

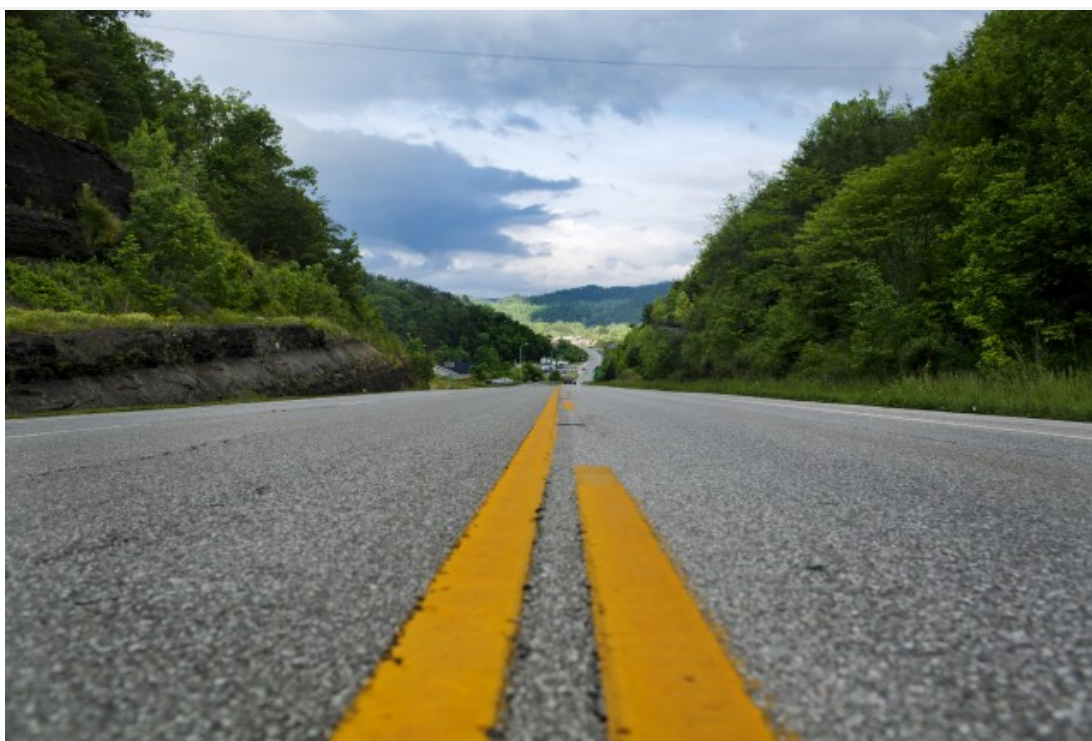
THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Pressing On the Upward Way

MONICA POTTS JUNE 12, 2012

A profile of life in one of the country's poorest counties

This piece from our July/August Poverty issue won the July Sidney award from the Sidney Hillman Foundation. Read an interview with the author about her piece [here](#).



Chris Wilson

By her second semester of college, in the spring of 2008, Sue Christian was about as tired as she'd ever been in her 40 years. It wasn't that her studies kept her working hard; she was used to long hours. It wasn't that she was missing her salary; she was already good at fretting over bills. It wasn't that the daily trip from her home in Booneville, Kentucky, was more than an hour long, a drive that, when rains washed out a one-lane bridge, took her over the nauseating Hatton Holler Mountain. It was more that, listening to lecture after lecture in crowded classrooms with people half her age, Sue felt her brain was stretched as far as it would go. "I thought, 'I'm so dumb, I'm not good at college,'" she says. "Professors seemed to be more focused toward that age group fresh out of high school. So, if you're past that, it's like, 'Catch up or get out.'"

Going to college was an accident of timing. The previous spring, SourceCorp, the data-entry company where Sue worked, had closed, which had come as a shock. The company had received a five-year contract from the federal

government, but a year and a half into it, the company shut down its Booneville office. “It’s like these data-entry companies either work you to death or lay you off,” Sue told her husband, J.C. Since the age of 15, Sue had used her only marketable skill—typing fast—to get minimum-wage jobs at data-entry companies. They were the only ones around. While her two children, Kody and Ciara, were in elementary school, she often worked the second shift to earn night pay. For most of their adult lives, the Christians have made less than \$22,113 a year, the poverty line for a family of four. This makes them like a lot of families in Owsley County, where 40 percent of the population lives in poverty and 30 percent lives just above it. More families rely on food stamps than make the national median household income of \$49,445.

