

**Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition  
Episode 6: "Those Still to Come"  
Presented by the Institute for Science & Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature &  
Science along with House of Pod**

**KRISTAN UHLENBROCK:** In the 1970s, a new generation arrived in Craig, Colorado. They came for well-paying jobs at the newly opened coal plant and coal mines. They started families. Their children grew up together, walking to school and knowing all their neighbors, even as Craig's population nearly doubled.

Brittany Young's childhood was shaped by those small town traditions.

**BRITTANY YOUNG:** The best way I think to describe it is when I was in middle school, the middle school's about three or four blocks down from downtown and my best friend and I's, both of our mothers, owned shops down there. They still do, they're like three doors down from each other.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Now in her twenties, Brittany is the Assistant Director for the Craig Chamber of Commerce.

**BRITTANY:** And every day after school we would walk downtown and there was a little coffee shop bakery place called Serendipities, and they were both so close with my, with both of our parents that we would be able to go in there every day after school and just say "put it on our tab," and we thought it was the coolest thing because we could just put put any charges on our tab and once a month our moms would walk down across the street and go pay for it. And so I think that just represents how close this community is and we're very trustworthy, trustworthy people here.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Coal enabled a way of life in Craig that many cherish. That sense of community is still a draw. But for those growing up here now, knowing big changes are ahead, will that feeling be enough for them to stay?

**BRITTANY:** I originally never pictured myself coming back to Craig, I actually just got a letter from what I wrote in high school that was I wrote in my senior year of high school that was to yourself five years in the future. And in that letter I did a lot of things that I said I was going to in focusing in a business path, but I, in all caps letters I said I was going to be in a big city, preferably California. When people want a four year degree, you can't get that here in Craig. So at some point, most people, unless you're going to do it online, will leave and they go to college and they experience life outside of that.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Brittany hastens to add that she loves Craig, and that she did stay to get her associate's degree before transferring to a four-year college in Grand Junction. She jumped at the chance to come back to take a job with the Chamber.

The broader phenomenon she's describing is very real. All across America, small towns have been steadily losing population. Younger residents are leaving to pursue jobs and education elsewhere. I know, because I'm one of them. Roughly half of all rural counties in the U.S. have fewer people today than they did in the year 2000. We talk a lot about identity in this series.

Which often comes down to values that a community holds. And while we spoke with many who are passionate about the town -- its current identity, and its potential future -- that's not universal. Not everyone feels at home in Craig.

*(walking & greeting)*

Just south of main street, we stopped in to a local screen printing shop, which designs custom T-shirts, hats, and sweatshirts. There, we met Marie Bolton.

**MARIE BOLTON:** I've worked here for six years. I was hired when I was a junior in high school. I've always been an artist. And now I'm an artist, a salesman, a project manager and office manager. So I'm the whole big deal here.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Marie was born in Craig. They're a talented artist and cartoonist. They designed the bulldog mascot costume for the local high school. They like the peacefulness of small town life. But they've never felt completely welcome, either.

**MARIE:** If you're different, you kind of aren't treated as well. As someone who is queer, I kind of have a hard time making friends and connecting with the community.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Soon, they'll move on from Craig.

**MARIE:** I'm actually getting my certification to become a lineman. I'm excited for sure. So it's just it's a lot of it's super dangerous because you're you know, you're working on the hot lines, right. So it's just maintaining and building infrastructure for electrical. I applied to school so I'll be leaving here in August.

**KRISTAN (narration):** They doubt they'll ever come back.

In our last episode, we heard Wade Buchanan of the Colorado Just Transition Office say that economic diversification will be key for Craig. And it's true. Craig needs new industries that can create well-paying jobs. But communities also require broader infrastructure. Schools. Shops. Restaurants. Transportation. More housing. A feeling of inclusivity.

With coal on its way out, Craig needs these building blocks in order to retain and attract the next generation of up-and-coming professionals, families, and students. What will this town mean to them? What will it look like by the time they arrive? To find some of those new opportunities, we had to put coal aside for now and start looking at Craig a little differently.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN UHLENBROCK:** This is *Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition*, presented by the Institute for Science & Policy and the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. I'm your host, Kristan Uhlenbrock.

As a society, we tend to put a lot of expectations on future generations. We're confident in their potential to innovate, to thrive, to advance humanity. To believe in youth is to believe in a hopeful future.

But that mantra can also make it a little too easy to kick our current challenges down the road. We can't just expect that wicked societal problems, like climate change and energy transitions, will be solved by someone else, some other time. You can sense the urgency in the voice of one young activist speaking at a climate strike in 2019.

