could it look like to be here? Um, you know, my, my dream would be to just, uh, there's so many wild things that grow there, like paw paws and blackberries and persimmons would just be to, you know, bring some of those to places like Huntington and Logan, and a lot of folks haven't had the ability to go out and forge for those things. And, and just sort of reinvigorate that culture of like, like sustainability was here before it was cool. You know, people were sustaining themselves off of jarring their own food and drying their own meats and fixing things that were broken. So I wanna sort of return back to that a bit in my hermit phase. Yeah. And then maybe get itching to, to be back in, in the, the economy and maybe start some sort of training program for hermit or something. I don't know. <laugh> We'll, we'll see what happens. <laugh>. Exactly.

Christine Gyovai ([39:02](#)):

Spin on the Hermitage

Jacob Hannah ([39:04](#)):

Re re hermit Appalachia, you know,

Christine Gyovai ([39:06](#)):

<laugh> hermit <laugh>.

Jacob Hannah ([39:08](#)):

Remind me. That's

Christine Gyovai ([39:09](#)):

Awesome. There's so many possibilities there.

Jacob Hannah ([39:11](#)):

Exactly. Yeah.

Christine Gyovai ([39:12](#)):

You know what's so interesting is that my dad grew up in the, the Near Rock Creek and Dry Creek in Naomi, um, down by Whitesville. And, and my mom grew up in Maryland and New York, and my dad in the spring, you know, knew like the right day to go out to search for morels, you know? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And he would go out. Um, and she remember my mom always reflecting like, she's like, I was always so curious how he just knew in his bones, like when it was time to go and would come back with a, you know, bag of morels or, you know, when it was time to dig a certain thing, you know, or when it was the right time to plant seed. And I think that those ways of knowing are deep, you know, they're deep in, in bones and blood and generations.

Christine Gyovai ([39:55](#)):

And, you know, we talk about, you know, again, I was just in a conversation with someone who was talking about framing things in the positive rather than the negative. And, and there's this whole movement around looking at generational trauma and how that influences future generations and how trauma can be passed on. But what about generational possibility? You know, and I'm just thinking about this now, but like, what about generational wisdom? What about generational? Like ways of knowing and scarcity creates value, but like, there's something in our bodies that knows when it's time to go out and hunt morales, or when it's time to gather with the community, or when it's time to reflect. Um, and that generational, that positive ways of knowing, I think we don't talk about enough.

Jacob Hannah ([40:39](#)):

You know? I love that.

Christine Gyovai ([40:41](#)):

And, and I think that there's, you know, the goosebumps, I think there's, there's something

Jacob Hannah ([40:45](#)):

There <laugh>. Yeah.

Christine Gyovai ([40:47](#)):

Um, in the Hermitage, but also I think there's something about the being able to be quiet and reflect and to be, you know, we don't know what those spaces are. Sure. Without being able to be quiet, we don't know what those generational ways of knowing are until we are able to listen to ourselves. So the, the value of the listening and the being,

Jacob Hannah ([41:04](#)):

So amen to that. I love that generational wealth. That's, uh, and it's, it's more than just a dollar, you know? It's the stories and the the things you, that's hard to describe. That's beautiful. Yeah. I love that.

Christine Gyovai ([41:15](#)):

And well, this is Sherry Torres who, Adam Wells, one of our, our friends and colleagues connected me with, I was in conversation with, um, for a podcast conversation and we were talking about, she even framed it in the realm of food wealth versus a food desert. Mm. You know, and when you use that framing of food wealth, what that difference of what could be created versus the contraction that happens with food does? Oh, yeah. So, so

Jacob Hannah ([41:39](#)):

Different. So my, my personal favorite motto is, is, uh, opportunity is in greatest supply where there is none. Um, when you start to look at it, okay, there's not a grocery store here. You can see that as, oh, well, there's no opportunity here for food. But really there's a, a massive opportunity for someone to open up something about food. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> to, to to start your own food market, your own food stand, uh, to, to forage and sell that food. Cause there's no competition, <laugh> mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you're, you're there to be a provider, uh, and you can thrive through that. It's, it's sort of reversing that lens of, well, because there's nothing here. I can't do anything here. Well, no. Cause there's nothing here. The market's wide open for you to do everything. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, so that's, I I love it.

