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# coal town • revival

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH A PRESERVE AMERICA AWARD-WINNER—PENNSYLVANIA'S LACKAWANNA VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA **AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN COSGROVE** PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ANDREWS

John Cosgrove—at the time of this interview the head of northeastern Pennsylvania's Lackawanna Valley National Heritage Area—has recently gone on to bigger things as executive director of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. Here he reflects on what made Lackawanna one of the first winners of the Preserve America awards.

*Left: At the Anthracite Heritage Museum, a miner greets visitors who descend 300 feet below the valley to glimpse a bygone way of life.*

**Q:** What are the pressing issues today in the Lackawanna Valley?

**A:** About three years ago, we were surprised to learn how little we knew our own story. And we thought, we've got to start this at home, because we found that too many residents actually believed the definition given to us by other people—that we're a tired old coal town whose best days are over.

So we started the Heritage Valley Ambassadors Program. We take about 15 or 20 people every month and give them, for lack of a better description, a whole day of the place.

**Q:** Who are the ambassadors?

**A:** They're from all walks of life. College deans and front-line people from the hospitality industry. Students and teachers. Community activists and retirees. Museum docents and members of the historical society. Convenience store clerks and government officials. Anybody who would benefit from learning the story so they can tell it and retell it as a point of pride. And the beauty of it is how the groups are mixed. Each group suggests the next, so the sphere of influence grows.

Have you seen the *New York Times* piece called "36 Hours"? It's a regular feature. They send a reporter to a travel destination without any warning ahead of time. So the reporter pulls up to our gleaming historic hotel, whose whole staff had gone through the program, from the front desk person to the catering guy. And boom, we get a great article.

How many people came here because of it? Who knows? But we have a saying around here, "Once we get you, you're got."

**Q:** How do you work with the school system?

**A:** We have a number of committees—the Education Alliance, the Environmental Alliance. We also have a trail management committee, an environmental fair advisory board. All of this falls under what we call strategic engagement with the public.

I get into trouble with the staff because I say we have the easiest jobs in northeastern Pennsylvania. All we do is facilitate. We get people around the table and keep them there. We all have the same goal, how to tell this story creatively.

We've done big projects like a documentary and smaller things like the Heritage Valley Station Stops, with Steamtown National Historic Site. We took a locomotive with about 300 tourists up the spine of the heritage area, up to the top of the valley, stopping in communities along the way. The tourists got off for up to three hours of sidewalk sales, art exhibits, chicken barbecues. Incredibly successful.

We're constantly trying to make people aware that we're the center of the universe. The coolest part is going right into the classrooms. We've captured the next generation so we don't have to fight this fight again.

**Q:** You have lesson plans?

**A:** We have curriculum guides for everything we do. I get laughed at because I say if it would help we'd do a curriculum guide for the parking lot. The documentary was created in chapters so it could be taught in the schools. It was nominated for an Emmy.

**Q:** The schools picked it up?

**A:** We work with three districts that cover, not just our area, but also the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor and the Schuylkill River National Heritage Area. So, between here and Philadelphia, almost the whole coal corridor. In a perfect world, we could reach 200,000 students.

We also did a book version of the documentary.





**Q:** How do you work in terms of revitalizing main streets and neighborhoods?

**A:** The heritage area is made up of a number of what we call valley towns. The first thing we did was heritage development plans for a good number of them. We took a grassroots philosophy. You've got to get buy-in first. You can fake it for a while, but it's not sustainable. It just isn't.

With any project we hope, long term, to be taken for granted. We hope that it becomes so ingrained in the community that we're out of the picture in a short time. And remarkably, we usually are. In five years, I can't think of a single project that hasn't been sustained.

And that includes the big projects like our trail. Our original idea was 40 miles, mostly along the river through the heritage area. Now Delaware & Lehigh south of us are working on a 60-mile segment. So eventually we'll have 100 miles of hiking, biking, and walking. And then



*Left: Use expired, the tools that built a nation litter the grounds of the Anthracite Heritage Museum.*

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there are the smaller projects like the station stops. We pay for the expensive part, the design and some of the materials. But the communities build them, sometimes with volunteer labor.

And it's amazing how the towns all arrived at the same theme—the people who came before us.

My wife calls me a font of useless information. I'm going to tell you why. Between 1892 and 1930, 20 million people came to the United States, from 36 countries around the world—the Italians, the eastern Europeans, the Welsh. Waves of people.

This weekend or next, we're opening a play called "Under The Lackawanna Moon" in the Dunmore Cemetery. It's all about the people buried there. We have 55 students in the play, which isn't by accident. If you want an audience, put lots of kids in.

**Q:** What about individual renovation projects?

**A:** We work one step up from that, on master plans. If the community wants to do individual projects, we help find the resources.

**Q:** You've got an internal audience with the locals and an external audience with the tourists. Do you measure how well you're doing?

