



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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The Impact Fellowship: Building the Talent Pipeline in West Virginia

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Natalie Roper is the Executive Director of Generation West Virginia. In this role, she works with local and state partners to strengthen statewide programming and infrastructure needed to attract, retain and advance young talent in the Mountain State.

Roper received her undergraduate and master's degree in public policy from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.

She is a 2017 Southern Living "Southerner of the Year," 2016 WV Living "Wonder Woman" and a proud alumna of the 2015 Leadership WV class.

A West Virginian by choice, Roper is motivated each day to help make the state a place where more of the next generation can choose to stay.

For decades, too many young people have had to leave West Virginia in order to pursue job opportunities elsewhere. Census data shows that an average of 41 people left the state every day in 2016. Trends such as these threaten the stability of our tax base and greatly limit our ability to attract new employers to the state who depend on access to an available workforce. Attracting – *and retaining* – young talent is truly the most foundational economic development strategy for West Virginia.

In developing our strategy at Generation West Virginia, I heard a consistent message from both employers and young people: employers were struggling to find qualified candidates to fill open positions and young people struggled to find quality jobs that would allow them to stay in the Mountain State. We identified a hole in the talent pipeline. Young people can't stay in a place without a job and we know that new and existing companies can't succeed in West Virginia without access to a skilled, qualified workforce. We set out to solve this problem from both sides of the equation and, in doing so, worked to transform opportunity in West Virginia.

In January 2017, we launched our Impact Fellowship program to connect young people with quality jobs in growing sectors across the state and connect employers with a pipeline of the top talent they need to succeed, grow and create more jobs in West Virginia.

Through the program, Generation West Virginia partners with employers across the state who serve as host companies, offering yearlong, paid fellowship positions in diverse and growing sectors. Impact Fellows are employed in



innovative work for one year at top West Virginia companies at a minimum salary of \$31,000 plus benefits. Whether fresh out of college or looking to transition careers, Fellows gain valuable first-hand experience working alongside some of the best teams in the state at companies that value their energy and fresh ideas.

While we know that young people can't choose West Virginia without quality jobs like the ones represented in this program, we also know that this generation is especially impact driven. Young people today choose to stay in places where they feel they can be involved and invested in defining that place's future. To meet that need, we've created a unique model, where Fellows volunteer every Friday to work on local projects in partnership with area nonprofits. By the end of the program's first year, Impact Fellows will have donated more than 2,500 hours – valued at \$52,794 – to local nonprofits across the state.

Through this workweek model, Impact Fellows are helping to enrich the communities they call home, while helping local nonprofits expand and enhance their reach and capacity to create meaningful change. In the program's first year, our Fellows have been a part of building houses and providing market analysis support for farmers markets, as well as starting grassroots organizations to make their own ideas come to life.

In addition, Fellows gather each quarter for cohort retreats in different locations across the state



Executive Director Natalie Roper addressing the audience at the 2017 Impact Fellowship Press Conference



In the first year of the program, the Impact Fellowship was able to help young West Virginians like Jacob Howell stay in their home state. A native of Hurricane, West Virginia, and a proud graduate of Marshall University, Jacob didn't think he was going to be able to stay in West Virginia and find work as a software developer.

Through the Impact Fellowship, Jacob found work in his field at fintech firm Core 10 in Huntington, just 30 minutes away from where he grew up. Through the program, he is also working to start the first game developers' association to help connect aspiring and established game developers working in the state, like himself, with the support and work they need to choose West Virginia while continuing to do the work they love.

We are more than doubling the size of the program in its second year to create even more opportunities for people like Jacob to stay, come home or choose West Virginia for the first time. For year two of the Impact Fellowship, we are partnering with 11 host companies and offering 17 fellowship positions that will start in September 2018. The 2018-2019 host companies are Alpha Technologies, Buzz Food Service, Core 10, EntreEd, Highland Hospital, The Mills Group, Mylan, PracticeLink, Quality Insights, The Thrasher Group and WesBanco. ▽

For those interested in learning more about the Impact Fellowship, please visit WeImpactWV.org. We are currently accepting applications for the 2018-2019 class of Impact Fellows.



Impact Fellow Jacob Howell

to learn from and speak with innovative thought leaders and change makers, all while enjoying new restaurants and adventures in the wild and wonderful outdoors. Over the course of the year, Fellows gain a nuanced understanding of the challenges our state faces while having a seat at the table to identify possible creative solutions.

Through the Impact Fellowship, our goal is threefold:

- 1) Connect young people to opportunities that ensure they can choose West Virginia

- 2) Connect employers with top talent
- 3) Highlight the true potential that exists for the next generation to work, live and thrive in West Virginia

We started small in 2017 with five companies signing on to offer seven fellowship positions throughout the state. In the program's first year, we received nearly 200 applications from across the state – and around the world – for highly competitive positions in a range of sectors, including technology, communications, finance and data analysis.