Christine Gyovai ([42:18](#)):

It's the framing. Yeah. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So as we get ready to wrap up some kind of quick roller questions about you. Okay. Uh, you've talked about this a some of these things a little bit. So Jacob, tell us what brings you joy?

Jacob Hannah ([42:30](#)):

What brings me joy is a lot of things. I, I, I, I get a enjoyment, a lot of things. I love to laugh, so I love, like, just weird niche internet humor in memes, <laugh>. Um, but I also love just going out into the woods and just walking and hiking and, um, and really just taking in nature, being with my family. I love writing music and playing music. Uh, I love the sound of the wind at the top of the trees on the mountain and spring. Cause it sounds like the ocean. Um, just the, you know, things that are, are, you know, tough to, uh, commoditize, you know, to put in the box, you have to sort of go out and get it. You have to earn it a bit. <laugh> mm-hmm. <affirmative>, that's what I really enjoy. That, that's what brings me joy on top of all the massive amount of like, work and projects that we do. Those are like the obvious joys, but the little, the little joys are what, what really, um, I think propelled me forward. Mm-hmm.

Christine Gyovai ([43:21](#)):

<affirmative>, sustain. And so, corollary, or not corollary, what keeps you moving forward on the days you struggle?

Jacob Hannah ([43:29](#)):

Guilt. Guilt. If I don't, um, people will suffer if I don't move forward on this grant, if I don't, um, help, uh, with the project, if I don't do my best, it's not just me letting myself down. It's me allowing my, my God-given opportunities and gifts to, uh, just rot and stagnate and at the, at the cost of other people's wellbeings. Mm. Um, so that, you know, just to be totally honest, that that plays a big part of it. And I

think it's a, it's a motivator. It's maybe not the most healthy motivator, but, um, I think once I get past that sort of kick myself in the pants a little bit phase, it's like, okay, well, I, I agree with that. And also, I'm, I know I'm gonna really enjoy seeing people's faces when they are touching a solar panel for the first time in this community without guilt, you know, when I see them on the same road that I went on like that, if I can make it through tomorrow to get to that training, great. Awesome. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I, I just gotta get to this rough patch.

Christine Gyovai (44:32):

Yeah. And, and I hear that sense of, uh, communal awareness, community awareness, that sense of we mm-hmm. To some agree mm-hmm. In that reply mm-hmm. Of you have an awareness of beyond your own Yeah. Moment in time with that. Totally. Yeah. What else makes you excited about what's happening in your community?

Jacob Hannah (44:50):

I mean, this massive funding opportunity through the Build Back Better grant, about 88 million. Um, that's, it's created like eight other small projects within it. I'd say smaller. Like, each one's like 8 million. That, that's really exciting. Uh, that's gonna, it's, it's primarily focused on clean energy. So, uh, it's gonna focus on the, um, solar training, workforce development program, um, uh, clean Energy and Battery Battery Research Institute. Um, it's gonna support our reuse corridor partners, uh, with a massive sort of market space for upcycling, landfill materials. Uh, it's, it is gonna do so much that we've all sort of been yearning for, and now we have the ability to actually actualize it. Hmm. Um, so I'm really excited about that. It's gonna be a lot of work over the next four years, but it's, it's happening now. It's no longer just a vision and the dream, it's actually coming true. So I'm really excited about that for, for Huntington, for Charleston, for the 21 7 counties that it's gonna, uh, touch upon. Um, so I'm, I'm really looking forward to that.

Christine Gyovai (45:55):

Yeah. Awesome. Love that. What key lessons learned would you, would you share with others who are trying to create change in their communities and regions?

Jacob Hannah (46:04):

Hmm. You know, I did look up all these, I did think of answers beforehand, <laugh>, and just through the lens, the lens of this emotional unloading, uh, it makes me sort of reevaluate what would've been my answers. I think what I would, a key takeaway I would give someone, um, is to really, you know, folks who come into this work, come into it with an idea and a solution. Um, because they, they want to deploy something to help people. I think that's great. And also not, but, but, and also allow for that idea to be totally pulled apart and put back together a different way. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, I think a lot of people come in with an ambition and an idea and a goal and a solution, and that can be good. And parts of it are probably true and relevant, but allow it to allow others to have ownership too, and take it apart and make it their own too, as well. And it may look completely different than what you expected, and that's a good thing. Um, cause if the idea isn't sort of born of the people who are gonna be a part of it, then it's, it's not an idea. It's, uh, it's a, it's a, uh, sort of an overlay of your perception of what an a good idea could look like. Mm-hmm.

