

## **Transcript of the Ninety-Seven Podcast** *S1 E1 — This is the Ninety-Seven*

[0:00] *[Music plays from Lucious Spiller]*

[0:28] *[Background music fades in]*

[0:58] *[Zack starts speaking]*

**Zack:** Welcome to the Ninety-Seven, where we believe rural America is the next place to pioneer. In each episode, we will highlight the challenges and opportunities that rural America is experiencing.

I'm Zack Mannheimer and I'm the Principal at Alchemy Community Transformations. We work with small towns around the country helping them revitalize their communities as they get ready to welcome the next generation of [the] workforce. I'm coming to you from my basement in Iowa City, where we will be recording this and many other podcasts until we can get out of here and get to our studios. We've got loads of great stories that never escape the six blocks of these downtowns, but we are beginning by reporting on how rural is responding, adapting, and hopefully thriving through the COVID-19 pandemic.

There's been a migration shift in America for the past 60 years. The coasts of our country have been over-saturated for decades, giving way to second cities — Minneapolis, Kansas City, Nashville, Austin, and Denver. Today those cities are over-saturated, and we are now in the rise of the third city — places like Des Moines, Boise, Albuquerque, Little Rock, Birmingham, Madison, and Raleigh. We used to think these cities would be reaching saturation point sometime around 2030 to 2035, but this virus has sped everything up — even though everything feels like it's been slowed down. What will it look like when cities empty out? When the distance between places is no longer measured by miles, but by download speeds?

A new Harris poll came out recently with the shocking news — 39% of urban dwellers are actively looking at real estate outside metro centers. And of that group, 18 to 34-year-olds are the ones most likely to make this change.

Now that remote working has been normalized in lightning speed, how many people will choose to work from wherever, if it's more safe and affordable? Even before the coronavirus, census data showed that urban growth was stagnating. There is a major opportunity here for rural America

— if they are ready for it. We will be exploring the many ways we all can respond, but it starts with understanding the seriousness of this plague.

How will rural rebound if manufacturing and food processing — a staple of many rural economies — collapses? How could rural get the word out about what they have to offer?

Rural America is the next place to pioneer, in some cases, by default. We will go on to share hundreds of stories about why we believe that is true, but I loathe that it took a pandemic to underscore how ninety-seven percent of the country is classified as rural, and yet 80% of our population lives in urban centers, at least as of today.

To the entrepreneurs and creatives listening, think about your next move. To truly disrupt — to make a positive change, where should you be? And to our rural communities, are you ready for this migration? Are you actively recruiting? Are you working to rebuild infrastructure, housing, and amenities? Because the people are coming, and they need you to be ready.

This is the Ninety-Seven.

[3:53] *[Background music fades out]*

[4:03] *[Start of interview with Timothy Griffin]*

**Tim:** About 10 years ago, my husband retired from Bank of America and we decided we were going to move to rural America and live. So we moved down here about 10 years ago, and I kind of got involved in some small things, and I come from a very open, welcoming, affirmative community, so I come down here 100 mph and that's not the way things work in a small rural town, I found out real quick.

**Zack:** This is my friend, Mr. Timothy Griffin, speaking to us from Pageland, South Carolina. Population: 2,668.

**Tim:** It took me a while to adjust and learn how the politics work and learn how things happen in a small rural town. About a couple of years ago, I really found my niche with being president of the chamber and bringing my marketing skills and small-town ideas, and it's working now, but those first few years were a little rough.

**Zack:** Tim is the president of the Pageland Chamber of Commerce and I knew he would be the perfect person for this episode when I kept seeing his daily COVID-19 Facebook live sessions about how to stay safe, where you can get help, and how to get a mask. He even started making them himself at home.

Tim has a way of shining a positive light on a negative situation. Pageland was growing, but then this virus hit, but Tim saw as an opportunity to expose what was missing for his downtown businesses and how to fix it.

**Tim:** Here's the thing, two years ago is when we really started pushing this, and we were riding high, we were getting the national attention, we were you know, having businesses contact us about moving in and then the virus hits, and so I think while everything has flatlined right now, I think we learned our weakness, our strength and once this is over that we have to immediately resume where we were and get right back on the horse.

