

Jackson Prather
Somerset Economic Development Authority
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Intern Focus Group

I am Jackson Prather, and I will be starting my senior year at Centre College pursuing a degree in Environmental Studies with a focus on Pre-Law. I am currently applying for law school in hopes to be accepted and be one step closer to fulfilling my dream of becoming a lawyer. This summer I was given the opportunity to intern with SPEDA under Chris and Jessica. When agreeing to this internship I really did not know all it would entail. The past month and a half I have been blessed with getting to know Chris and Jessica along with many other people that visit the office that have truly allowed me to not only grow my connections but grow as a man. My internship at SPEDA is another milestone that has helped me in my future career aspirations. I have been able to sit side by side with Chris and Jessica while they fulfill not only their passion but their gift of giving back to the community of Somerset through the form of economic development. I have seen that to truly make a change it cannot just be just another job, but this is the way they live their lives looking for things they can do to help because they truly care about aiding the growth of the town they have lived in their whole lives and are extremely proud to say so.

One of the best parts of the internship was coming into work each day not really knowing what I would be doing. While being here I have learned and been shown so many new things. I was involved in various projects that allowed me to enhance my research, data analysis, and strategic planning abilities. Working closely with Jessica and Chris, I gained insights into the intricate processes involved in attracting new businesses, promoting entrepreneurship, and fostering regional economic

development. There would be days where Jessica would sit me down and show me how to work the bank account and explain everything, she then would allow me to “drive” the computer so that not only was I being shown how to do these things but given the opportunity to put my skills to practice. There would then be other days where we would be giving back to the community in the form of serving ice cream at God's Food Pantry to the homeless. No matter whether we were in the office or out and about working an event I was continuously learning.

While working alongside Chris and Jessica, it made me sit back and reflect on what Somerset means to me and what things that I hold near and dear to my heart. The first few things that came to mind for me were family and the lake. For me there's nothing more important other than God than family and friends. I always look forward to coming home from college to the friendly waves as you drive by your middle school teacher walking her dog downtown to the family cookouts on Sundays after church. Things like these are often taken for granted because in many cities knowing what car your friends drive and always seeing people you know when going out to eat just is not the case. For some people this may get old and seem unimportant but for someone that has lived out of town for three years I find myself missing this when I'm gone. Another thing that I have come to love about Somerset has come with age and understanding is how many families that are here today can trace their lineage back to Somerset for generations which I find interesting. I'll use a memory from high school. For example, when me and a kid were playing high school football together our dads told us that they played together just as we were 30 years earlier along with our grandfathers before then. I remember hearing that and thinking and wondering how that was. I truly believe that

when people come and live in Somerset and truly get to experience all the great people and the many beautiful outdoor options such as Lake Cumberland and the Daniel Boone National Forest that they never leave. They choose to lay their family roots here and add on to the ever growing and beautiful city that I am honored to call my home. The charm of the city lies in its vibrant community, rich history, and strong sense of togetherness. The next thing that's laid the foundation for my love for my hometown is Lake Cumberland. I can remember being just barely able to cast a fishing rod as a young child with my father, uncle and cousins going out on the lake every weekend at sunrise. I thought that was always the coolest thing, getting to hang out with the "big kids". From there on for about every weekend since 6 years old I have been on the lake and to be honest I got to where I was really taking it for granted not giving it the credit and love it deserved for all the things economically and environmentally for our town until two summers ago. Like I said I am currently enrolled at Centre College and some of my friends and I didn't have any plans one weekend and they asked if I could bring them down to Lake Cumberland and I said sure. Till this day they say that weekend was one of the best weekends they have had during college. Their faces were like it was Christmas morning, they kept on bragging about our town and our lake which filled me with pride knowing that this was where I was planning on spending the rest of my life. Since that day I have looked at my lake and town not that it's just Somerset, but its Somerset-the Capital of Lake Cumberland and I am and always will be proud to say that when talking to my peers. As you can see, I could write story after story about what the city of Somerset has meant to me but for me and SPEDA we not only wanted our thoughts and stories on Somerset, but we wanted to hear from others.