Sue describes herself as introverted, but she is so ready to tell you about her shyness that she proves herself wrong. She is private and slow to start a conversation but also slow to stop it. She’s quick to a giggly laugh, a happy look that makes her dark eyes disappear. At five feet four inches, she’s shorter than her kids, and they tease her for her short arms, which tend to dart up while she talks. Her hair is black as coal next to her pale skin—she straightens it every morning into a neat bob—and it’s lined with an increasing number of silver strands.

She might have worked at data entry forever had SourceCorp not laid her off. “I used to do the only thing I thought I could earn money from,” she says, “but I was kind of content.” Not content in a happy way but content in that she wasn’t looking for any other type of work. “It’s sometimes easier to stay where you’re at, instead of trying to get to someplace else.”

For as long as people could remember, the biggest employer in Owsley County has been the school system, and people lucky enough to get hired hold on for life. Beginning teachers start out at \$28,000, which makes those jobs some of the most sought after. Senior teachers can earn as much as \$55,000, which makes them rich by Owsley County standards. Losing her data-entry job got Sue to thinking about teaching. She had always enjoyed teaching Sunday school and liked working with kids. So when a friend told her about a social-services agency that could help her pay for college, she decided to apply to Eastern Kentucky University, an hour away in Richmond. She decided to major in middle-school education. What she had not taken into account, though, was that she had always been the family’s steadiest—and usually biggest—wage earner. Without her money coming in, and with Kody heading to college and Ciara entering high school, the Christians were about to enter four of their toughest years.

Now Sue was stuck in science and math courses, next to students fresh out of high school, talking about meta-this and osmosis-that. She was used to setting to a task and working in a fury until it was done, but maybe going to college was a bad idea, maybe she had reached the limits of her mental ability. If a data-entry company had been hiring on, she would have taken the job. When she’d go home, she’d tell J.C., “I don’t think I can do college.”

Sue felt like whenever someone from Owsley County went out into the world, the world went out of its way to poke them in the eye. One professor, who spoke at an orientation seminar, encouraged the freshman class to rub out their accents. “It’s all right to be from Eastern Kentucky,” he told them, “but you don’t need to sound like you’re from here.” Eastern Kentucky University was supposedly in the same region as Owsley County, but as far as Sue was concerned, that hour’s drive into the rolling hills of the Bluegrass was on the other side of the country. The limestone runoff from the Appalachians enriched the Bluegrass, making it ideal for tobacco, horses, and bourbon. Even the soil, it seemed, took what it wanted from the mountains and made itself rich.

Then, in her second semester, Sue took a class called “Educational Foundations” from a professor named Roger Cleveland. He had taught in some big city, Louisville or Cincinnati—Sue could never remember—in a school for teenagers who lived in gang-ridden neighborhoods. Part of his job was to go to the kids and say, “Don’t look so close at the situation you’re in now. Look at where you want to be,” and that resonated with Sue. He asked Sue once, “Christian, do you feel like, because you’re from Eastern Kentucky, people try to put you in a box?” She said, “Well, yeah, I do.” It was weird, but it was this man from the city who seemed to understand her and her people, and that was a way to win Sue over.

Cleveland gave all his students a test that identified their learning styles. For Sue the test was a revelation. It said that she absorbed material better by doing projects with her hands than by listening to lectures or reading textbooks. The learning-styles test became a talisman for Sue to ward against the danger of feeling dumb. She changed the way she studied. By the time she got her degree, in May 2011, she'd won an award for being on the dean's list. She graduated along with about 300 other middle-school education students, who would compete with one another for jobs in Eastern Kentucky. Sue hadn't found a job by graduation, but that didn't matter. "Have you ever impressed your own self with what you're capable of doing?" she says. "That's how I felt when I got my degree."



Chris Wilson

While most of Appalachia is poor, Southeast Kentucky, where the mountains start turning into hills, is the worst off. There was never enough coal for deep mining that would at least provide well-paying jobs. The ground, mostly black slate, is too rocky for farming, though some families grew tobacco on a few flat bottomland pastures until the government bought them out in the 1990s. Five of the poorest counties in the United States—Owsley, Clay, Lee, Knox, and Wolfe—touch here, huddled along a swath of wilderness, the Daniel Boone National Forest, that divides them from the rest of the state. Owsley County does the rest of these small, poor counties the favor of being a little bit smaller and a little bit poorer. Less than 200 square miles, slightly bigger than the city of New Orleans, it's shaped like a bowl with hills on the edges and the low, slow south fork of the Kentucky River cutting through. It has the distinction of being the poorest county in the United States with a majority-white population.