One of the things that we learned real quickly with the COVID-19 and the stores closing was things that we lacked. We lacked online marketing and online stores for most of our retail. In fact, not a single retailer in Pageland had an online store. So, when I found this out, I kind of put the word out through my chamber members and industries that this was something that we needed. Now our chamber is a very low income bringing in organization; our funds are very limited and we had one of our business leaders here in town Andrew Curry, who owns Cross Country Adjusting, who has had a couple really good years and his business is booming, said: "I will take care of this." So, he generously donated \$10,000 for us to hire someone to set up and manage online stores for all of our retailers. While I think this is kind of good during the COVID-19, I actually think in the future it's going to help our stores and our retailers be more marketable in the future.

**Zack:** That \$10,000 gift is setting up fifteen downtown stores to get online and keep revenue coming in during the shutdown. He also wants to keep raising funds to market the rest of the community.

**Tim:** And then we're going to invest a lot of money in marketing. I think to the fact that we are the main drive from Charlotte and many other cities to the beach, I think we need to utilize the billboards and some kind of marketing on that bypass to bring the people down to the unique shops of Pageland. I think we need to tighten up, you know, what our message is going to be.

**Zack:** 'Shop Online' 'Shop Antique' are a few of the slogans being tossed around but these are not unique to Pageland. How can Pageland truly create that unique voice? Perhaps it's all about geography.

**Tim:** I don't know if we're necessarily unique in what we're going to do with our downtown as much as we are ahead of the curve and we're ready to roll programs out.

You know, a lot of towns have started with the unique and the art and the antiques, but they may not be as strategically located as Pageland, South Carolina. You know, we have such a crossroads of people who travel through our town, that I just think that we are going to be able to market 'location, location, location.' I always say that Pageland is unique, but we're not, in a way. There are hundreds of small little towns just like ours. I just

don't think that they have utilized social media or the resources to get the word out.

**Zack:** As I alluded to, Tim is a master of social media. Sometimes he even sings on his grand piano to get the word out, and I mean on the piano. He's also a leading voice of rural America and calls people out when they're not keeping rural's best interest at heart.

**Tim:** For example, our governor put together a team of people called South Carolina Accelerate — 29 people from around the state — to help with guiding the reopening of South Carolina. I was nominated to be on that to represent rural America and the struggles that rural America is having and I was not placed on the committee. In fact, not a single rural chamber or representation is on that. They're only taking representation and listening to the large towns, and I find that disturbing that rural America is getting hit hard. Our kids don't have the broadband and the laptops and the tablets to do their school work. We are unique in our retail and mom and pop businesses and yet the people in Columbia really don't want to hear about that.

**Zack:** One of the major weaknesses COVID-19 has exposed in rural communities is a lack of broadband speeds. If these communities are to attract millennials or any professionals from urban centers, high-speed broadband is a must. In Pageland, students are driving to parking lots where there is a school bus loaded with hot spots in order to get their homework done — sitting in their cars.

**Tim:** I was talking to Brian Broughton, CEO and president of Lynches River, and I told him I said while this pandemic is going on, I said I need to see that broadband going at 400 miles an hour getting it installed because I think, I think telecommuting is going to be... businesses learned through this that "Oh my God, we do not have to be paying millions of dollars for a building in downtown Charlotte. Everybody can work from their den."

But you know, we've got to have that broadband down here and being rural, we don't.

We're having to use Wi-Fi buses for our kids to do their homework. We have to have Wi-Fi buses — buses that have Wi-Fi installed on them and they go to the schools and then the kids' parents can pull up their cars into the parking lot and access the Wi-Fi because most of their homes don't have it. These kids were not getting their homework turned in.

Do you know how we were doing it here in Pageland, or in Chesterfield County? The teachers would go to work on Tuesday, they would put together work packets, put them in Manila envelopes, and set them outside the school, and the kids would come to drop off their homework and pick up another work packet and take it home and then every week they bring it and drop off their homework and pick up another packet for the next week because we cannot do Internet school, we just can't. We are so rural, and you know, [pause] the poverty level on some of our homes they just don't

have the capability right now, and you know it's very sad to see our kids are probably going to get the worst year of education we've ever had here in Chesterfield County.

