

Nestled beside a river that spills from the mountains, tucked into a cranny of Pennsylvania and wrapped in ribbons of looping highway, lies Pottstown.

Pottstown is a rust belt city, the kind with smog and coal dust still wedged in its crevices—reminders of a time when steel mills breathed life into America's metropolises, weaving iron and carbon into building blocks for bridges and transforming workers' sweat into stacks of money. Riding high on the cresting wave of the American economy, the city carried industrial promise in its smog-smearred underbelly.

Now, however, the mills are closed. The fat furnaces no longer huff smoke into the southeastern Pennsylvania air. Developers have moved in, ladling the ground with asphalt so that parking lots form like puddles beside dilapidated concrete buildings. Some history books say that it is a complex interplay of factors--economic, social, technological, and political--that have caused Pottstown's industrial promise to rust over.

That doesn't mean, though, that Pottstown's promise has rusted over.

Tucked into its little cranny of Pennsylvania, lying just outside the reach of Philadelphia's skyscrapers and newly-constructed high-rises, Pottstown cradles just as many dreams between its small-town arms as any big city. Down the historic sidewalks of High Street, small businesses sit like little testaments to community and family.

Step into Once Upon a Time, for example, and find an array of carefully arranged dresses in a kaleidoscope of colors, the consignment boutique's metal racks stocked full with a vibrant patchwork of different clothes. Many of these clothes are donations from the local community, gathered and sold by Gina Spease, who recently moved her store to Pottstown's downtown, fueled by hope for Pottstown's revitalization.

Walk a little further down High Street and see the small house coated in bright, persimmon-orange paint. The quaint building is home to Elena's, a pizza and catering business owned by Guatemalan immigrant Cesar Mendez. In running his establishment, Mendez says he is fulfilling a dream of having a restaurant named after his mother.

When I collaborated with the other staff members of my school's student-run newspaper to write feature articles spotlighting businesses like Spease and Mendez's, I realized that Pottstown is teeming with dreams. As the child of two Vietnamese immigrants, much of my upbringing was contoured by the idea of the American dream--what it is, how it is attained, and what it means to chase it. Moving to Pennsylvania from Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, my parents were tasked with building new lives for themselves in the US with virtually nothing. My father taught himself English in the grease-soaked kitchens of the Wendy's where he worked; he bonded with my mother as the two of them collected recyclable trash for money.

However, despite the hardships that they faced--despite the discomfort and uncertainty that comes with carrying the burdens of immigration and war--my parents' stories of their first years in America are still laced with the beauty of community and empathy. Their stories carry images

of the first winter jackets they received from the kind-eyed workers at their local church, of the teachers who volunteered to teach them English, sticking with them even when English words felt like heavy rocks in their mouths.

When I look at Pottstown, I see the same things that showed my parents the ways that America can be beautiful--the things that showed my parents that their own American dreams could be attainable. When I look at Pottstown, I see organizations like ACLAMO, dedicated to the empowerment of Pottstown's Latino community, oriented with the mission of increasing access to resources spanning education, social services, and health. I see the community cleanups, where groups of people from all backgrounds gather in the Edgewood Cemetery to make sure that no person's final resting place goes uncared for. I see small businesses where the owners treat customers like family, where people know each other by name and talk to each other as long-time friends--because that's what they are.

Head to any part of Pottstown, from the multicolored lights illuminating the sign of Steel River Playhouse--inviting passerby to stay for the town's latest musical--to the neighborhoods where children laugh and play basketball in the streets, and find that Pottstown is characterized by its people.

To some, the city is still smog-dusted and coal-coated; it still lingers in the history of the industrial powerhouse it once was. To some, Pottstown simply exists in the shadow of its big-city neighbor, sitting quietly away from the glare of Philadelphia's bright lights and bustling traffic.

Look closer, however, and find that industry and money are never the things that make a city. Instead, it is the people--relentless and tough but caring and tenderhearted all at the same time. Pottstown is built on these kinds of people; the ones who are determined to make it so that, in the clearing of the steel mills' rusty smoke, a stronger city lies in wait underneath. These are the people who make Pottstown both a community and a home, both a place for pursuing dreams and a place for achieving them. To me, Pottstown is its people, and there is nothing more special than that.