

Hillbilly Elegy, How J.D Vance's Critically Acclaimed Work Helped Me Understand the People
and Issues of Importance in Georgia's Ninth Congressional District.

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Abstract

In the Winter and Spring of 2017-2018, I had the opportunity intern at Doug Collin's Ninth District Congressional office. During this time, I was required to read a book that related back to the work I was doing at my internship. I decided on the book *Hillbilly Elegy* written by JD Vance. The book taught many things about my internship, and in turn my internship helped me to better understand the book. JD writes about his childhood and the Appalachian people that surrounded him. The people very closely relate back to the constituents I was in contact with daily at my internship. The people of both JD's book and the ninth district, are going through some of the same issues and have the same thoughts about issues. The book taught me the necessities to deal with the rogue people, such as the office's constituents, and the way the people see certain issues. This paper addresses the situation I experienced in the congressman's office, the way the people of Middletown, Ohio and the ninth district relate, and *Hillbilly Elegy's* effect on me.

Hillbilly Elogy, How J.D Vance's Critically Acclaimed Work Helped Me Understand the People and Issues of Importance in Georgia's Ninth Congressional District.

In the Winter and Spring of 2017-2018, I had the honor of interning for Congressman Doug Collins Ninth District Congressional office. The district has a population of almost 800,000 people ranging in twenty counties. The major industries include poultry and agriculture alongside tourism and manufacturing. Just a couple of the main issues our office handles include; veteran's issues, immigration, and second amendment rights. The people of this district are over eighty-five percent white and over fifty percent of that being rural land. The people I worked with daily, were closely related to the hillbillies discussed in JD Vance's book *Hillbilly Elogy*. The book helped to me to relate to and understand the people I spoke on the phone with and sat in meetings with.

J.D Vance tells an amazing tale in his book *Hillbilly Elogy*. He tells the story of him growing up in an Appalachian home and the hardships that went along with the extreme culture his people cherished. The book was published in 2016 by the Harper Press and quickly came to be a book of national renown, and made the New York's Best seller list within the first year of being published. His book is a memoir focused on his childhood, and the hardships he had to face being a part of the Appalachian culture.

The ideas surrounding the Appalachian Culture are ones full of loyalty, foul play, and hard workers. Vance tells his readers in the very first chapter the idea of the 'Hillbilly' and the way his people lived. He describes a Hillbilly with extreme loyalty to their family and some who inhibits violence in their everyday life. He was born in Middleton, Ohio but many of his close family are from Kentucky better known as Appalachia. The Appalachian Mountains reach from the eastern tip of Alabama through all states up the eastern coast of the United States, ending in

Canada. These mountains are home to these so-called “hillbillies”, and to JD Vance’s family. In the book, we get the details of the events that unfold that lead him to the place he is now in his life. JD’s grandmother, Mawmaw, is a strong woman who holds her cultural value very near and dear to heart. She has loyalty to her people despite the violence and substance abuse that has a dark way of plaguing them. JD’s mother was a life-long drug abuser and had the ‘hillbilly’ violence that surrounded her throughout Vance’s childhood. She was raised by an alcoholic and a mother, Mawmaw, who was violent and vulgar to everyone around her. This way of life is normal to them, and they see nothing being wrong with beating each other to a pulp with their words and their fists.

Hillbilly Elegy is a book about how the middle-class Appalachian people live their life and the culture that surrounds them. This an inside look into this life from someone who grew up in the middle of the chaos. Vance is now a Yale graduate and has escaped the vicious cycle that has plagued the people so close around him. This book relates closely back to my internship and the constituents of the ninth district. The fact is that district nine is in the North Georgia Mountains. The constituents that we serve are the people that J.D writes about in his book. He writes the hard truth about the people he cares for. The people that have long criminal records, issue with substance abuse, and violent traits. These people’s loyalty is still a trait that masks all the other negative ones we see in the book. District Nine has the holler towns that Vance talks about. For example, I was working in Dahlonega for a VA meeting and we were in a mountain town like he describes. The people here are used to the ‘hillbilly culture.’ They have a love for their town and culture, no matter the problems that come along with this mindset.