The teachers are trying everything they can, but if you don't have broadband and the kids cannot access their schoolwork online it's a horrible situation.

**Zack:** Getting fiber to the home can be expensive, but there are programs at a federal and sometimes state level to cover these costs. The federal ReConnect program is one example. It has over \$500 million available, but it takes time and know-how to apply. Still, this problem has led to some positive developments in Pageland, such as their own local version of Grubhub.

**Tim:** So, we had a young man that was laid off from his job, not here in Pageland, but from [the] COVID-19 situation and he said, "You know what, I want to start a delivery service." So I met with him and spoke with him, and in less than 36 hours from his layoff, he had gotten his business license, gotten his car signs, contacted all the local restaurants and is now running full-on with his delivery service, picking up anything from the pharmacy, he has got contracts with all the restaurants delivering food. He's our own mini Grubhub. But he has really [sic] took this and he's now an entrepreneur and owns his own company.

**Zack:** Pageland has always had an entrepreneurial spirit and Tim has harnessed that energy to help them move through this pandemic.

**Tim:** Most of our businesses have been passed down generation to generation, and we don't have a lot of large corporations. We have Conbraco Industries, which is the largest, and of course Walmart, but the rest of our businesses are all very family-owned, and the great thing about that is they take care. Since they live here and they grew up here, they know the struggles for their employees.

**Zack:** That entrepreneurial spirit is what turned Tim's home-based mask sewing circle into a mass-produced local product by a T-shirt company. This has also had the added benefit of keeping their employees working and getting paid.

**Tim:** We have a local company here that's owned by LaVonna Rivers, and she has always done silk screening and T-shirts and business cards, but when this happened and a lot of our large industries needed quantities of masks that were 300, 400, 500 — the sewing circle couldn't do that, so she set up an assembly line and production company, moved all of her T-shirt and business card stuff out of the way, and they are mass producing masks and it's been able to keep her employees and her business running.

**Zack:** Everything boils down to talent attraction. Pageland, like all small communities, will need to create jobs to keep going. This was true before COVID-19 and is now even more vital. The problem is that the old way of

economic development and offering financial incentives to attract businesses to create jobs no longer works in rural. It doesn't matter how much money you offer a company if their employees don't want to live there. So, Tim's job is also about beautifying downtown and creating the amenities that a modern workforce demands.

**Tim:** I'm also on the Board of Directors for the Chesterfield County Economic Development Board and that really focuses on the large industries. You know, multimillion-dollar industries, but one of the things that we have learned that over a few years — I think it's one of the most overlooked things in economic development — is when an industry comes to your town to do their research, and they drive through the town and they see 50% of your downtown gutted, boarded up, and shell buildings, that's not a place that they feel that they're going to be able to attract millennials and that new workforce. So, what I'm focusing on for our town is to create a fun, vibrant downtown that when our Economic Development Director, Kim Burch, goes out to these industries and starts putting our bids in, she can say, "...and your workers will love our downtown. Here's a great pizza place, here's a great coffee shop, here's a movie house." We've got things to attract and keep the workforce. I think that's probably one of the most overlooked aspects of recruiting industries that I have seen.

**Zack:** Tim and his husband Neil moved to Pageland several years ago from the big city of Charlotte, and as he said, it wasn't an easy transition. Pageland is Neil's hometown and he had made a name for himself in Charlotte as an executive at Bank of America, but Tim was new and as you have come to learn, he isn't afraid to speak his mind. Early on, there were some local clashes, but Tim was determined to make a good life for himself in his seven Yorkies and also to contribute to the community. He found his way, in his words, "to be needed year-round." This is evident in his leadership of the chamber where, by the way, he does not receive a salary. And he has also used his skills to take over the Miss Pageland Beauty Pageant, the oldest beauty pageant in America — older than even Miss America. You can read about Tim's work with the pageant on our website and the great Miss Pearl, who at 105-years-young and still living today, became the second-ever Miss Pageland back in 1931.

Tim and Neil were the first same-sex couple to be married in the state of South Carolina, and true to his nature of making a scene in a meaningful way, they held their wedding in Pageland's park gazebo for all to see.