Near the end of the internship, I was tasked with gathering a group of peers from the Somerset area that had recently graduated from high school and have them come into the office for a luncheon where I would lead a conversation asking questions about Somerset and gather their thoughts and ideas. The focus of our conversation was what people, places or things make these college kids want to move back to Somerset after pursuing an education and what things about Somerset that were not meeting expectations. We were honored to have Kannon Tucker, Jonathan Ramsey, Erin Atwell, Aryan Patel, Chandler Godby and Tate Madden in the office for this conversation. This conversation covered many topics that could each be written and focused on all in themselves but when you look at them all together the main topic was what makes you proud to be a resident of Somerset and things that could use more attention to make us even prouder. Jonathan started us off by talking about one thing that draws him back to Somerset is the “Small but yet not too small-town feeling” he said he loves being able to know everyone and know that if he ever needs anything there's always people to lend a helping hand. The rest of the group agreed and started sharing what they thought supplemented that small town feeling. Tate responded with the “The local festivals like master’s Musicians, New Year’s downtown and the Foodstock events have been one thing that I have truly enjoyed attending with my friends and family”. We then begin to all share memories of fun times at the festivals and how we all think the events like those are crucial to family life and to retain people of our age to stay and raise families here. We began to think about ways and ideas of new festivals and Chandler brought up the idea of how awesome it would be to host a country themed concert/festival which was just one of the many themes that were brought up. Based on the conversations they

were just all so happy how Somerset and Pulaski County had begun like myself to start to truly see what Somerset is and has and promote it whether it be promoting local music artist Hunter Flynn and Logan Purcell or promoting new local businesses downtown like Serendipity. No matter big or small Somerset is proud to have these people and places that make it home. After talking about all the things that they felt that Somerset was doing right we then turned our attention to what Somerset could do better to meet the needs of not only the younger generation but the needs of all ages. No matter how well and great a place is there's always room for improvements and it's important that we start to fix these things to improve the quality of life of the residents and visitors of Somerset. Some of the main things that arose were the issues of homelessness and how there has been an influx of homeless people in the past couple years that when we were growing up, we had never experienced. Erin shared with the group how she had an alarming experience with a homeless man one morning at her home. We then began to brainstorm ways to alleviate the issue and Erin really focused on education and job training in hopes to allow these people to get back on their feet and to not always have to rely on others for their livelihoods. Kannon brought up that he thought counseling services could not only help this issue but help many other issues such as mental and family health. This discussion continued on a path on talking about the opioid crisis in not just Somerset but Kentucky as a whole. As you can see even to me who believes Somerset is perfect it still has many things that need to be given more attention to every town has its own issues. These issues don't define the town, it's what we do to fix them and there's no doubt with SPEDA, Mayor Keck and many others that they will continue to do all they can to make Somerset a better place than they found it.

The thing that makes these conversations effective is when people share how they truly feel. The conversation went on for hours diving into deep thought and was a true honor getting to sit at the table with some of Somerset's finest and brightest young ladies and gentlemen.

Interning with Jessica and Chris at SPEDA was an honor that provided me with many great experiences and allowed for my own professional growth. Many people other than Chris and Jessica also played a mentorship role in my internship such as Mayor Keck and Julie Harris. One of the main things that I will take with me was a quote that Chris told me which was "Big doors swing on small hinges." meaning that big plans happen from the detailed little things. I took this as the little things that happen in our town like the festivals, artwork and many other things that keep the city of Somerset on top. Somerset, Kentucky the natural beauty and feeling of community will forever be held deep in my heart. I am very grateful and excited to one day be able to start my family here in Somerset instilling the pride that I have to my children. I want to one day be able to sit down and know that I have helped change and push Somerset in a positive direction allowing for economic growth which as I have learned leads to many things such as family satisfaction and family retention because we all know Somerset would not be Somerset without the great and kind people that make up the Capital of Lake Cumberland.