Kentucky began calling Owsley County a "pauper county" as far back as the 1890s, because it took more state tax revenue than it contributed. Since the federal government began tracking poverty rates in 1959, Owsley has ranked as one of the nation's poorest counties. By the 1960s, when much of the United States had moved into prosperity, Southern Appalachia's shoeless children, living in mountain shacks without electricity or plumbing, seemed like relics—trapped in a sticky poverty that modernity had yet to solve. The people of Owsley County translated all the attention as criticism. They weren't descendents of pioneers. They were a problem.

Sue's was the first generation to live in Owsley County after Lyndon B. Johnson declared his War on Poverty, and this part of Kentucky was Omaha Beach. Do-gooders, ministers, and bureaucrats came and never stopped coming. Grants

poured in. Programs were created. The Appalachian Regional Commission. AmeriCorps VISTA. The Community Action Program. The Christian Appalachian Project. The Children's Dental Health Initiative. Endow Kentucky. Head Start got kids into school and free lunches fed them. All these initiatives solved the problem of basic survival, but they didn't solve the problem of an increasingly depopulated region: not enough consumers to support business, old trail roads that kept big trucks out and kept the cost of goods high, companies that only opened their doors because they could pay the populace, hungry for jobs, less than they would have to pay people elsewhere. Because the government programs were the most visible, well-functioning industry in town, many locals set on them with a special brand of ire. They were helping a lot of people—more than anyone wanted to acknowledge—but they also seemed like an attack on a way of life. Sue felt the same way. "I think we've been helped so much," she says, "we're getting helped to death." Government benefits, from welfare to Social Security to the Earned Income Tax Credit, account for 53 percent of all the county's income.

For many years, the way to be successful in Owsley County was to leave—the students who could make it to college stayed away. The population, which in 2010 was 4,755, started to fall seven decades ago. There were few opportunities to keep young people in Owsley County, and the first thing that federal anti-poverty programs did was connect the poor here to opportunities elsewhere. What was good for individuals drained the community as a whole. About 40 miles in any direction there's a bigger town with a Walmart and enough jobs for Owsley County's young to go make their living.

When Sue was born in Owsley County, in 1967, most families lived like hers—up a holler, piecing together work through manual labor and growing most of the food they needed to eat. Her parents, Ruby and Puddin Thomas, had lost their first child to pneumonia before having Sue and her brother. Puddin earned money on his own, going into the logwoods with a small dozer. This sense of self-reliance bred confidence—you'll never go hungry if you grow your own food. When Sue was in first grade, Puddin broke his arm in seven places. That winter a local church brought over food and Christmas presents. Puddin's working life ended when he was 53 after part of a tree fell on his head, a near-fatal injury that kept him in recovery for more than two months, and even then he checked out of a rehabilitation center early. The injury aggravated his body, especially his arm. "If I knew it wouldn't kill me and I wouldn't go to hell," he'd grouse, "I'd cut my own arm off." He's been drawing disability and, later, Social Security ever since.



Chris Wilson

When Sue was 15, in 1983, she fell for a 25-year-old from the next county north, Lee County, and got married. Maybe the attentions of an older man were too tempting for a bashful teenager to resist, maybe it was because Puddin' disapproved, but Sue set at that marriage in a stubborn way. She moved with her husband to a house with no indoor plumbing. He was unemployed. Although she remained in high school, she got her first data-entry job, working nights; most of her paycheck went to the electricity bill. Her husband, without a word to Sue, joined the Navy. When he was transferred to Jacksonville, Florida, she decided to finish school there, but she was used to a rural high school where kids lined up, orderly, for lunch; this new world was too aggressive, and she dropped out. Far from home, in a marriage she stuck to for spite, Sue was conquered and miserable.

Four years after getting married, Sue and her husband divorced. Soon after, Sue met J.C. when she applied for a job at his mom and stepfather's window-installation business in Jacksonville. Tall and slim, J.C.—which stands for James Christian—was six years older than Sue. He had tawny skin and tattoos up and down both arms, but he kept his black hair close-cropped and he dressed neatly for the job. When Sue saw him, she thought: "Clean-cut." J.C. had a girlfriend he fought with all the time, and one day Sue asked, "How serious are you and that girl?" and J.C. said, "Why? Do you want to go out?" In Christian family lore, this means Sue had made the first move. Five months after her divorce, Sue and J.C. married.