**A:** We do. Who's our market? Here we are in northeastern Pennsylvania. Seventy million people can have breakfast in their kitchens and be here by lunch.

Most of the anthracite went to New York or Philadelphia. We haven't moved since. And we're within five hours of Boston and Washington, D.C. Plus all the communities between here and Pittsburgh.

The state tells us that tourism in this county accounts for about \$600 million every year; that translates to about 10,000 jobs.

As a destination, we still have a lot to do. But people are discovering us.

Why come to a dirty old coal town? Because of the impact we had on the state and the nation and the world. And because of our assets—community life, quality of life, strategic location.

Community life, that sounds mushy. But corporations have a top ten list of attributes, and we consistently have eight of them. Safe, affordable, great cultural amenities, great recreation. We have a brand new conference center—a historic hotel that

was going to be demolished 20 years ago. All we had to do was hose it down. Inside are these ravishing marble mosaics.

**Q:** What's Scranton's economic temperature these days?

**A:** We're losing population. But we're new at redefining ourselves. All the secondary indicators show real promise—attendance at museums, downtown economic development, neighborhood revitalization.

The greatest hope is the train link, a serious effort to reestablish passenger service to New York City. With all the tragedies of 9/11, the major financial industries are developing back offices as a contingency. We're 90 miles from Manhattan as the crow flies. Imagine high-speed rail. Pennsylvania's tracks are done; it's in New Jersey's hands now.

Ten years ago, we didn't have the infrastructure to handle it. It would have been a disaster. That's all changed.

**Q:** You got some headlines when a national park—Steamtown National Historic Site—opened in the middle of downtown Scranton.

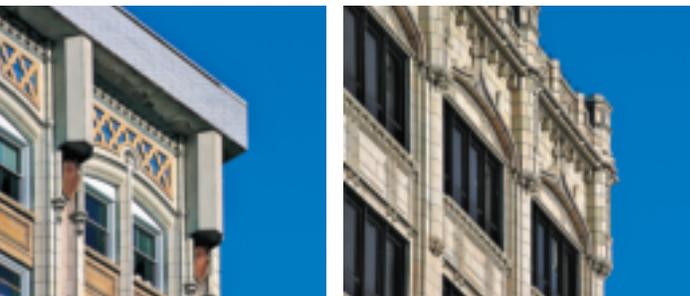
**A:** Yes, we were *Newsweek's* biggest pork barrel project. Yet one man's pork barrel is another man's economic development.



*Above, right: Steamtown National Historic Site melds stories of trains and coal.*



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*Left: Survivors from Scranton's gothic golden age.*

When you have a national park literally the epicenter of a \$600 million annual business, you lead with that story. People will say, "Hey, that was a pretty wise investment." Annual expenditures at Steamtown are \$2 million. For a \$600 million return.

What sets our heritage area apart is that the National Park Service is the obvious leader. But we get 180,000 people here every year, and they don't just stay inside the park.

Steamtown isn't just about interpreting trains. Ours is a nationally important story. The park blends trains and coal in creative ways. The tourist locomotive used to run above the valley. Well, the park worked with us on the valley stops. Now, interpreters on the train tell the stories of the boroughs too.

**Q:** How do you work with the environmental folks?

**A:** Probably our most active partner is the Lackawanna River Corridor Association, a 30-plus-year nonprofit that has done a spectacular job.

In our industrial past, the Lackawanna was a sewer, with all the waste running down and into the Chesapeake. When I was a kid, we lived across the street from the river and the railroad tracks. My parents would say, "Don't go near the river and don't go near the tracks. And if you have to choose between the two, play on the tracks."

I remember—we called them rotten-egg mornings. You'd walk to school in between the smell of the river and the smell of the culm—the waste product of the anthracite. This was the commercially unviable stuff that the young boys—they called them breaker boys—picked out. For 15 hours a day. The mines dumped it in huge piles all over the place.





*Above: Signs of life—a sparkling facade looks down on passers-by a stone's throw from Steamtown National Historic Site in downtown Scranton. The edifice was being restored when this photograph was taken in January.*

I pronounce it like a local, “cull-um.” Your heritage doesn’t dissipate in a generation or two. But the story we tell doesn’t focus on the product or the machines. It focuses on the people.

**Q:** You have oral history programs?

**A:** All of our marketing material focuses on the “they.” “They” came here to build a new life and ended up building a new nation.

We don’t ignore the textiles and the coal and the trains, because people come here for that. But we say, “Somebody had to go down in the ground. Somebody had to forge the iron. Somebody had to run the mill.”

If you focus on the people, you connect with all the visitors whose families did this work. I mean, many of us are their children, their grandchildren, their great-grandchildren. We all came from someplace else to make a better life. That’s the story. The courage and the commitment and the focus and the resilience. And we’re finding in anecdotal ways that we’re making that connection.

