

Episode 28: Crushing Rural Stereotypes with Kendra Bozarth | Transcript

[Music]

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Welcome to Hidden Truths, the podcast where we examine the root causes of economic and racial inequality. I'm Jhumpa Bhattacharya, and I'm super excited to be joined by our guest, Kendra Bozarth.

Kendra is the Director of Communications for the Roosevelt Institute, where she sets the organization's editorial strategy and oversees the publication's process for all of its work, ranging from white papers and blog posts to social media content and more. Prior to joining Roosevelt, Kendra worked on state-level budget and tax policy campaigns in Kansas as a member of the State Priorities Partnership with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. She earned a bachelor's in English from the University of Kansas in her own state. Kendra is also the Communications Manager for the podcast *The Homecomers with Sarah Smarsh*, which shares untold stories of rural and working-class America through the voices of its residents and advocates. Kendra, thanks so much for joining me today.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Hi! Thank you so much for having me, I'm so happy to be here.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: So I'm super excited to talk rural today. We don't get a chance to do that, that much.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yes! Absolutely!

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And I feel like there's a lot of misconceptions about rural America that you are here to demystify.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah, let's do it.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I really want to hear your story. Where in Kansas did you grow up? Tell me a little bit about the town that helped produce the amazing force that is Kendra Bozarth.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah, absolutely. So, I'd say, technically I didn't grow up in Kansas in the way that people use that term. You know, it's my home, it's where I evolved into who I am, it's the place I'm heading to when I say I'm going home. But my mom was actually—who was a single mother—she was actually in the United States Air Force for 30 years so we moved about every two to three years.

And I moved to Kansas when I was freshly 18 to attend the University of Kansas, and I ended up staying for five more years. So it's the longest place I've ever dug in roots and now for almost half my life, it's what I call home. And it's really defined who I am.

I'd say my biggest connection to Kansas is that the state is really rooted in resiliency. I don't think a lot of people connect resiliency with Kansas. The state motto is actually "ad astra per aspera," which means, "through difficulty, through hardship, to the stars." And Kansas was pro-abolition throughout the 1800s and Lawrence, where I'm from, was really the state's antislavery stronghold during the Civil War. You should Google "bleeding Kansas."

So for many reasons, it's just about strength and resiliency, and I think there's a lot of Kansas—which is labeled a conservative state—that really is about equality and fighting for people. And, you know, that's who I am. I think Lawrence, Kansas, itself is a pretty progressive town. For me, it not only strengthened my own commitment to diversity and equality but actually living in Kansas, traveling through Kansas, really strengthened my understanding of both of those ideas.

And so, ultimately Kansas is seen as kind of this "red state" that is super regressive and everyone there thinks the same and acts the same. But in actuality, in Lawrence and far beyond, throughout the entire state, it's a really dynamic place with a lot of progressivism happening. And that's where I kind of became the progressive warrior woman that I am today.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I love it. So you brought this experience of living and being rooted in Kansas to the podcast that I mentioned, *The Homecomers*, right?

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yes.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And I'm kind of obsessed with it because it really is—it's phenomenal. And I think that it really does push the boundaries in our thinking and kind of what we think about when we think about rural America. Because I think for most folks, you know, when they think about rural America, they have a very specific picture, right?

KENDRA BOZARTH: Mm-hmm.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: So can you tell us a little bit about the podcast for our listeners that may be not already familiar with it? Tell us a little bit about what it's about and kind of what the goal is with that podcast.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah, absolutely. So Sarah Smarsh, you know, long-time journalist, writer, she's actually a second-generation Kansas farm girl. And as someone who is from rural, someone who loves podcasts, she set out starting in 2018 to kind of—she really just wanted to fill this void of shows that are by and for rural. That's just not really a thing that exists when it comes to podcasts. And she saw that gap and said, well, if someone else won't do it, I guess I'll do it myself.

I think the big—you know, you kind of talked about stereotypes and these ideas we have about rural, and a big is that you just can't make it there. And so *The Homecomers* ultimately like really aims through six I think very deep, very intimate conversations. It really aims to like, disrupt the stories we all tell ourselves about rural and working-class America while also showing you, you know, that resiliency I mentioned and progress that's happening in a really misunderstood place. And so, I think Sarah provides some understanding.