In 1988, they moved to a trailer outside Winston--Salem, North Carolina, where Kody was born, and later to West Virginia, to a trailer outside Charleston. When Kody was two, J.C. asked Sue why they didn't just move to Owsley County and be near her parents. J.C. could see life there, quiet, up a holler. Sue's answer was quick: "There are no jobs." J.C. lined up a job with an electrician, and they spent their last \$600 getting to town.



Chris Wilson

Booneville's downtown is only one square, where three state highways meet and wrap around a courthouse. A plaque marks a spot where Daniel Boone might have camped; the town was christened on so slight an honor as passing through. Two cafes, two churches, and five empty storefronts surround the courthouse. Just off the square, there's a Dollar General, a Family Dollar, a Shopwise market, and three gas stations that serve biscuits and gravy. There are three pharmacies, one doctor, one dentist, and a pain-treatment clinic. There's the Owsley

County Action Team office, an unofficial, ancillary government and social-services agency paid for by donations and government grants. Down the road sits the husk of a building with brown aluminum siding, covered with graffiti, which was a movie theater when Sue was growing up. By the theater, a Baptist mission operates a food bank out of an old motel, which also provides lodging to volunteers who come to build houses in the summer. In 2005, the drive-in movie theater just south of town closed, leaving the cinder-block projection wall standing by the road that leads toward an empty industrial park built to lure businesses that never came.

By the time Sue and J.C. moved to Booneville, his job had fallen through. The electrician who promised J.C. work said he didn't have enough calls to justify his hire. After that, J.C. held a series of jobs—bagging groceries, clerking at a hardware store, working at a factory one county over—and either quit in a huff or got fired from each. J.C. doesn't talk much about his dad, except to say that he was a mean drunk. J.C. owns that he's inherited a watered-down version of that anger. When he drank or had to take medication because he was injured, he got worse. After five years in Owsley County, he decided to become a handyman. He figured his best boss was his own self—if he got mad, he couldn't storm off and quit. It took years, though, for J.C. to get hired regularly around town. Like a lot of small places, Owsley County is suspicious of outsiders. "J.C.," folks later explained to him, "we didn't know you." That first year in Booneville, J.C. brought in \$11,000, and for a six-month stretch, the family relied on food stamps. The next year, when Sue started working as a data-entry keyer, their income grew to \$17,000.

In July 1993, Sue became pregnant with Ciara. The visits to Sue's doctor took them past one of her favorite spots, a little rock that jutted over the highway west of town like the bow of a ship. It was quiet and removed. Sue would think that if she could just put her family up there, they would be safe. The land, no more than a quarter-acre, belonged to her cousins, who said Sue and J.C. could have it for \$4,200. They had hopped from one rent house to another in Owsley County. "I wanted to settle and be still," she says. She also wanted her children to know where home was. The couple borrowed \$3,800 from the bank, and J.C. paid off the rest by helping Sue's cousins in their tobacco fields. Sue and J.C. bought their first trailer, rundown and tiny as a cracker box, for \$1,000. Puddin lent them the money, a debt that J.C. settled by working on his father-in-law's farm. They gave their kids the bedrooms, one at either end. J.C. and Sue slept in the living room, pushing two blue couches they had together at night and pulling them apart again in the day. "That was pretty rough," Sue says.

Most people will tell you that two kinds of folks live in Owsley County—those who draw and those who work. There are families who receive aid and families who don't, and, because the county has only one grocery store left, everyone knows who they are. There are families who send their children to school neat and clean and fed, and those who don't. It's easy to think appearances don't matter; but country poverty has its own wardrobe, and, sometimes, seeming less poor is about clever costume design.

When nearly everyone in the county is poor, the distinction between have and have-not becomes meaningless.

When nearly everyone in the county is poor, the distinction between have and have-not becomes meaningless. There are have-very-little's, but even they wouldn't always call themselves poor. Neither would the Christians. As far as Sue was concerned, "poor" was the word for giving up. It took drive to make a living in Owsley County—you had to create your own work on your own steam—and Sue had seen plenty of people run out of it before they got anywhere. "They're good kids," people will say about Kody and Ciara. "Their parents both work." Sue and J.C. performed a service for their children that was less tangible than getting the bills paid. They made sure no one in town looked down their noses at them.

Beginning in 2002, things began to improve. Sue had started inputting for SourceCorp a couple of years earlier. At first, it was from home and catch-as-catch-can. There were nights when she underestimated the amount of time it would take her to finish, and she would work until morning to meet deadlines. SourceCorp then hired Sue full time, which

meant going into their office and steady pay. J.C. had managed to turn his handyman and electrician services into something that could rightly be called a business. For five years, from 2002 to 2007, they managed to finally make enough money to cover the bills and have a little extra left over for drive-in movies with the kids on Saturdays. They financed a new doublewide, which had a master bedroom and a decent-size kitchen. They set it on their little hill, and J.C. built a porch on the front. Those years they made a touch more than \$30,000. That's how much the Christians needed to be comfortable.

