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Op-Ed

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STATE YOUR TRADITIONS: A CALL TO WEST VIRGINIA

The State Fair of West Virginia has arrived! This year's theme is "Start Your Traditions". Tradition is what makes fairs special as they pass down history, lessons and principles to the next generation. Given tradition is already an essential part of our fairs around the state, what could this year's theme mean? The interpretation we concluded, at the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, is we need to start some new traditions in West Virginia. We need to forge promises that we will keep to ourselves, our neighbors and our fellow West Virginians. Here are some traditions I hope you will join me in.

First, we need to start buying local to support West Virginia businesses. This is crucial for rural areas as we continue to see more and more retail giants pull out. Grocery stores, that were dying to get into these areas just a few years ago, are closing shop leaving a food desert behind. Without a local grocer, residents find themselves driving over an hour to buy food to feed their families. This is not sustainable for low income families. What are they supposed to do? One area that is forging a new tradition through local food is McDowell County. When Walmart pulled out in 2016, residents were left speechless and heartbroken. The good news is local farmers are fighting back to provide food in Walmart's wake. For McDowell County, local food not only fills a void, but keeps monies local, supports small businesses and provides healthy food options for the community. A tradition, even born out of necessity, will pay dividends years down the road.

Second, we must start the tradition of inspiring our young people. I recently spoke at the 89th West Virginia FFA Convention, which had in attendance over 450 students and their families for the 3-day event. I was blown away by how strong our FFA community is in West Virginia. The good news is this community is growing! More and more young people are realizing the huge potential we have for agriculture here in the Mountain State. The older generation must help the next follow their dreams and become the leaders of tomorrow. Beyond agriculture, we need to instill strong traditions in our young people and teach them how to lead so they can guide West Virginia into a brighter future.

Last, but not least, we must start believing in West Virginia. Politics today is hyper-partisan with very few elected officials working across the aisle for compromise. When media outlets give our state poor reviews or breaks a story that casts a negative shadow, we point fingers. Did you see West Virginia is now ranked the worst state for business by CNBC? If West Virginia is ever going to be a state where our children and grandchildren want to raise their families, we must start working together, fighting back against the negative stereotypes and selling the state to the rest of the world. Let's start a tradition of functioning as a unit to help West Virginia reach her potential. You would be surprised at what we can accomplish.

We at the department encourage you to visit the State Fair August 10th through the 19th. Pack up your family, head down to Lewisburg and take in the best West Virginia has to offer. While you are there, forge some traditions and some promises that will make the Mountain State a better place. Let's get to work West Virginia, I know we can do it.

Kent Leonhardt serves as the West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

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