

In the heart of Trump Country, his base's faith is unshaken

By **CLAIRE GALOFARO**
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SANDY HOOK, Ky. — The regulars amble in before dawn and claim their usual table, the one next to an old box television playing the news on mute.

Steven Whitt fires up the coffee pot and flips on the fluorescent sign in the window of the Frosty Freeze, his diner that looks and sounds and smells about the same as it did when it opened a half-century ago. Coffee is 50 cents a cup, refills 25 cents. The pot sits on the counter, and payment is based on the honor system.

People like it that way, he thinks. It reminds them of a time before the world seemed to stray away from them, when coal was king and the values of the nation seemed the same as the values here, in God's Country, in this small county isolated in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

Everyone in town comes to his diner for nostalgia and homestyle cooking. And, recently, news reporters come from all over the world to puzzle over politics — because Elliott County, a blue-collar union stronghold, voted for the Democrat in each and every presidential election for its 147-year existence.

Until Donald Trump came along and promised to wind back the clock.

"He was the hope we were all waiting on, the guy riding up on the white horse. There was a new energy about everybody here," says Whitt. "I still see it."

Despite the president's dismal approval ratings and lethargic legislative achievements, he remains profoundly popular here in these mountains, a region so badly battered by the collapse of the coal industry it became the symbolic heart of Trump's white working-class base.

The frenetic churn of the national news, the ceaseless Twitter taunts, the daily declarations of outrage scroll soundlessly across the bottom of the diner's television screen, rarely registering. When they do, Trump doesn't shoulder the blame — because the allegiance of those here is as emotional as it is economic. It means God, guns, patriotism, saying "Merry Christmas" and not Happy Holidays. It means validation of their indignation about a changing nation: gay marriage and immigration and factories moving overseas. It means tearing down the political system that neglected them again and again in favor of the big cities that feel a world away.

On those counts, they believe Trump has delivered, even if his promised blue-collar renaissance has not yet materialized. He's punching at all the people who let them down for so long — the presidential embodiment of their own discontent.

"He's already done enough to get my vote again, without a doubt, no question," Wes Lewis, a retired pipefitter and one of Whitt's regulars, declares as he deals the day's first hand of cards.

He thinks the mines and the factories will soon roar back to life, and if they don't, he believes they would have if Democrats and Republicans and the media — all "crooked as a barrel of fishhooks" — had gotten out of the way. What Lewis has now that he didn't have before Trump is a belief that his president is pulling



Chesla Whitt, right, talks with employee Angela Whitley in the Frosty Freeze restaurant Whitt runs with her husband in Sandy Hook, Ky., Dec. 13. Whitt isn't quite sure how much faith to put in Trump to improve things in her own life. She liked him on "The Apprentice." She liked that he was funny and knew how to make money, and so she thinks everyone ought to calm down and give him a chance.



Steven Whitt checks the date on a tombstone he needs for a document as part of his funeral home business in Sandy Hook, Ky., Dec. 14. In addition to running a restaurant, also owns a local funeral home, and he's the county coroner — elected as a Democrat.

for people like him.

"One thing I hear in here a lot is that nobody's gonna push him into a corner," says Whitt, 35. "He's a fighter. I think they like the bluntness of it."

He plops down at an empty table next to the card game, drops a stack of mail onto his lap and begins flipping through the envelopes.

"Bill, bill, bill," he reports to his wife, Chesla, who has arrived to relieve him at the restaurant they run together. He needs to run home and change of out his Frosty Freeze uniform, the first of several work ensembles he wears each day, and put on his second, a suit and tie. He also owns a local funeral home and he's the county coroner, elected as a Democrat.

The Whitts, like many people here, cobble together a living with a couple jobs each — sometimes working 12 or 15 hours a day — because there aren't many options better than minimum wage. There's the school system, and a prison, and that's pretty much it. Outside of town, population 622, roads wind past rolling farms that used to grow tobacco before that industry crumbled too, then up into the hills of Appalachia, with its spectacular natural beauty and grinding poverty that has come to define this region in the American imagination.

Whitt slides a medical bill across the table.