And for me, the way I look at it like people think rural is so unfamiliar, it's like this foreign thing. Like oh, flyover country. Oh, you know, there's just, you know, one store and no stoplights, and that's what rural is. But like, it's not really unfamiliar because the stories coming out of rural are super, super universal.

I mean, ultimately like the term "homecomers" comes from Wes Jackson. He coined the term; he's the founder of the Land Institute in Kansas. And so it's really about the story of the homecomers in general, but for Sarah, it's really about people who either return to or refuse to leave a place that society tells them they should get out of. Instead, they said, "No, I'm fighting for this place and for people and for community and for the Earth." And so I think you see that thread, that theme, throughout every single episode in such different ways but also in the same way, right?

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Definitely. And I think like what you're describing is really about essentially changing the narrative, right—

KENDRA BOZARTH: Oh, yeah.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —on kind of how Americas understand rural America.

Like what significance does our kind of concept of rural America have for economic policy that we have in states right now? Like you work at the Roosevelt Institute, I can see how this podcast like falls in line with a lot of the work that Roosevelt is trying to do in terms of changing the rules, right—

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yes, yeah.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —around economics in particular. So yeah, like how is that—how are the two kind of connected? I'd love for you to speak about that a little bit.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think, if I could, my title at Roosevelt would be “Director of Narrative Change” because that is just like what I think is, like, so crucial.

I mean, you all did, at the Insight Center, put out that great report on the power of narrative and like the whole thing had me screaming. But what has me screaming, right, is that we can't really—we have all these big ideas happening right now and really great debates moving throughout the country, but like policy change cannot be real and totally change the way we talk about policy and people, right? And so, you know, I say a lot my go-to mantra when it comes to public policy is, “race is not an issue, it's every issue.” And rural is the same thing.

And so, you know, narratives shape the way we all see the world and how we approach it. And as Sarah touches on, not only in *The Homecomers* but in a lot of her work, we've really reduced entire communities, entire regions to like these really kind of flawed, and honestly I feel, offensive like political headlines. And so in doing so, we're like blanketing over the real experiences of real people, you know?

Like when we paint Kansas, for me for example, when we paint Kansas with these broad strokes of red, we're literally erasing tons of people and now we can't provide them with real solutions. Because everyone's facing today's struggles in different ways, but we act and assume that they all want the same thing, in the same way.

And so, you know, getting back to economic policies, like when policymakers write economic rules and policy and build systems for a place that they actually don't understand, they're quite literally jeopardizing people's lives and their livelihoods and their well-being.

An example I like to use a lot is healthcare when I talk about rural because rural America is truly such an expansive place. And so, you know, we have these Medicare for all debates, we have these universal healthcare—we have all these debates going on. And so when we talk about access to healthcare without actually considering the fact that some people in

this country have to travel tens of miles to get to a hospital, then we're not really talking about achieving equitable access, right? When we talk about reforms to tackle corporate power - which we do a lot at the Roosevelt Institute, which you all do a lot in your work at Insight - if we're ignoring rural healthcare workers who are being decimated in the system, we're not actually reining in corporate power's might.

You know, I actually pulled a quote for this interview. Sarah wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed recently that, "The future of rural is intertwined with suburban and urban outcomes by way of food production, natural resources, the economy, political movements, and beyond." And so, like I mentioned earlier, everyone thinks the majority of people—about 80% of the country, 60% of the country—thinks that rural is so far removed from them. It's just not something they understand or even want to care about, when rural is part of all of us, just as much as urban is.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I love it, I mean, this idea—there's a lot of talk about, kind of, how all our states are connected. And I think that people think about that in terms of race and class but not necessarily, like, rural and urban. So that's a really beautiful quote. And just like, yes, we are connected, that we are kind of one society that is, you know, giving and taking from each other. And that how we do, we need to connect to the rural part of America, I think is a really important message, for sure.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Absolutely, yeah.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: The first episode of *The Homecomers* podcast is a conversation with political scientist Veronica Womack, right? And she talks about the Black Belt on which, you know, maybe unfamiliar to a lot of our listeners. Like what is a "Black Belt?"