Then in 2007, SourceCorp closed, and the Christians were down to J.C.'s bumpy income. The only other decent-paying job Sue was qualified for was to be an aide at the nursing home outside of town. "I'm very squeamish," she says, "and I thought, 'I can't do that.'" Sue decided to go to college. She'd been a bad student in middle and high school, but when Kody and Ciara had started in Owsley County schools, she'd chaperoned trips and parties and eventually become president of the Parent-Teacher-Student Organization. When she thought about where she could work, the school, with its well-paying jobs, seemed like the best bet. She was already there so often. College was just a necessity, something she could work like a job at SourceCorp, steeled with faith that, this time, she'd be a better student.

Like many of America's poor, the Christians had a few tantalizingly good years that set a standard of living they struggle to maintain during the bad ones.

Still, it was a huge gamble. Sue didn't drive in the snow, so some days, J.C. would have to take her to Richmond and sit, all day, waiting for her to get out of class. She and J.C. knew college would add to their expenses. Even with help from various programs, she would have to pay for some of her gas, lunch, and books. But what they hadn't taken into account was how much they would miss Sue's income. Sue didn't allow herself the title of breadwinner—that would have been too hard on J.C.—but in truth she was. Even in their best years, J.C. had off months—long winters when no one called him for home repairs—and Sue's paycheck had kept them going. Sue had also provided health insurance for the family through her jobs. Her work had pushed them above the poverty line and, now that her work was gone, they had dropped below it again. Like many of America's poor, the Christians had a few tantalizingly good years that set a standard of living they struggle to maintain during the bad ones. What they hadn't known, of course, when they made the decision for Sue to go to college was that the global economy was about to collapse and J.C.'s work was about to dry up.

On top of everything, Kody had quit Asbury College, a religious school near Lexington, after his freshman year and was back home. He had enrolled at the same time Sue started at Eastern Kentucky. Kody had told everyone that he was desperately ready to leave Booneville, but the extent of his rebellion was refusing to come home on weekends. He wanted to become a preacher and was planning to get a degree in theology. Then, during a cross-country meet, he blew out a knee and lost his scholarship. When school ended, he left with a girl he was sure God wanted him to marry. The relationship turned bad after two months, and he returned home. When Kody came back, what Sue saw was her 19-year-old son looking gaunt and baggy-eyed, fresh from a place where no one had cared for him.

For a time, Kody worked with J.C. to save money and maybe go back to college. When the pastor at his Methodist church asked if Kody would be the music leader, though, he decided that God was calling him to stay in Owsley County. He spent all the money he saved on music equipment and a van. Sue was happy to have him home. "College wasn't for Kody," she'd say. He would find his way, she was sure. Still, he was having as much trouble holding a job as J.C. once had. J.C.'s mom likes to say Kody was J.C. made over, with a bit of his temper but without his dark skin. Kody had never quite fit in Owsley County—he was quiet and artistic and liked to spend his free time in church and practice the guitar. "He always was kind of nerdy," Sue says. He straightened his dark hair every morning and wore it spiked or swooped down over his eyes. His favorite shoes were a pair of Converse with a Batman design. In college, he'd made friends with other musicians, and when he was back in Booneville he started to play in Christian rock bands and sell comic fan art online.

Ciara entered high school the year Kody came back home. She was learning to drive and wanting money for gas and

clothes. She was beginning to realize her parents couldn't always give money because they didn't have it to give. Ciara's friends were all high-achieving, academic-team, straight-A students, and Ciara started to shine in 4-H contests and on the occasional morning newscast she helped produce for one of her classes. Ciara liked being a star. Bubbly and outgoing, she decided a career as a news anchor would keep her at the center of attention, and she wanted to study broadcasting in college. Ciara was the opposite of what Sue had been as a teenager. Sue teased Ciara and called her their little diva, but she was also protective. Sue knew how the pretty girl in school could be the focus of the wrong kind of attention. Plus, Sue knew that looks faded. She didn't want Ciara to go into the cutthroat world of broadcast, where she would have to lose her accent and live far from her family. Still, Sue saw that Ciara's way of helping the family was to promise that she would win every scholarship she could, finish college, and have a successful career. What Kody heard when Ciara said this was "I'm not going to be like Kody."