"Looks like this one is the new helmet," he says, and his wife tears the envelope open and reports the debt: \$3,995. They will add it to a growing pile that's already surpassed \$40,000 since their son was born nine months ago with a rare condition. His skull was shaped like an egg, the bones fused together in places they shouldn't be. Tommy, their baby boy with big blue eyes, has now outgrown three of the helmets he's been required to wear after surgery so his bones grow back together like they should.

They pay \$800 a month for insurance. But when they took their baby to a surgeon in Cincinnati, they learned it was out of network. In-network hospitals offered only more invasive surgeries, so they opted to pay out of pocket. At the hospital they were told that if they'd been on an insurance program for the poor, it would have all been free.

This represents the cracks in America's institutions that drove Whitt, a lifelong Democrat, from supporting President Barack Obama to buying a "Make America Great Again" cap that he still keeps on top of the hutch. Many of their

welfare-dependent neighbors, he believes, stay trapped in a cycle of handouts and poverty while hard-working taxpayers like him and his wife are stuck with the tab and can't get ahead.

"Where's the fairness in that?" he asks.

But Whitt doesn't blame Trump for the failure this year to repeal the health care law and replace it with something better. He blames the "brick wall" in Washington, the politicians he sees as blocking everything Trump proposes while "small people" like them in small places like this are left again to languish.

A third of people here live in poverty. Just 9 percent of adults have a college degree, but they always made up for that with backbreaking labor that workers traveled dozens of miles to neighboring counties or states to do, and those jobs have gotten harder to find.

Many here blame global trade agreements and the "war on coal" — environmental regulations designed by Obama's administration to curb carbon emissions — for the decline of mining and manufacturing jobs.

When Trump bemoans the "American carnage" of lost factories and lost faith, it feels like he's talking to the people in these Appalachian hills. When he scraps dozens of regulations to the horror of environmentalists and says it means jobs are on the way, they embrace him.

Coal has ticked up since Trump took office; mining companies have added 1,200 jobs across the country since his inauguration, more than 180 of them in Kentucky. But industry analysts say that was tied largely to market forces and dismiss Trump's repeated pledges to resuscitate the coal industry as pie in the sky. Coal has been on the decline for many decades for many reasons outside of regulation: far cheaper natural gas, mechanization, thinning Appalachian seams.

Whitt leans back in his chair and ponders whether his community has so far sensed any relief.

"I don't think we're seeing anything yet," he says, and asks around. "Do you?"

The stock market is surging, one of his regulars at the next table says. The tax reform plan will help them, they hope. The unemployment rate here has dipped slightly to 7.6 percent, still higher than the state and national average but better than it had been.

"With the opposition he's had, I think he's pulling the plow pretty good," offers Wes Lewis from the card table. A few months ago, he says, he saw four brand-new coal rigs going through town. "For the longest time, under Obama, all we saw were trucks being pulled on wreckers, because people turned belly up, they went broke."

Lewis says he's heard about friends of friends being called back to work. He's noticed new trucks in people's driveways, too, which he takes as evidence that his neighbors are feeling confident about their futures. These tiny signs stack up to him as proof. Lewis fishes the tag out of the bib of his overalls: "Made in Mexico," it reads.

"Trump's bringing them back," he says.

Lewis, a registered Democrat, trusts Trump because he trusts his values. And because of that, he trusts Trump's other promises — so strongly he can't think of anything that would shake that faith in him. If the factories and mines don't come back, he'll blame the opposition. If there isn't a wall on the Mexico border, he says, it won't be because Trump didn't try. If investigators find his campaign colluded with Russians, it's because so many people are so determined to bring him down.

He watches all the news stations, he says, toggling back and forth as he performs his own calculations to figure out what he wants to believe. He almost always sides with Fox News and anchors who dismiss allegations of Russian collusion as a "witch hunt" and tout the president's declarations of accomplishments. The people against Trump are, by extension, against people like him, too, Lewis figures.

"They don't care if we starve to death out here, because they don't care the first thing about anybody other than their pockets being full," he believes. "Donald Trump doesn't care about that because Donald Trump's pockets are already full. That's the reason I've stuck with him."