I would really love it if you can give our listeners a quick overview on, kind of, what a Black Belt is. And I think there must've been intentionality to have that as a first episode for a podcast about rural America. So I'm just kind of curious as to why y'all decided to start with Veronica and talking about the Black Belt.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think even myself, I was pretty unfamiliar with what the Black Belt meant. You know, I'd obviously heard of it, but like what does that mean? What does it include? And so, you know, *The Homecomers* taught me many things, including the Black Belt.

So it's actually a region of the rural South. It stretches from Texas to Virginia. It's crescent-shaped, so it kind of does this, you know, like half-moon effect between those two. And its population is majority Black American and so it's actually a place that's kind of

considered America's third world. Like it's just poor and completely disregarded. But you listen to this first episode of *The Homecomers*, what you really get a feel of is like the richness that the Black Belt has to it.

From, you know, its name actually comes from the deep black soil that exists in the lands there, which is just rich and beautiful and just grows amazing crops and amazing agriculture. But also a lot of what Veronica Womack talks about is like the richness of the people and how they value the land and how they value each other.

And so when Sarah and I were working on the episode list for *The Homecomers*—you know, because she started this project in 2018 she had everything recorded by, you know, May of this year—so we had all the content and just figuring out like how we wanted to tell this whole story about homecomers. If I'm remembering correctly, I don't think there was like an explicit conversation about the Black Belt and Veronica Womack going, as a rural place, like going first? But I think there was like this implicit understanding between the two of us that a choice was this because, you know, Veronica Womack is a Black woman, who knows the real story about both Black America and rural America.

And, you know I won't speak for Sarah, but I personally believe that you know, Black people have been probably the most is disadvantaged by false narrative. They can really relate to what it means to have your story mistold. And so, you know, in this episode, in all of the episodes, and I'd even say in Sarah's work more broadly, she really gets out of the way of the storyteller and lets the subject reveal their truth. And so I think starting with the Black Belt and starting with Veronica Womack was the best way to crush a whole handful of stereotypes like right out of the gate.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I actually did not realize that the Black Belt name came from the soil. I totally thought it was because it was heavily populated by Black families, essentially right? So I learned something new.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah!

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Do you have a favorite episode of the podcast series? If not a favorite episode, maybe two or three key moments or some things that would stand out to you?

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah. I mean, beyond Sarah and probably our audio editor, Jesse Brenneman, I can't imagine anyone's listened to these episodes more than me, you know. As I was thinking through my communication strategy, I was playing them and pulling content. And when each one dropped each week, I re-listened to them again. I go back to,

like, I just want one little moment, one little nugget; I go back through like a minute of, you know, Kathleen Sebelius talking about Kansas. So I really fell in love with them over and over again in different ways every time, and so it's hard to pick a favorite.

I'd probably say, just for many reasons of my identity and just who I am as a person, I probably most identify and just feel seen by Dr. Womack's episode. I mean, the first time I listened to it, it's just like, "Well, I guess I'm quitting my job and moving to, you know, Alabama and like getting a farm." Like, I'm returning to my homeland and I'm like taking what's mine.

But then I think like moments-wise, I think like the episode four, which is with Brett Ramey—he is a member of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, he's the director of the Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program up in Washington—I think that episode really amplified my commitment to the fight for a climate solution. A Green New Deal is just, you know, one of the biggest, boldest ideas we have moving around. I'd like to say, you know, ignoring the ridiculous question of how do we pay for that, which a growing chorus of economists are showing that question carries no merit and we can, in fact, afford it, but also we don't really have a choice.

I'm not going to quote him but he says something about how we can't think about the health of the economy without thinking about the health of a creature like a frog. And, you know, that for me just really, I don't know, it made me feel like really rooted in the Earth, even though I was like sitting on my couch. But it's such a beautiful way to think about how the choices we all make, the policy choices we make, affect everything. And so like to me that speaks to, you know, we can't fight private power—or like rebalance it least—and fight for our future, if we ignore economic security and like worker well-being and only focus on the actual Earth and vice versa, right. And so that was beautiful.