Chris Wilson

Sue had always been what she called a dweller, someone who fretted over things. When her mind got hold of a worry, she couldn't let it go. But she says her real worries didn't start until she became a mother. She met J.C. when she was only 20, and they both liked to party. She would spend a lot of time with people who did things they shouldn't have. She'd ridden in cars with people who liked to drink or get high. Being pregnant, being responsible for someone else, made Sue deeply regret her youth. It hung over her like a penance.

She had been dragged as a child to a Pentecostal church on the few occasions Ruby had decided Puddin needed some religion, but she had never been deeply religious. Then, when Kody was two, Sue watched the *700 Club* on TV and heard a born-again Christian testify that being saved had lifted all his burdens, and Sue thought, "I would like that, too." She knelt on the crooked linoleum floor Kody had learned to toddle on and recited the sinner's prayer. Sue's religion was personal, guided by her own interpretation of her relationship with God. She didn't understand denominations—she felt like people were always trying to put God in a box—and for many years she and the kids attended a small nondenominational church far out in the county. It was Kody who inspired them to go to the United Methodist Church in town. The pastor was his track coach, and the church had a popular youth-group service on Wednesday nights that he wanted to join.

Becoming a Christian didn't relieve Sue's problems like she thought it would. She was prone to panic attacks, frozen by overwhelming dread. During the attacks, she told Kody, she felt like she was alone in the world, screaming, without anyone to hear her. Other times, it was like she was pressed into a dark, tight space, held down by a heavy weight. The attacks usually hit when she was by herself, and she'd call J.C., who would stop what he was doing and talk to her until she was calm again.

The attacks became less frequent as she got older, but not because her problems left her. Turning them over still kept her up at night, and most of the time her problems were her bills. Sue liked to say that she didn't want fancy things. Her family had what they needed, and that's all she cared about. While Sue had gotten saved after Kody's birth, J.C. had gotten a Suzuki GS750 motorcycle. Sue always saw it as a childish luxury, a money suck. Sue wanted J.C. to care about paying the bills as much as she did. She'd yell at him to grow up, but J.C. knew what it meant to grow up—it meant to lose your sense of humor, and he wasn't interested. He liked to joke that he didn't need to be born again because he was born a Christian the first time.

Kody remembers his parents fighting over money throughout his childhood. He was close to both of them, but even as a kid he felt that J.C. was the parent he had fun with, and Sue was the parent he spoke about serious things with. Sue was in charge of the bills, the food, and, increasingly, everything else—discipline, getting to places on time, going to church. Kody would pray that his father would get saved. Like Sue, he was zealous. If J.C. became a Christian, Kody thought, he would take more responsibility. Then his parents would talk to each other the way Christian couples should and stop fighting over bills.

By the winter of 2010–2011, Sue's last year in college, the Christians' financial worries began to seep into every conversation. J.C.'s work usually slowed down in the cold months anyway, but this winter was even worse. The weather and the economy were keeping families down to the most necessary repairs. J.C.'s biggest jobs had always been hooking new mobile homes up to electricity. He could make as much as \$600 a hookup. But almost no one was buying a new mobile home—that's how the housing crisis came to Owsley County.

Like most of the families they knew, the Christians had become masters at rotating their payments.

Like most of the families they knew, the Christians had become masters at rotating their payments. They could skip a few months of paying on time before their water or electricity would be shut off, but Sue didn't like to be late on bills that people in town could know about. It was better to miss the unnecessary amenities they'd gotten used to in the good years—like their satellite TV. J.C. had to drop his favorite channel, which showed Westerns nonstop. Sue teased him that Westerns were all he liked to watch or read. "How many home-on-the-range things can you read about?" she asked. "They do the same thing every day."

Other things were harder to get rid of. All four family members had gotten cell phones, and it cost them more to cancel their plans than it did to keep paying them for the rest of the contract. J.C. played a game on Xbox called *Black Ops* and had signed up for an online gaming service that withdrew from their bank account automatically. It often overdrew their account, costing them fees. Their water bill went up. The electric company started adding a surcharge, and it cost nearly \$400 a month to heat their trailer in the winter. Sue was driving a rickety Chevy Lumina to school every day, and she knew it wouldn't last long. The grants from the program that helped her pay for school had fallen short, and she'd had to spend more for textbooks. Most years, Sue tried to take care of property taxes by December because she'd get a \$100 discount. The Christians had missed that date, and it looked to Sue like they might be late for the final deadline in April, which would mean they'd have to pay even more money. The real penalty, as far as Sue was concerned, was that their names would be listed in the paper. They got the payment in just before it was due.