**Tim:** They just kind of shut you out, and I think my favorite — I once asked — I said, "What is the problem?" Well, besides my mouth because if I think it, I say it. I was told that "Here in the South we like our homosexuals like we like our fur coats, we like them to stay in the closet and only brought out when we need them." I took that to heart and I decided that I just need to make myself needed year-round.

So, we're doing good I think we still have a long ways to go, but I make sure that we're available if there's ever an issue with a gay or lesbian

situation at our local high schools, I make sure that were available for gay youth to have a safe place to talk.

So, you know, and as more gay couples retire, I think rural America is very on the top of their list of places to retire. We have other friends who are looking in this area. I think it's quiet. You know there comes a time when you hit urban and big town burnout and I just think that you know, I don't know if it's just a gays issue or if it's anybody. I just think that people are looking for a quieter return to small-town values.

**Zack:** Urban burnout is so relevant today as COVID-19 shows no signs of receding. Could Pageland and other rural communities market themselves as a safer and more affordable alternative to urban? The great thing is that rural communities don't have to fight this battle on their own. They can learn from each other. Tim certainly won't be shy to share his knowledge and I know he's willing to help out however he can.

[19:22] *[Background music fades in as Tim starts talking]*

**Tim:** I want people all over the United States to know that you're not alone; you're not the only small town out there, and I've spoken at many conventions and speaking engagements, and I tell everybody to get out and realize that your businesses are your heartbeat and that's what's going to make your small town. But you're gonna have to work together, you're gonna have to all row the boat in the same way, and just love one another and learn to truly be each other's neighbor. At the end of the day, that really is, it may sound simple, but it really is the key to our success.

[20:05] *[End of interview with Timothy Griffin. Background music continues]*

[20:15] *[Lucious Spiller plays his music]*

[20:51] *[End of Lucious Spiller music, background music fades in]*

**Zack:** Thank you, Mr. Timothy. We hope you and everybody in Pageland stays safe and healthy.

At the top of this episode, and just now, you heard my friend Lucious Spiller. We recorded this at Lucious' house in Clarksdale Mississippi. Population 15,304. We recorded over zoom (hence the crackling rural Internet connection) as he waited for his plumber to arrive. I met Lucious a few years ago at one of my favorite Juke joints, Red's, where he plays weekly sets and how he makes his living. Now, with COVID-19 taking over and all the joints closed, I wanted to check in to see how he was coping in his new normal.



[20:40] *[Start of interview with Lucious Spiller]*

**Zack:** How has this entire pandemic affected your lifestyle?

**Lucious:** It totally has turned it upside down 'cause it's my only way I make my income — playing music.

**Zack:** Right. How many gigs do you normally do a week when things are normal?

**Lucious:** At least three or four, you know, at least three or four.

**Zack:** And have you been able to supplement a little bit with doing Facebook Live? Like what are you doing to make it through this time?

**Lucious:** Yeah, I guess Facebook Live that's the only way I've been able to —

[22:21] *[Plumber speaks in background]*

**Lucious:** Yeah, Facebook Live has been pretty much...

[22:23] *[Inaudible. Lucious speaks to plumber in background]*

**Lucious:** It's been kind of rough man; I'm so used to playing. I'm not used to sitting at home. It's been hard, it's been really, really, really hard, but we'll make it through.

[22:58] *[End of interview with Lucious Spiller. He plays guitar. Background music fades in]*

**Zack:** We're now going to hear from my colleague Alex Holland. Alex has been with the Alchemy team [for] almost three years now. She likes to label herself a recovering government employee as she worked with the federal government for several years before joining us, and she just has a fantastic knack for understanding where funding is available for communities, in general, and also where the funding is available because of the stimulus due to COVID-19.

She has spent the better part of a month deep in her bunker in D.C. creating an online resource that's free to use on our website, that gives information for any individual, small business, or community to figure out how they can get access to funding to rebuild infrastructure, workforce development, do planning work, housing, whatever it is. So, let's hear from Alex.



