

*SOMERSET FROM
2020 GRADUATES'
VIEW*

Devan Neely

SPEDA

When I think about Somerset, Kentucky, I first think, “This is home.”

I was born and raised here, and I truly cannot imagine growing up anywhere else. As a 2020 graduate of Somerset High School, I am often asked what my plans are post-graduation. When my response is attending the University of Kentucky, I am usually asked if I will come back to Somerset to live after graduating from college.

This answer is a little more complicated. In my mind, Somerset was the best place to grow up because of the small-town feel and small-school traditions I experienced at Somerset High School. I love the local businesses and tourism because we are so close to Lake Cumberland, which is my favorite place to escape on weekends and holidays. I have always envisioned myself raising a family here. But I have to ask myself, will it be feasible when I start my career? Will there be enough opportunity to advance in my area? Will my opinions and morals be valued by the community? What will Somerset look like in 10 years, and will it grow with me or become stagnant? I know my peers are asking themselves the same questions, and to keep young professionals returning to Somerset, our town should as well. Our community should evaluate its strengths, weaknesses, and growth potential to encourage graduates to return here to live.

In order to highlight my peers’ thoughts on our community, I formed a focus group of recent high school graduates as part of a project for my summer internship with the Somerset-Pulaski Economic Development Authority (SPEDA). These rising college freshmen — Olivia Stevens, Aryan Patel, Jonathan Ramsey, Grant Oakes, Bailey Patterson, and Chase Eastham — graduated from Somerset, Pulaski County, and Southwestern high schools and were interviewed about what they like about Somerset, what they would change, and what will make them want to return here to live after college.

My favorite memories as a child are wrapped up in the businesses and ideas that embody the spirit of this town. I remember going to Baxter's for a blueberry muffin with my mother. We would walk into the original location, and the sweet and bitter aroma of coffee would fill my head as the barista would start my mom's coffee before she ordered because she already knew what she drank.

I remember going to The Mole Hole at the Tradewinds Shopping Center and going behind the counter to help wrap soaps and gifts while my mother shopped for a new purse.

I remember going to Faulkner and Burnett farms to get fresh strawberries and sweet corn every summer with my parents, and the owners letting me sample some of the produce because I just could not wait until I got home to eat what we bought.

I remember going to the Seafood Buffet in Jamestown with all of my friends and family after a long day on the lake learning how to drive the boat with my dad. In my mind, Somerset and Lake Cumberland intermingle perfectly. Since I was a baby, my family and I have visited the lake every weekend to enjoy watersports, long weekends on the water, holidays, and friendships on our dock. I cannot imagine Somerset without the lake, as it has become my second home. Focus group participant Chase Eastham agreed with me, saying the lake was his favorite part of Somerset. It has taught me many lessons, including how important it is to respect our environment, how to drive and handle a boat, and how to let go of a difficult week and relax by appreciating what is in front of me. Lake Cumberland is so much more than just a tourist spot for me and many others in our community; it is a lifestyle. You cannot have Somerset without the lake, or the lake without Somerset. Even if you do not own a boat or go out on the water every weekend, our way of life in this town is directly impacted by the resources and tourism this gem

brings to our community. We must do everything we can to support it so that we can reap the full benefits of this unique aspect of our town.

I remember during Somerset High School's homecoming week anxiously awaiting the parade on Friday so I could collect all of the candy I could ever want with my friends while we stood in awe of the floats that the high schoolers created out of tissue paper and chicken wire, wondering how we could ever accomplish something like that when we finally got to high school.

Now, I am a Somerset High School graduate, and while this town has grown tremendously, many things have stayed the same. Businesses like the ones I mentioned remain, operating strong, with the same community and relationship values their No. 1 priority. Traditions in Somerset, old and new, have been framed around the spirit of family and togetherness that this town holds. I can't help but appreciate the progress this town has made while still staying true to its core values and keeping a "small-town" feel. Focus group participant Grant Oakes agreed, saying "I think its small enough that it has that homey feel to it, yet there's so much development all the time. I see something new every time I drive up 27."

When asked what their favorite part of Somerset was, the focus group appreciated how connected our community is.

"There's a sense of family about this community," Aryan Patel said. "Most of my friends are within five minutes of me. As long as connections remain in this town, it will be a great place for me to return."

New businesses and traditions like the festivals downtown keep the environment personal and connected, which is probably my favorite part of living here. Bailey Patterson's favorite part is the growing number of artistic opportunities.

“There’s a beautiful artistic community in Somerset that a lot of people aren’t privy to,” she said. “There is a tight knit group that’s been happening in Somerset recently. When I was in elementary school, the only opportunity for theatre was Lake Cumberland Children’s Theatre. When Flashback opened in 2012, it was a big opportunity for me.”

The group also appreciates beautification of the community through murals and artwork.

“Murals are really nice; they help brighten up downtown and make it look new and fresh,” Grant said.

Olivia added, “Somerset looks so much more pleasing to the eye, I’ve noticed.”

I see the growth we are making in the arts and in attracting new businesses and it makes me proud to live here and call Somerset home.

As a young adult entering college, I can appreciate everything that has happened in Somerset to see it grow, but I still see so much potential in our small town. We need to do more to encourage younger generations, like high schoolers and college students, to return here to live. Creating more jobs and internships in fields like health care, therapy centers, city/county government, law enforcement, religious centers, the arts, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) careers would encourage young professionals to consider what options they have for jobs in Somerset instead of having to go outside of our community to look for meaningful work.

Olivia hopes to be a dentist in the U.S. Air Force, so this type of exposure is important.

“One thing I don’t see very much of in Somerset is businesses reaching out about internships or shadowing,” she said. “For me, I’d have to go ask eight dentists to get 40 hours of shadowing. Those are a big deal to me. Maybe a program to get those jobs during transition years would help.”