School was always a means to an end for Sue, but when her last semester started, it started to feel like a luxury. J.C. was working too little and playing *Black Ops* too much. She talked about quitting and going back to data entry. It was J.C.

who didn't want her to. J.C. was the one who went on about how employers always mistreated their workers, but even Sue had to admit that sitting and typing for 12 hours had started to cause her aches and pains. She told J.C. she'd stick it out.

When Owsley County's leaders, official and unofficial, talk about what Owsley County needs, they identify different problems all with the same urgency. For the schools superintendent, Tim Bobrowski, it's essential that the high school prepare students for college, which is difficult to do when you can't recruit physics or chemistry teachers. Molly Turner, who runs the Owsley County Action Team, wants a new highway that will make it easier for folks to live in the county but work outside it. Molly's brother, former county executive Cale Turner, argues that the county needs housing—real, solid houses, ones with foundations. Tim's brother, Nelson, who runs the bank, thinks the town should have more entertainment, like the golf course he helped build, to lure college graduates. (Others in town said that Nelson just likes to golf.) Jamie Brunk, the Methodist minister, believes the town needs a drug-recovery program to halt the rampant use of prescription painkillers. All of them want more young people to stay or, to be more precise, they want more young people to go to college and then come home. They like to say Owsley County needs more energy, and it needs a critical mass of young people to create it.

With that in mind, they ought to have thrown Kody a parade when he decided to stay and take over a business in Booneville. Late in the winter of 2011, the couple who owned a T-shirt printing business in town came to Kody and J.C. and offered to sell it. Kody had worked for them briefly as a graphic artist. They had tried to sell before, but they always wanted too much money. Now they were willing to go down to \$30,000, and that seemed like something Kody could do. Kody wanted a job for J.C. where he could be less physical. He'd already seen how his grandfather suffered from a lifetime of hard labor. Looking at his dad's arthritic hands, which J.C. plunged into hot wax every night to ease the pain, Kody thought he could help by going into business with J.C. When they went into the only bank in Booneville to see about a loan, the officer asked, "Where's Sue at?" Even when they tried to run things, Kody and J.C. couldn't escape the notion that Sue was in charge.

Kody renamed the business Robots in Disguise (he's a *Transformers* fan). He made sure the store could be found on Google Maps and opened Facebook and Twitter accounts. But problems cropped up right away. Another couple had opened a T-shirt-printing business on the square. Booneville was going to have a hard enough time supporting one T-shirt-printing store, but two?



Chris Wilson

Sue didn't have a job after she graduated that spring and also began working at the shop. Kody needed the free labor, but Sue was good at driving him crazy. Sue says that she doesn't ask anyone to work harder than she worked, and Kody says that's the problem. Sue needs for everything to be perfect. Kody wanted her to understand that, sometimes, you did the best you could do in the time you had. For Kody, that meant occasionally cutting corners in ways that he didn't think people would notice. When Kody had worked for the previous owners, the Owsley County Action Team ordered signs for their drug-and-alcohol-free party after prom. Some signs came in red and white instead of the ordered maroon and white—the high school's colors. The party organizers said Kody's response was "I thought you might want a little bit of variety." It would have been better, they said, if he had just admitted that he ran out of maroon paint.

The biggest problem was that charging people money vexed Kody. He often arrived at a price that factored in the cost of the goods but not much else. When J.C. had to drive an hour to Richmond to pick up a blanket for a last-minute order, Kody didn't take into account the price of gas. More disconcerting, Kody often didn't charge for the time he spent designing the logos and getting them ready for screen-printing. His time, he says, is invaluable. When he thinks about pricing, he's guided by one thing: Would he pay that much? "I don't see it as I need to make one huge lump sum in a sitting," he says. "I see it as if I charge them this amount, they'll eventually come back and order more." Kody didn't always understand that a business is supposed to make a profit. Its first year, the shop covered all its expenses, but Kody himself only made \$600 and J.C. \$877. With three working adults, the family's income for 2011 was a combined \$21,000, right on the poverty line.

In November, six months after she graduated, Sue finally landed a job. She had looked at every middle school within an hour's drive of her home but had found nothing. She had resigned herself to working at Kody's shop until the beginning of the next school year when she heard that Berea College was running a federal initiative called Promise Neighborhoods. With adjacent Jackson and Clay counties, Owsley was one of the few rural areas to receive a grant. Based on the Harlem Children's Zone, the program hired counselors to work with children from cradle to high school and prepare them for college. Sue was hired to help middle school students. Armed with the

learning-styles test, she would provide one-on-one counseling to struggling students.