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— **Steven Whitt**, restaurant and funeral home owner

LAWS: Minimum hourly pay in Portland climbed from \$9.75 to \$11.25 in July

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self-fueling to 24 hours in 15 Eastern Oregon counties, with populations of less than 40,000. The expansion of the law was primarily designed to keep solo gas stations such as Heppner's in operation. Some stations were in jeopardy of going out of business because owners couldn't afford to hire enough pumping attendants, said Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, the bill's sponsor.

Stations are still required to have at least one attendant between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., but customers could pump their own gas if the attendant is busy and a cardlock machine is available.

"Now, I think a lot of that impact is off because (motorists) don't have to sit and wait for someone to pump their gas so they flow through a little better," Wright said.

Minimum wage

The state's landmark law to increase in the minimum wage for seven consecutive years was enacted in 2016, but the greatest jump in wages happened in 2017.

Minimum hourly pay

"Life in the Portland metro area continues getting harder for people with entry- to mid-level wages."

— **Rep. Janelle Bynum**, D-Happy Valley

in the Portland metro area climbed from \$9.75 to \$11.25 in July of this year, after a 50-cent increase last year. The minimums were lower in other parts of the state, an acknowledgment from lawmakers of the variety of economic realities and cost of living in different parts of the state.

Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Happy Valley, who owns four McDonalds franchises in the Portland area, supported the minimum-wage hike, despite the added cost to her business.

"I'm going to be honest here. It is hard," Bynum said of balancing the increase in payroll with her family expenses.

"Life in the Portland metro area continues getting harder for people with entry- to mid-level wages, so it's good that raising the minimum wage helped give some relief to working families."

However, Bynum said raising the minimum wage fails to address the root cause of why so many families are struggling to make ends meet: the cost and availability of housing.

Full-day kindergarten

Full-day kindergarten began in Oregon in 2015, thanks to funding approved by the Legislature, but the law continues to have ripple effects, both for children's long-term education and families' short-term financial outcomes.

For instance, students in full-day kindergarten are more likely to read proficiently in the third grade, a critical benchmark for reaching on-time graduation in high school, Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, has said.

Plus, the longer children are in school, the less child-care parents have to pay for or work they have to miss.

DEPOSIT: 64 percent of beverage containers eligible for a deposit were redeemed in 2016

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Drop centers is processed in Oregon. That means plastic containers such as juice bottles that have been headed to landfills in recent weeks can go back to being recycled.

"The inclusion of new beverage products in the

bottle bill is a testament to the enduring success of Oregon's bottle deposit system," John Anderson, president of the OBRC, said in a statement. "We've worked hard to prepare so that Oregonians will experience a smooth, hassle-free transition."

According to the OLCC

website, in 2016 a total of 64 percent of beverage containers eligible for a deposit refund were returned for a refund in 2016.

A full list of included and excluded beverage containers for 2018 can be found online at www.oregon.gov/OLCC/

SETZER: Couple met as Peace Corps volunteers

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reached the driveway. Ice initially prevented the moving truck from reaching the house, however — the movers drove to Seattle to drop off other cargo before coming back to unload.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Setzer and her spouse rapidly fell in love with their new town.

"Everyone was incredibly welcoming," she said. "People went out of their way to be friendly."

The Indiana native noted that Pendleton and Windhoek (a city of 350,000) have similar rough-hewn beauty. The couple's view of the Blues from their living room window is similar to the one from their Namibian

home. The animals roaming the country, however, were quite different. In Namibia, they saw giraffes, elephants, lions, leopards, zebras, ostriches, hippos and others.

"Warthogs and baboons are the mule deer of Namibia," Setzer said. In Africa, Jim helped the Namibian government strengthen the country's health information system. Kathy's visa wouldn't allow her to work for pay, so she volunteered in an after-school program.

Kathy had met her epidemiologist husband when they both worked as Peace Corps volunteers in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). They married in 1980 and raised two daughters. Over

the next few decades, the couple also lived in Kenya as well as Namibia. They both speak fluent French.

In Pendleton, Kathy works for CAPECO as a case worker, helping low-income clients beef up their résumés with education and workforce development training.

In their new home, the Setzers have found opportunities to spend time outdoors, as well as enjoy the thriving art and music scene. They like to listen to music at the Great Pacific or attend local symphony or choral concerts.

"We are blown away by the amount of talent in this community," Setzer said.

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