Jonathan Ramsey also thought shadowing would be helpful for students to know what type of work they like or dislike before going to college. This would help students pick a major and career path earlier with fewer regrets.

Chase added that since he hopes to go into the medical field, early research would help give him a leg-up on that process.

“Lexington schools are able to begin research opportunities in high school through UK,” Chase said. “Hands-on research at the high school level through Somerset Community College would help begin our college careers a little earlier.”

If our town can provide this exposure for trending career areas, it will result in more awareness for jobs that exist at home and lead to more students returning after college. I would love to see internships and jobs relating to medical technology and engineering open up, as this is my interest area.

One of the top reasons I hear from my peers about why they do not wish to return here to live is the lack of job opportunities in their desired field. Maybe there aren't any jobs available, or maybe there just isn't awareness about those opportunities. If there are careers in those fields available here, my peers have simply not been informed about them. When we go to college, we will be recruited by surrounding towns and states to work and live there post-grad. If Somerset officials want to see graduates return home, there must be recruitment and job awareness efforts not only before, but during college, so that my generation knows about the options in our hometown.

We also have great potential to grow in our knowledge of diversity and what is going on in the world around us. As a small town, it can be easy for us to become wrapped up in our way of life. We need to see how other communities are dealing with these issues so we can learn from

their experiences. When we can understand and learn other communities' cultures, we can begin to diversify our own. This can be accomplished by having more festivals similar to the International Festival at Somerset Community College or developing culturally diverse restaurants.

When asked "What will increase your quality of life," Bailey said: "For any community that I live in, it's important to me that the community is inclusive and diverse. Events like the Juneteenth Charette, Chill Out and Proud, and more will make me want to come back here."

When we begin to diversify in these ways, it will increase open-mindedness in our community. For a thriving community, it is important for all people to feel their opinions are valued. Olivia said growing activism is one of the most unappreciated aspects of our town.

"I think it's good no matter what side you're on to see change in your community, be vulnerable in front of a crowd of people, and speak your truth," she said. "These actions will move mountains."

In younger generations like my own, sometimes it is difficult to decipher where we stand on political issues in the world or even our small town. It is even more difficult to navigate our own opinions when we are afraid to share them because they might be viewed as "wrong" by others in the community. In my experience, this is one of the top reasons people my age do not want to return to Somerset; they believe their opinions are looked down upon by others. Working to diversify our community and become more open-minded as a whole would eliminate this issue. If younger generations feel empowered to share their opinions, they will be more likely to value others' and share their own, ultimately motivating them to live in Somerset.

We've made a huge step forward as a community in entertainment. With all of the festivals and activities that have been happening, it's difficult to complain about there not being

anything to do in this town. As the focus group discussed what keeps them entertained in Somerset, the downtown festivals, Master Musicians Festival, and food trucks were popular to keep people excited, entice tourists from the lake, and establish connections with other people. To keep people here, we must continue to find ways to keep them entertained and happy because if someone feels like they can work and play in their own community, it will keep them excited about living there.

People my age want to have new experiences, whether it be trying new foods, hiking a new trail, or trying a new sport. When I asked the focus group what they like to do in Somerset for fun, almost everyone agreed that going to the lake and kayaking Buck Creek were among the most popular options. The drive-in theatre is also a valuable part of our community. If businesses and events can keep us exploring our own community, we will not feel the need to escape to find something new.

A good way to keep people excited would be to convert some areas that need remodeling into entertainment spaces. Aryan suggested that Cundiff Square is a prime location that needs some work. “We could turn this into a nice shopping center down there,” he said.

Grant added that featuring a grassy area with a mural, chairs, and stage for music to improve night life would be a great advancement.

When I asked the group what services or businesses they would like to see Somerset have, a common theme of overall health emerged. Indoor sports facilities were a major request.

“Almost every weekend I spent travelling with club soccer, trying to find facilities that had five to eight fields,” Chase said. “Bowling Green has a large park with 12 fields. These multisport facilities are a huge draw for tourism. I think multisport facilities could really boost this area.”

For tennis players, the only indoor options are in or near Lexington. The closest shooting range is 30 minutes away. Facilities like these would keep sports enthusiasts in our community and draw others in as well. Along with more opportunities to stay active, more convenient health food restaurants would improve our community's wellness.

I also asked the group what conflicts they wish to solve in Somerset. Drug abuse, homelessness, and generational poverty are among the top issues we see. Public transportation is also a concern to help those who cannot afford a car or those who want to cut down on their environmental impact. Buses and Uber were services everyone agrees would help our community. Olivia highlighted the benefits, saying, "Having Uber would be very beneficial. It would help drinking and driving, opportunities for transportation, and food and grocery delivery options."

More accessible walking and biking paths would also tremendously help, as well as electric scooter or bike rental services.

So, what will bring my peers and I back to Somerset? Ultimately, if there are career opportunities with ways to advance, I will most likely return. The focus group agreed with me on this, with most saying that if there are jobs for them, they would love to come back here to live. I love the idea of raising a family in a small town that is still growing to fit everyone's wants and needs. I love the idea of sending my kids through a small school like SHS so they can experience traditions like the Jumper Walk and the homecoming floats and parade. I love the idea of being so close to Lake Cumberland that we could spend our weekends there and have a home away from home.

These things already set Somerset apart from other towns, but we have the opportunity to really stand out. Part of loving where you live is having something to look forward to. If this

community can rally to keep younger generations informed about job opportunities, give them exposure in these areas, keep them feeling like tourists in their town, and make sure they know their opinions are valued, Somerset will thrive as the top choice for where graduates want to live. If we can continue to grow and live up to our potential while staying true to our roots of being a small town, graduates like myself will be excited to return.