One of the main ideas that plagues the authors family is the factory that is in his hometown of Middletown, Ohio. The reason that JD’s grandparents moved to Ohio was to start

working at this factory. His grandfather worked there his entire career and retired with benefits from this place. When America started sending jobs and factories overseas, the factory went out of business. This was not just one of many factories in Middletown, this was the place that most of the town was employed, and the only one residing in the town. If you did not work at this plant, you worked serving someone who did. This idea is of a person staying in the same job their entire career is just not the case anymore. Modern society has accepted the idea of the transient employee. The idea that you are constantly wanting to better your career, and that does not mean promotion in the same workplace. By the age twenty-five, you could be on your second or third career job. For example, my grandfather started as a mail carrier in a corporate and climbed the corporate ladder all the way to executive status. I, however, have had multiple starting out jobs that I will not stay in to try to move up in that work place. In the book, JD's mother's childhood is the main factor in her struggle with substance abuse and the ability to take care of her children. Growing up, she saw her father and the people around her easily acquire jobs and live off working in this manufacturing factory. This lead for her world to be completely turned upside down when the plant moved across seas. She no longer had a backup plan if her dreams did not work out. That sense of her uncertainty, and the violence she saw from her parents lead her to be an unstable mother and be an abuser of drugs.

In the ninth district, there are only a couple counties that had the place of work that employed most the population. In Stephens County, the Toccoa Casket company was the job supplier for the county. The company had been around for most of the twentieth century and was once the leading casket company in Georgia and supplied caskets for the United States Military during the Vietnam War. When the company went out of business the economy of Toccoa was devastated. Many people were out of jobs which then effected the shops that catered to these

workers. The ninth district chambers ended up having to bring in new jobs to diversify and bring back the economy to this tourist town. In Gainesville, the poultry companies have been a job source for many people. I know people that raise chickens and I know people that work in those plants. Even though Gainesville has more than one manufacturing plant, they are still major sources of jobs for the people in our district.

This book was able help me to better understand the people I would deal with on the phones and in person. JD speaks about how the people of Appalachia want things handed to them and expect the government to supply their every need. I have always been very judgmental about people being this way. I take on the same outlook as JD does in the fact that my family and I have had to work hard for what we earn. He speaks about how he felt as if the poor received better benefits and ultimately had a better quality of living because of the aid the government offered them. In one chapter, he is working his summer job at his local grocery store. He explains how he would inspect each person that came through the line. He started to observe that the people that were receiving government aid through food stamps etc. were better dressed and had things such as cell phones which were very out of reach for him and his family. I can relate to this in the way that I have always felt that I get punished for doing the right thing and being a productive citizen. I, like JD, have worked since I have been able to. My parents both have jobs but are not on the upper middle class side of the spectrum. The amount of money we made has always been on the spectrum of not being awarded/ earning give outs. We had to work twice as hard to get the same things. The book opened my eyes to see people through a different light. I never have been the person to pity someone like the people that are explained in *Hillbilly Elegy*. Talking to people on the phone that have the ideas that the government should hand them certain items, or that feel like they can cheat the system is something I do not think I would have been

able to respond to well. Of course, I would have been respectful on the phone but in my mind, I would have been very judgmental. JD taught me to look at these people in different eyes. I could now understand the cycle that keeps entrapping people in its web. I always used to speak about how I did not understand how children could watch their parent's life and grow up in poverty and not want to do everything they can to get out of it. I would also just say it like it was so easy, "just break the cycle." I know understand how naïve that was of me. I think that at some point every single kid living in poverty thinks about breaking the cycle but the idea of doing that is a completely different story. We, as in office, deal with people that we think should just break the cycle. The book taught me that instead of judging, try to come from a place of understanding. I think that JD does a great job of showing the outside world this. Vance also explains that the main reason he was able to 'break the cycle' was because of the outsiders encouraging him and helping him to see a way out. His Mawmaw was not an outsider but helped him to realize the problems of their community. She talked with JD about them and encouraged him to always do well in school. After finishing the book, I was reflecting on my drive home and I started to think how this book can relate to my father's life so very closely. His mother was and still is in many ways like JD's mother. She faced tragedy throughout her life that she was unable to get away from into her adulthood. Without the outside influences such as my dad's aunt and grandmothers, I don't think he would be the successful well rounded man he is today. According to the cycle, he should be a drug abuser and emotionally damaged. Through his outside people, he could see a way out and too see past the chaos that surrounded him as a child. Also, much like Vance, my dad says that part of the reason for some of his success is his wife. Vance spoke about in an interview that I listened to about how his wife, Usha, helped him through many emotional issues and taught him how to be in a proper relationship.