For every ambassadors program that we do, at least half the people have a story like, “I remember my grandfather sitting in the living-room chair just coughing and coughing and coughing.”

We do a project called Portraits From Life, commissioning an artist and a writer to sit with a senior. Ordinary people with extraordinary stories, people who wouldn’t typically sit for a portrait. One was a woman who worked at Scranton Lace for 59 years.

Scranton Lace mostly hired young single women, developing the workforce from within. These women would work 12 hours a day, go home, get dressed, and come back for dances and social hours. It was a city within a city, with swimming pools, bowling alleys, clubs.

Anyway, this woman never married because the company frowned on it. But she said she was engaged for 40 years. You know, patience, resilience, commitment . . .

**Q:** Is there a tourism message for the granola crowd?

**A:** There really isn’t. We incorporate our story into theirs. You pitch the river as this once horribly polluted waterway and now it has top-grade trout fishing. That piques people’s interest.

**Q:** How do you bring the locals into the process? What if someone says “not in my back yard” to one of your proposals?

**A:** We engage early and listen. We let people know we’re not going to do eminent domain. We say, “If you don’t want that trail, we’ll realign it.”

My staffers would roll their eyes at this. But our harshest trait here in coal country is pathological modesty. We don’t blow our horn. The Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island—they’re symbols of opportunity, but this is where the opportunity happened. This is where you came to stand next to an eight-zillion-degree furnace or go 300 feet underground to get a better life.





*Left: A reminder of Scranton's heyday, aglow on a winter's afternoon, will light up the night in a few hours.*

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But our modesty told us, don't call attention. It didn't matter how horribly the coal companies treated you. It didn't matter how discriminating they were. It didn't matter how unsafe the work was. It's better than whence you came. Don't make waves. Put your head down and work.

That doesn't go away in a generation or two. Growing up, if I admired myself in any way, if I said, "Gee, this tie looks great," my grandmother would say, "Tis yourself that knows it." Who likes a braggart? But when it starts to hold you back, you have to question it.

Look at the D-Day anniversary. These men in their twilight saying, "Ah, it wasn't a big deal. We just did it." Sixty years to build a monument because they didn't want it.

Modesty is important, but not when you're talking about the future of your community. We've got a vital story to tell.

Another way that we engage is a monthly breakfast called the Heritage Valley Roundtable. And the purpose is this: "For the love of Pete, talk to each other." Because that wasn't really happening.

**Q: Who came up with the idea?**

**A:** This one we didn't steal; we came up with it ourselves. It was born of my frustration with the modesty thing. The documentary was the first product to come out of it.

And I said, "I don't want another video that winds up on the shelf. I want a top-of-the-line product. And I want to focus on the people."

We worked with these terrific local filmmakers. They found footage at the National Archives that nobody here knew existed. Mine-safety films. A cave-in. They researched the heck out of the 1902 United Mine Workers strike, which stopped the country. Teddy Roosevelt had to call in a commission to arbitrate, the first time a President intervened in a labor dispute. It was of international importance.

**Q: How did you pay for the documentary?**

**A:** We put a partnership together. We worked mostly with the state heritage program, but also with businesses, foundations, educational entities.

*Right: The Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel, once a target for demolition, is the former headquarters of a railroad empire.*

**Q: Did you hire a fundraiser?**

**A:** No. We went off grants and begged. It took us about a year and a half to put the finances together. Meantime, the filmmakers were like cowboys. They'd say, "Well, we have enough money to film this part, let's just do it."

In the end, we shopped it to PBS. It's played, or is going to play, in 80 markets across the country.

There were two goals. Number one, we wanted to reach a national audience. We wanted the family in Oklahoma to be as interested as our own people. And number two, we wanted to teach the next generation of our own kids.

The opening was like Hollywood in Scranton, with the klieg lights and the tuxedos. The people interviewed in the film—the mineworkers, the breaker boys, a woman who lost her husband, brother, and father to the mines—they were all there but one.

"Let's trumpet this on a national stage," I said at a roundtable meeting. You know, if John Cosgrove calls the big media saying, "This is a great story," it doesn't work. But if you've got federal partners and state partners and local partners all around the table, somebody's brother knows somebody's brother who knows somebody who will listen. And that's the way it works.

**Q: Final words?**

**A:** I believe we're poised for the next big step. We'll never be what we once were. We'll never be a center of the nation's financial universe, unless anthracite makes a comeback—we still have eight billion tons under us. We've got to depend on other things like quality of life. And the absolute most important part—the core characteristics of the people who came here 100 years ago.

For more information, contact the Lackawanna Valley National Heritage Area, 1300 Old Plank Road, Mayfield, PA 18433, (570) 963-6730, [www.LHVA.org](http://www.LHVA.org). Contact John Cosgrove at [anha.cosgrove@adelphia.net](mailto:anha.cosgrove@adelphia.net).

