

In a 1996 interview about Bruce Springsteen's song "Youngstown," *Washington Post* photographer Michael Williamson offered the best explanation for why the Steel Valley Heritage Area matters: "Youngstown's story," he said, "is America's story." John Russo and I have quoted Williamson many times over the last 20 years, as we have written about the Youngstown area and spoken with hundreds of students, community members, and reporters about industrialization and deindustrialization and the region's persistence over four decades since the loss of the steel industry that long shaped its economy and defined its identity.

To say that Youngstown's story is America's story recognizes that this community's history of industrial strength and innovation is at once unique and typical. The details are particular to this area -- the natural resources of Brier Hill black coal that made Youngstown the home of iron and steel manufacturing, the innovative design of the GM Lordstown auto plant in the 1960s, and the research and development today in advanced manufacturing and a small but growing tech sector. But the underlying story reflects a national narrative about America's role as an economic leader.

Youngstown's story is also a tale of a vibrant American city that was shaped by immigrants and migrants who came in search of jobs. They also built the institutions that fostered what sociologist Robert N. Bellah has called a "community of memory," a set of ideas and shared experiences -- good and bad -- that create a sense of place. Across the Steel Valley Heritage Area, people established the churches, unions, museums, symphonies, schools, and universities that brought people together, that occasionally divided them, and that gave this region important sources of pride and identity.

Of course, Youngstown's story is also one of struggle and resilience. Since the late 1970s, Youngstown has been treated as the "poster child for deindustrialization" by journalists, filmmakers, and artists who have examined the causes and the social costs of deindustrialization through the lens of this community. Soon after the steel mills shut down, Youngstown became famous for organizing the first-ever American proposal for a community to buy and operate a local industry. While that effort ultimately failed, the story remains powerful for many, as does the community's continuing responses to the half-life of deindustrialization. The Steel Valley Heritage Area still draws national and international attention. In recent weeks, it has been the focus of a powerful photojournalism piece in the *New York Times Magazine* focused on how local families are being affected by the closing of the Lordstown plant, hosted the Labor Attaché from the German Embassy for site visits and talks about changes in work, and welcomed delegations from global businesses and communities who want to learn about Youngstown's Business Incubator, its neighborhood revitalization projects, and the development of advanced manufacturing.

The Steel Valley Heritage Area has a rich and significant history of growth, struggle, and resilience. We must recognize and preserve its history now, because we are beginning to lose the generation that lived through the steel mill closings. The memory and appreciation of their work and their experiences deserves more attention. By supporting and coordinating cultural heritage efforts, the Steel Valley Heritage Area will help ensure that the history of this region will not be forgotten.