The idea of Appalachia was not a new idea for me. I am from North Georgia and have seen some of these instances in the book happen to the people around me. The congressman's office taught me some very helpful skills for the rest of my life and career. A main part of my intern responsibilities was answering the phones in the office. Starting off in the internship, this was something that terrified me. I was cautioned on my first day that the constituents sometimes called in and vent their frustrations in a very vulgar way, because politics can be a touchy subject. I had very little knowledge and very little experience with handling this type of customer service. I quickly came to learn that not everyone is angry at you, and honestly, I received a smaller percentage of those angry phone calls than I was expecting. When I did receive those, I would try my best to kill them with kindness and help them with the issue they were upset with. One of the first projects I was put on, was making phone calls to the neighboring states and all their district offices. I think that David, the intern director at the office, knew this was not my strongest skill and wanted to have me get more comfortable with this. The project included calling and gathering information from each office to get to obtain contact information for the worker in our office and give the information to a program that helps veterans to conquer post-traumatic stress disorder. Answering phones soon became a weekly occurrence in my internship life.

The book helped me to learn about the vulgarity and harshness I might encounter in this internship. *Hillbilly Elegy* is not what I would consider a 'kid friendly book'. JD's tells the harsh reality of the people in this culture. Many times, Mawmaw used a very colorful language to express her feelings. She would yell and shout hurtful things, but that's how it was. I'm glad that

Vance did not leave out these details because they ultimately helped me to understand and sympathize with the people I would have conversations with.

I am very thankful that the office staff put the trust in me to help me deal with constituent cases alongside the caseworkers. There were many times I could sit in on meetings and listen to phone calls. David was always very proactive to make sure that I learned everything I could from each situation that would arise during the day. The cases that stand out to me the most are the ones involving veteran affairs. Our office is a major hub for veterans coming to receive help in dealing with VA and getting help with their benefits. Before starting the internship, I knew of the VA but I knew nothing of the surrounding issues or even what benefits consisted of. I was taught by one of our veterans, Bill, in the office of the exact meaning Veteran incases. A Veteran is someone who served in the active military, air force, or naval services and was discharged with anything beside a dishonorable discharge. David sat me down one day and explained to me about how each Veteran that applies for a percentage of the benefits think they deserve. Many times, the veterans become very upset when they get their ratings back because you cannot get more of a hundred percent of the payment. If someone receives a rating of one-hundred twenty-five percent they are still going to only get the top offered amount. For example, if one- hundred percent is \$300 a month and the person receives one-hundred twenty- five percent the amount they receive it still 300 because there's nothing more than one hundred percent. This is how the benefits work and each veteran must go through the VA to let them decide how much monetary worth the injuries from war are. I got the opportunity attend a Veterans event in Dahlonga, Ga. The event was to help to bring benefits and programs to the veterans in Dahlonga and make them more known and available to these men and women. The congressman spoke at this event. This was the first and only time I got to meet him. He truly believes in what he's doing and he

has a staff that properly carries out the needed plans. He spoke to the veterans about him personally being in active duty in the air force. He reinstalled the belief in our office doing to best we can to help fix their problems.

JD worked in a congressional district office throughout college. He speaks briefly of working with veteran's issues. I think that JD would be very adamant now about supporting our veterans and making sure they get the benefits they deserve. JD himself is a veteran. He served in the Marines and was on active duty in Iraq. He performed many public affair jobs. JD contributes his success to not only his Mawmaw, but also to the Marine Corps. He says that they are the reason he finished college and to go on to be so successful. The core taught him discipline and service. I think that JD, and the people of Middletown would have a strong sense of pride for Veterans. JD speaks about how when he came back to Ohio from serving how different the people of his hometown had treated him. For example, the barber wanted to cut his hair for free, or just walking through the grocery store people would come shake his hand and thank him for his service. The people of Middletown don't just have a pride in the culture and loyalty, but also their country.

I worked only a few times with immigration issues but it was an issue that many emotions arose from. Immigration issues are such a talked about issue today in our nation that it is hard to try and ignore it. I received many phone calls involving building the wall. I received both for the wall and against it. One man told me that the wall was ancient Chinese ideas and that it was morally wrong to execute it. Phone calls are one thing, but when I was able to meet real people whose citizenship is being questioned by the government, you feel the emotions that come along with the issue. This man had called our office and straight off caused panic throughout the workers. This has been a huge issue prior to him calling him. The idea of

immigration is something that American is divided on. Some people believe that America should be a boiling pot of the world. Or that we should let everyone come to our country because they have it worse than us. Which yes, America is the best country in the world but we cannot allow people to break the law just because they are in a worse place than we are. This was an issue that made me very emotional. I got a call about someone talking about how she was a Dreamer and to pass a message on to the congressman to vote to renew the Dreamers Act. These children did not have a say in being brought here at such a young age. This is the part that makes me feel for the immigrant. I never want to exclude someone or kick them out of their home, but we as a country cannot continue to allow certain people to break the law or just live outside of the law. The office staff and I had long talks about immigration and the negative effects it has on our country.