[24:10] [Start of interview with Alex Holland]

**Zack:** Alex how are you

**Alex H.:** I'm good how are you

**Zack:** I am also good. I heard that you are questioning whether or not you need a mask if you're going to go out running.

**Alex H.:** There are a lot of conflicting views on this, so yes, I need some advice from real runners unlike myself.

**Zack:** That's 'cause you live in a big city. Since you are in a big city, in our nation's capital, tell me about what you were doing before you joined Alchemy. You had a pretty interesting job.

**Alex H.:** Yeah, so I got my start in D.C. working for the Delta Regional Authority, and DRA is an economic development agency that supports communities all across the Mississippi River Delta region, so that's a pretty big region. You've got eight states, 252 counties and parishes, and essentially the agency was created to invest in public infrastructure, transportation improvements, workforce development, and entrepreneurship to support rural communities, and also underserved areas that might not be able to leverage funds otherwise from the federal government.

**Zack:** Yeah, you have a really unique talent to be a policy wonk and understand what the federal government is talking about, and then translate it in layman terms over to somebody like myself, who was a theater major and has absolutely no idea how to read those things, so that is invaluable. You've taken this skill — and I remember this was a few weeks ago we were all sitting around talking about whether or not what we were going to do because of COVID[-19] and how we're going to help all the communities that we're working with — we were talking about how we were going to help them get access to all the funds [inaudible] system and still is, and you took it upon yourself to build out an entire website because you're crazy ambitious. Tell me about why you decided to do that.

**Alex H.:** Well, with all of the information that's available, and even all of the federal programs that are available to communities urban and rural across the country, I didn't feel like there was a comprehensive resource for rural communities specifically. And as someone who has lived in a rural community, I can't even imagine how frustrating that is to not only know that your taxpayer dollars are going into supporting the programs that should be available to you, but you now don't know how to access those dollars, and it's a full-time job to go through all of these programs and to figure out how you might be able to use them to better your community.

And so, we created a website, and that website includes a search function for federal resources for rural communities, and what we have done is we've taken it to where you can search by topic, you can search by the type

of applicant — so everything from an individual to a small business to a nonprofit or state and local government — we also have the funding that is available. Is it a grant? Is it a loan? Does the program provide both grant and loan combinations? And then the biggest piece of information that you really can't find anywhere else is, does this have a match requirement or does it not have a match requirement? Because especially for the situation we're in right now, in order to apply for a grant that takes a lot of work already, but then if you have to have a match on top of it — dollars that you have to put into the program yourself. Money is hard to come by right now, so I thought that that was a really important feature of our website. So that's what we put together for communities.

**Zack:** And you know, this goes back to what we say at Alchemy all the time when we talk to communities — that really, money is never the problem, money is not the problem for communities to do this work. Getting the money can be a problem, but the money is out there, there [are] trillions of dollars, especially right now with the stimulus that's happening. There's so much money available. Now, there's a lot of competition for those dollars, but the money is definitely out there and folks and communities can use this site to figure out how they can, what programs that they qualify for, first of all — whether they're an individual, a small business, or community — how they can go about accessing the dollars, where all the information is, they can talk to their neighboring communities. All the information is at this site and that site is: [alchemycommunities.com/COVID-19](https://alchemycommunities.com/COVID-19). So please go to the website, use it as you will. There is a survey, if you want to fill it out, [it] helps give us valuable information [about] what you're looking for and helps us improve the site. We do update it every week, so it is very relevant, and we hope to see you there.

[29:19] [End of interview with Alex Holland. Background music fades in]

**Zack:** Thanks to Mr. Timothy Griffin in Pageland, SC; Lucious Spiller in beautiful Clarksdale Mississippi; and my colleague Alex Holland in Washington D.C. We hope you all are staying safe and staying well. Our original music was composed by Mike Hogan. This podcast was co-produced with our partner, Just Place, and our Executive Producer, Joe Crimmings.

To learn more about Alchemy please visit [alchemycommunities.com](https://alchemycommunities.com). [To view] photos of our guests and long-form stories on our communities, visit [ninetysevenpodcast.com](https://ninetysevenpodcast.com).

This has been the Ninety-Seven.

[30:12] [Background music fades out and Lucious Spiller plays]