And then I think another episode that really, really speaks to me and just, you know, elevates the "let's crush some stereotypes" mission is Elaine McMillion Sheldon, who was in episode two. She's from Appalachia. She's a documentarian who does a lot of work with addicts and recovering addicts. And she is all about, you know, just like Sarah, she's a storyteller and she really gets out of the way and lets people tell their own stories. But, you know, she really elevates the stigma around addiction and she just like made this point that just like punches me in the gut every time I think about it. But like, you know, society looks at an addict and they think, you know, what a weak person and Elaine's point is like, they should really look around and say, what a weak society we've built for this person, you know—

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah.

KENDRA BOZARTH: —we've really failed them in so many ways. And they're not a weak person, they're just doing what they can in a society that doesn't value them, that ignores

them, and that honestly like stigmatizes them and leaves them in a lonely place. It's like it's about isolation, right? And so she really is listing these stories about, you know, how do we rebuild those connections so that people who are trying to recover feel like they have a society to connect to.

They're all fantastic. I mean, I think you've listened to the whole thing. I think there's a part of every single episode that people can identify with or find some inspiration from.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: That's really interesting like what you said following up from like the first comments that you were making about like being tied to the land and just being like, you know, just sitting on your couch, feeling really rooted to the Earth; talking about the frog.

I think that that's really interesting because I think that there's an argument to be made that, you know, we lift up that kind of urban life and urban American as kind of the gold standard in a lot of ways I feel like. But we've become so disconnected from the Earth, right?

KENDRA BOZARTH: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And in some ways, or I think in every way, rural America is still in so many ways connected, right? Because there are still so many farmers—or like there's more connection to the land, like living off the land, being at one with the land. We have a lot to learn from that space—

KENDRA BOZARTH: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —and maybe that's the perspective we should be coming with more versus like this complete disconnection that we've created from the land, right?

KENDRA BOZARTH: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Like water is life; Earth is life. I think we've just completely divorced ourselves from that.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Absolutely.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Which is why we are where we are today.

KENDRA BOZARTH: Yeah. I mean, there's a beautiful scene in again, to lift Brett Ramey—and I'm probably a little biased because he went to Haskell University, which is also in Lawrence, Kansas—and so he talks a lot about the wetlands. And so, you know, I get to— if someone's like, "Where are you from?" And I'm like, "Lawrence, Kansas," and they're like, "Tell me about it." And I'm like, "Well, listen to episode four of *The Homecomers*," because he talks about it so much.

But, you know, that was very treasured land for Indigenous people and a few years ago, there was a huge battle across the city about building this highway through the wetlands to connect one end of the town to the other. And so I loved—he has this moment where he talks about how he was recently back out there and he—ultimately, I'd say corporate power won, convenience won, and the highway was built. But he goes out there and, you know, he says the wetlands are still here, you know. The frogs are still croaking, and the birds are still flying, and like you can still feel the spirit, especially for him of his own people.

And, you know, I love New York so much, but when I think about, like, my homecoming story and returning back to Kansas, I think about, you know, getting in my Jeep—and even though that highway's there, getting to drive through the wetlands and like feeling that connection. And it's just kind of like a unique juxtaposition again, of how we balance those things. And like what you just said, like the connection to the Earth. Like I'm driving in a car on this like man-made highway, but I still feel at one with everything that's around me.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: That is really beautiful. I think we are going to close there with that amazing statement.

Thank you so much again, Kendra, for sharing your story and your expertise with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us.

KENDRA BOZARTH: I appreciate you for so many things, and thank you for having me.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And thank you all for tuning in to this episode of Hidden Truths, the podcast of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.



You can find *The Homecomers with Sarah Smarsh* podcast on [iTunes](#) or [Spotify](#) and learn more about the project by visiting thehomecomers.org.

To learn more about Kendra and her work, visit rooseveltinstitute.org and follow Kendra on Twitter [@kendraboearth](#).

For more information about the Insight Center, visit insightcced.org. And if you like what you heard today, leave a review for Hidden Truths on [Apple podcasts](#), [Stitcher](#), [Spotify](#), or other platforms and help spread the word. Thanks, all.