Another issue I received many calls on was Mr. Trump building the wall on the Mexican-American border. The people calling would say things such as “this is an ancient Chinese way and America is being immoral” and other people thought this was a very well thought out idea. I don’t have this answers to immigration but through Congressman Doug Collin’s office I was able to learn information and better develop my opinion on these emotional issues.

A major issue that stems from Immigration is the issue of jobs. Undocumented people can come into our country and work under the table jobs. Meaning the workers get paid cash, without paying income taxes. These can negatively affect are economy because these people can live for free. While, the American citizen must pay for their taxes. Knowing this issue, I can know better understand why immigration is such a huge issue, especially in our district. The average working class American, does not agree with someone coming here and living for free. I think that the people of Middletown would not like this and would be very against illegal immigrants.

An issue that is currently the biggest fight between the two parties is the Gun Law and Gun control. I was working at Congressman's office when the Parkland school shooting occurred. I was also in the office the day a teacher fired a gun in a school in our district. The phone calls we get from our constituents range from guns being a constitutional right to guns being a tool that should only be accessible to army personnel. Our office is very pro-gun and believe that every person should have the opportunity to own a gun if that's what they want for their life. With these recent shooting, and the talks we've had in the office. I do not think that taking away citizen's guns is the way to fix the problem. People are going to hurt people like they have been doing since the beginning of time. For example, in England guns have been banned for over a century. Recently though, there has been an increase in knife assaults. The country's government has decided that the next step to take is to start a ban on knives. The people of England are now no longer able to purchase kitchen knives and other easily accessible knives. The people are slowly being swiped of their basic rights. A gun rights group sent approximately 500 letters to the office. The letters were signed petitions stating that these people are willing to fight for their rights and they want the congressman to fight in congress for their gun rights, too. I was put in charge of arranging the information in a way that was easy to read. The office wanted to be able to present the petitions in a proper way when they argue the case for gun rights.

Guns are a subject that is talked about throughout many chapters in *Hillbilly Elegy*. The scene that stands out to me the most is when Mawmaw was against JD going into the military. She did not like the idea of any bossing or yelling at him, unless it was her. The day the military recruiter came to visit the house, Mawmaw stood on the porch and threatened to shoot the man if he came any closer. In another scene, JD had been hanging out with the wrong group of kids.

When he moved back into Mawmaw's house, she insisted that he start focusing on school and change the group he was hanging out with. To make sure JD took her seriously, Mawmaw threatened to shoot the 'bad' kids he was hanging out with and then proceeded to say that JD would not want to have murder on his hands. I think that in these scenes, Mawmaw is trying to instill dominance and I highly doubt that she would shoot someone. These scenes point out Middletown's love for guns and their right to arm. The people of the ninth district are the same way, and believe in their rights to bear arms. I think that Mawmaw Vance would roll over in her grave if she could see the way people are against guns.

I could not rightly finish this paper without mentioning Donald Trump and the effect he has had on the people of the ninth district and the people of Appalachia. These people can relate to their president now in a way that were unable to relate to their president for the last eight years. Obama was a president that spoke like a college professor would speak, he also looked different and came from a completely different background than these people. JD explains it as "Trump talks like a guy at a bar in West Virginia" he's like "my dad sitting around the dinner table". (Lewis, 2017) I think that also the people felt as if they were not important anymore. Obama was not as worried about the white working class as he was about the poor black community. So, when Trump was elected and was focusing on better the working-class members of society, the people supported him endlessly. He had the connection to be a likeable president to these people. JD also speaks that the reason he thinks that Trump is so likeable in this culture is because the issues he explains in the book. When you no longer have the job, you've worked for your entire lives, the people around you are ruining their lives from drug use, America seems to have evil leader, and you feel as if your life is crashing down around; Trump was someone different some out of the ordinary. (Chotiner, 2016) Trump draws so many supporters because of

the way he is so outrageous and says what's on his mind. The people just cling to him and the idea of hope. Trump won over eighty percent of the people's vote in our district. He relates to the people in this district and I saw the support daily.

Through this book, I have been able to empathize with a group of people I was unable to connect with before. *Hillbilly Elegy* helped to open my eyes and widen my horizons to the issues that are going on in our country, but also the district I was serving in. JD wrote a story that I was to mirror back into my internship so well. I learned how to talk to these people, to understand the reasons they need government assistance, and the mindset behind the love of Trump. JD talks about in interviews how it's almost as if before this book, the middle-white working class had almost been forgotten about. Without my internship, I would be unable to like and relate back to the book as much as I have. And without *Hillbilly Elegy*, I would not empathize and understand the work I am doing for the ninth district constituents.

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