Restless and on a whim, Kody announced that he wanted to drive to New York to watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Almost at the last moment, Sue, J.C., and Ciara, in a celebratory mood, decided to go with him. The Christians didn't tell anyone, because they didn't want the town to know that their house would be empty for a few days. They found a cheap hotel in New Jersey and drove the 12 hours in a straight shot.

They hadn't known it would cost \$12 in tolls just to get into New York City or \$40 for parking. They couldn't really see the parade from their crowded spot along Broadway, except Ciara, who perched on top of a postal box. She held a two-year-old from South Carolina in her lap. They were cold and miserable. They got lost and turned around in traffic and yelled at by a lady police officer they asked for help. The next day, they went to see the Empire State Building, but it cost \$23 to go to the top, so they passed. They decided to go to the Statue of Liberty but were, again, put off by the cost. Sue skipped lunch—she said she wasn't hungry—and the rest followed her lead and skipped lunch, too. Kody said that they wouldn't have wanted to be shocked by the check anyway. During the few days they spent in New York, they often didn't eat until 11 at night, when they got back to the New Jersey hotel and picked up food from a nearby Subway. Their first advice to others when they got back to Booneville was "Don't go—stay home and watch it on TV."

By the winter, the Christians had settled into a routine. Sue and Ciara went to school around 7:30 in the morning, J.C. and Kody went to the shop, and they all gathered there late in the afternoon. Sue ran the embroidery machine. After a while, customers started bringing her dresses to hem, broken zippers to fix, and other things to sew. It wasn't really what the shop was supposed to do, but Sue would still do it—she brought her sewing machine into the shop's office and was often perched there, at night, tired. When J.C. and the kids got hungry, they still turned to Sue to ask about dinner. There was a time when she would have rushed home to make chicken and dumplings or beans. She used to never let her kids eat hot dogs or pizza. But Sue was letting go of some of those things she used to have so much control over.

There were other things to worry about, anyway. Sue thought Kody and J.C. spent too much time sitting at the shop, hoping new customers came in. She had gotten into the habit of drawing charts to show J.C. and Kody their progress. She knew the test would be not whether the shop's revenues could cover its expenses but whether the business was growing year over year. Their loan lasted for ten, but if the shop wasn't doing well after two years, they might need to think of a different way to cover that loan than working, as a whole family, on a shop that couldn't make money.



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It also bothered Sue that Ciara was so dead set on majoring in broadcasting. Broadcasting would take Ciara far away. Ciara was as ready to leave as Kody had been. By early 2012, she'd settled on Morehead State University, but Sue didn't like Morehead—it was liberal and the kind of place where Ciara would forget who she was—so she worked on Ciara to change her mind. As Ciara moved toward graduation, she decided to go to the University of the Cumberlands, a Christian school near the Tennessee border. She also decided that she'd become a 4-H agent. Ciara had always loved 4-H. Sue liked that, as long as it was what she really wanted to do, because it meant Ciara might work close to home after college.

Sue wasn't so sure about this new job, either. Many days, she had to spend more time doing paperwork to show she was working than actually doing the work with the kids. Worse, Berea officials were butting heads with local school administrators. Sue's work overlapped, her supervisors were starting to see, with an older grant program called Gear Up, which also aimed to get students ready for college. After a few months on the job, everyone started to argue over Sue's head about what her job should be, and they decided that for the following school year, Sue would be in charge of parent outreach for every student in the school system, from Head Start to high school. It was a daunting prospect. Sue had been listening ever since Kody and Ciara were born to how teachers talk, and she knew they talked their own language—a language that it took Sue four years of college to decipher. "No wonder parents are scared of y'all," she thought. "They probably think you'll make them feel dumb if they come. Chances are, you probably will. Not that you mean to." That was the bridge Sue was going to have to build, and she wasn't sure she could do it.

This was also the first salary job Sue had, and it made her nervous. She was used to her pay being tied to results. With this job she never knew, on any given day, whether she was doing enough work to merit her salary, which for 2012 would be \$30,000. It was enough, more than enough, Sue knew, to pay the bills. But it wasn't enough to calm her worries. Berea had assured everybody that the grant would last five years. Sue, though, had heard that before.

This article has been amended to better describe Kody's work at the t-shirt printing shop. It has also been corrected to more accurately describe Sue's living situation during her first marriage.

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