Christine Gyovai (47:16):

<affirmative>. So an openness of letting go, a trust, curiosity

Jacob Hannah ([47:23](#)):

And, and a willingness to embrace and adapt change mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and let change happen within you, within your community, with your ideas and just listen

Christine Gyovai ([47:32](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> wise words there. And last, what do you wish someone told you five or 10 years ago about this work?

Jacob Hannah ([47:40](#)):

Ah,

Christine Gyovai ([47:41](#)):

<laugh>.

Jacob Hannah ([47:49](#)):

Hmm. What can I legally say? <laugh> <laugh>. I wish I would've known the toll it takes on my body. You know, you think it's an office job and you think it's just sitting down, and it's not manual labor, but the toll it takes on your mind and your heart every day to work in communities that are going to go home with you after you go outta the office. You know, you, you, it's not like you don't get much sleep because the work hours are hard. You don't get much sleep because it's, it's hard to turn off empathy and, and, and what you've seen and what you know, can be better, but just isn't better cause of these unjust systems. Um, so that takes a toll sometimes. And it's, you know, it's good to be aware of it. It just comes with the territory, but mm-hmm. It makes it all the more important to find your joy, what you were asking me before, like, find the things that make you happy. The little things that you can just return back to really quickly and recenter yourself and not get bogged down too much in the, in the despair.

Christine Gyovai ([48:44](#)):

Yeah. Well said. Yeah. It, it took me a long time, Jacob, you know, I live from my head up for, for many years. And it wasn't until I learned to live in my body and to really tune in and listen and listen from my heart, and to recognize that, that by prioritizing the things that bring me joy, it brings me so much energy to do the work and the world and the things that I love. And to not come from a place of overwhelm and from burnout and from scarcity, but to be able to bring a real different part of myself to my work that's much more integrated. Um, and I, I don't think I would've learned that without experiencing it, you know? Yeah. Hard, hard learning, hard lessons as we all go through. But, um, but that body wisdom, you know, just that trust has been really transformative to me, and also prioritizing the things that bring me joy,

Jacob Hannah ([49:36](#)):

So. Totally. Yeah. Well said.

Christine Gyovai ([49:38](#)):

So, uh, what other thoughts and reflections would you like to share, and how can people learn more about you and your work? We'll include the links to the episode, webpage in the show notes.



Jacob Hannah ([49:47](#)):

Well, if you'd love to learn more about our work or the, we have a massive network of partners, um, that we're, we're working together with, um, feel free to reach out to me. Uh, my, my contact information is on our website@atcoldfielddevelopment.org. Um, I'm happy to connect with folks I love giving tours at the facilities that we're transforming here. Mm. Be on the lookout. We're gonna be doing so many trainings in the future. Uh, you don't have to have any background or experience in these trainings. These are meant to be like, sort of first point engagements with the communities. Uh, we do deconstruction training, solar training, uh, composting, uh, water reclamation, just transition, uh, local food systems. Uh, so, so much. We wanna make sure that these, these assets that are doing good for communities also teach, also educate, also communicate. And so that's, we, we wanna focus on doing a lot more of that this year, so be on the lookout for that. Um, if you wanna join, uh, I'm pretty sure all of the trainings are free. If they're not, they're a very small fee to pay. Um, and, uh, and if you have any ideas that you wanna share with Coalfield with me on things that you think might be good solutions, I hope I haven't talked you out of it, <laugh>, and come,

Christine Gyovai ([50:59](#)):

Uh, I doubt that <laugh> come,

Jacob Hannah ([51:01](#)):

Come hit me up and, uh, and let me know, uh, if you have thoughts or ideas. And I'd love to brainstorm. Uh, one plus one really equals three out here because I think a lot of folks have ambition and ideas and we can make a lot happen together. So, um, yeah, I'd, I'd just love to continue to reach out to folks and if anyone listening to this wants to grab a coffee or something and, and share an idea on how to transform a Appalachia or start a Hermitage College, you know, let me know.

Christine Gyovai ([51:26](#)):

<laugh>. Awesome. Well, Jacob, it's been such a delight today. Thanks for taking the time to join. I really appreciate it. So thank you.

Jacob Hannah ([51:33](#)):

It's been my pleasure, Christine, thank you so much.

Christine Gyovai ([51:40](#)):

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