



Mayor Michael Pavey (second from right) with director of special projects Brian Sheehan (left) and interns Nate Robert Eze and Mason Gordon. Pavey: "If you're wanting them (young people) to come back in your community, it has to be set up for them and their needs and what their generation finds important."

Rushville Benefits From Young Leader

By Symone C. Skrzycki

The stakes were high.

It was 2016 and the city of Rushville was a finalist in the Stellar Communities program, which provides resources for transformative quality of place and community improvements.

Rushville Mayor Michael Pavey and members of his team were moments away from the final step: delivering a community presentation.

"Whether you like it or not, the mayor is the lead in the presentation," he remembers. "Everybody's kind of on edge and getting ready for this big presentation. I'm not the guy who likes being the public speaker. I'll do it as part of my job, but I am not the guy who goes out and seeks that attention."

Mason Gordon, a 19-year-old intern with the city of Rushville who had created the technical aspects of the presentation, initiated a memorable conversation:

Gordon: "Hey, can you come here and can I talk to you?"

Pavey: "Sure" (walking over to him).

Gordon: "Can I give you some suggestions?"

Pavey: "Sure."

Gordon (drawing on his background as a former FFA officer): "This is what I've learned (about successful presentations)."

Pavey took the pointers to heart. He also entrusted Gordon to give a solo presentation about the city's youth engagement team and the organizations involved in its technology applications.

"It was a big-time presentation," Gordon emphasizes. "And he was willing to give up some of his air time for me to speak. I'm still incredibly grateful for that opportunity."

Why was the mayor so confident in the intern's judgement? Pavey puts it simply: "I trusted Mason."

Summers of discovery

Rushville is a rural community in east central Indiana with about 6,300 residents. While population losses and workforce shortages have proved challenging, educational offerings remain a strength.

"The success of our intern program really highlights the success of our school system because we're able to pick kids that come to our school system that 'get it,'" Pavey declares.

Gordon is one of them. He returned to Pavey's office for a summer internship in 2017 and one at Rush County Economic Development the following year.

Gordon made the most of those summers. With the city, he tackled projects such as writing a city ordinance and serving as "an ag voice" for a mural at the new location of the Farmer's & Artisans Market. In addition, he assisted with securing funding for the latter.

"My role – having been involved in the agricultural community – was to recruit sponsors for some of the necessary items we needed for events: tables, chairs and lights and all of that kind of stuff," Gordon shares. "I was able to, between sponsors and grants, raise \$45,000 for our farmer's market and we were able to purchase all of the items on

our wish list. I'm very proud of that."

Brian Sheehan, the city's director of special projects, oversees Rushville's internship program and youth engagement initiative.

"It's that connection to, 'Where do you want to go and how do we get you there?'" he affirms.

"If for example, I've got an art major (intern) in here and all they're doing is filing paperwork, that's not doing anybody any good. If I can figure out a way they can help ignite our Arts Council – that's a goal of ours this year – that's who I want to do it."

He refers to Gordon as an intern "that we could plug into anything."

"Literally, if the mayor couldn't be somewhere and I couldn't be somewhere, we'd have confidence to say, 'Here's what we need to go to.' And he could fill in."

Speaking from experience

Gordon recounts a high school memory.

He was a senior, sitting in government class. His teacher was curious. How many students anticipated returning to Rushville after pursuing additional education (college or workforce training)? Who planned on coming back and spending their life there?

"There were only five hands that went up in a group of 25 probably," Gordon notes.

As much as he loved Rushville and his volunteer activities (including serving as a youth member on the Hometown Collaboration Initiative Committee), he was conflicted.

He embarked on a journey of exploration. He graduated in 2015 and took a year off school to serve as an Indiana FFA officer.

"I traveled the state and got involved in circles I'd never been involved in before," Gordon reveals. "I got excited about politics. I could easily see myself going to Washington D.C. I could easily see myself living in Indy and working on state government stuff. ... I



One of Gordon's memorable quotes during the city of Rushville's Stellar Communities proposal: "While other interns are making coffee, I'm making a difference!"

was still passionate about my hometown, but didn't necessarily see myself coming back to my hometown."

He earned an associate degree from Lincoln Land Community College in Illinois. In 2018, he transferred to Purdue University and completed his first semester. He'll resume classes after an internship with the Purdue Bureau (through a partnership with the Purdue College of Agriculture) concludes and plans to graduate with a bachelor's degree in 2020.

"I would say that my internship has made me more conflicted than ever, if that makes sense," Gordon imparts, chuckling. "I've got some passions that I didn't realize I was going to have. Lots to think about. And I'm still trying to figure out what that dream job is."

"Now when I think about careers and I think about my future, I don't know if I'll be able to come back. I'm not going to say, 'This is where I'm going to be the rest of my life.' But I want to be there (Rushville). I legitimately want to be back in my home

community," he continues.

"That's solely related to my involvement in the community. Solely related to the mayor saying, 'You can be a part of every meeting. You can be a part of every decision. You can have a voice. And you can make an impact on your home community.'"

Making connections

All organizations and communities can benefit from internships.

It's a core philosophy of Indiana INTERNnet, the statewide resource for internship opportunities managed by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. Its online database links employers, students, high schools, colleges and universities.

"I saw Mason speak at an event and he was amazing," asserts executive director Mike Slocum. "He's made such an impact on his community."

"From an employer's perspective, the key to successful internships is to have talent stay within Indiana and make your community one that interns return to. No matter an employer's size or industry, there are opportunities to host internships throughout the state."

Gordon emphasizes the significance of Pavey believing in him.

"I always had a seat at the table. It didn't matter what meeting the mayor had. It didn't matter who else he was inviting to the table. He never asked me to leave because he didn't want me to be a part of a conversation. That's what any internship manager should strive to do: Allow that intern to feel like a member of the team. I certainly did. That's definitely why I kept coming back – because I felt like I was able to make a difference."



Gordon's background helped grow momentum for a new agricultural mural on the wall of the downtown farmer's market.