**COLORADO YOUTH CLIMATE STRIKE CLIP:** *To all the adults who just don't get it, you scold us for missing school, you tell us that we're ruining our lives, our future. You need to understand that we're striking to protect our future, the future that you want us to have. One that you were guaranteed, the one that we were falsely promised. Your inaction requires our reaction.*

**KRISTAN (narration):** The next generation won't automatically save Craig, unless we help set them up for success. Educational opportunities will be crucial. So we took a drive over to Colorado Northwestern Community College, or CNCC for those who know it. The main campus sits on a hill just north of downtown. It's a strikingly modern design, with clean lines and big glass windows. And it has some unexpected features. Like the geothermal field out back. It conserves electricity by heating and cooling the college's buildings using only ground water. I was pretty impressed.

Community colleges become important cultural hubs by default in many rural areas. They offer sporting events, libraries, and high speed internet access. Often, they're one of the largest employers in their region. And they've long provided affordable technical education.

And the college's role is now more important than ever. As we walked through campus on a self-guided tour, we serendipitously met Sasha Nelson. She's the Executive Director of Workforce Education and Economic Development at the college. And like many we've spoken with in our series, she grew up here.

**SASHA NELSON:** We moved when I was young to Craig, so most of my education and growing up years were here in Craig, where it was, even in those years, more affordable to raise a family on a modest income. So, very connected, deep roots. I have left the area several times. But I can't resist coming home to this valley and the amazing natural resources that are here and the people that are here and of course, family, as well.

**KRISTAN (narration):** When she started at the college, she remembers the focus being a little different than it is today.

**SASHA:** I was brought on in April of 2019 and inherited, at that time, a community education program. We were doing a lot of training and programming that is very important but, lifelong learning, where we were helping people inspire them with a passion or a project or travel, but it didn't necessarily teach work based skill, and it was failing miserably. Our enrollment was tanking. We were costing the college a lot of money with that program, it was not helping serve our communities or our college.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Just months later, in January 2020, Tri-State announced the coal closures. Hundreds of coal workers would potentially be looking for other careers.

**SASHA:** *And so we're hustling really fast to retool community education into workforce training. That doesn't mean we've abandoned the lifelong learning programming, it just means that we've reprioritized, cybersecurity, business, mine training, massage therapy...these are all new*

*programs to us that we've recently developed or programs that we think need to be reviewed, revisioned, brought up to date, changed in some form or fashion.*

**KRISTAN (narration):** There's some question about how many coal employees will actually embrace new industries. Many will just retire. Some may move to a different state. But a not-insignificant number of early- and mid-career coal workers may be open to trying something else. And if the college can help them find a new path, Sasha feels that responsibility.

**SASHA:** My real job is to peddle inspiration, to remind people that because of those characteristics and those strengths and those qualities we have growing up and being part of this community, we can transition into just about anything we want to be. Coal miners can become coders, route salesmen can become high tech business owners, anything is possible for our community when we set our minds to it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Our careers may not always play out exactly as we envisioned. Sasha hopes that whatever that different future looks like for coal workers, they'll be able to stay here in Craig if they want to.

**SASHA:** I hesitate to go so far as, as saying that the college is going to save the community. We are one important aspect of the puzzle. And when we piece all of those pieces together, we have a bright future in front of us.

**KRISTAN (narration):** We continued our tour through the college. It was summer, so the normally busy hallways were quiet. We stopped in at the President's office. As it happened, our mid-July visit coincided with a leadership change.

**LISA JONES:** My name is Lisa Jones and I'm the incoming president for Colorado Northwestern Community College.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Tomorrow's her first official day. Wearing a tailored red blazer to match school colors, Dr. Jones exudes warmth and curiosity. She talks like we're already old friends. She loves HGTV and interior design and gardening. She's already considering which type of all-terrain-vehicle to buy. And, perhaps most importantly for her new role, she knows firsthand what it's like to rely on a community college.

**LISA:** I was not on a path to go to college, nobody ever asked me if I wanted to. The counselors put me on a, basically a homemaker track, I mean I learned how to balance a household budget and how to fill out a check, you know, fill that out. But that was the extent of my, my math skills. And it wasn't until I went to the community college that I even believed that I had a future. I am the first of my family that has gone to college. My parents, they're still together, they're still alive, thank God, and they're, you know, late 70s and early 80s, and they originated from a small town. My mom's from Mississippi, my dad is from Riseborough, Georgia, and they brought with them these, you know, kind of values of hard work, and you know you often see in a rural community where people are very close knit, they rely on one another.

**KRISTAN (narration):** She found a niche in higher education, working her way up in a variety of administrative roles in Michigan and later in Texas. Now, she's entering her new role as the college's President at a crucial moment.

**LISA:** If we're going to attract people to come in to want to stay here and to love it here. Then certainly there must be jobs, there must be great housing, there must be great education.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Housing, education, a sense of community -- she was echoing what we've heard from others about a need to think more broadly than jobs.

**LISA:** You know, even though we're not the driver of city and county goals -- that is the leadership of those cities and counties -- our job is to be the education leader to provide the support, and to be for any of y'all who live in, in this region, we work for you. We want to do that. So you don't have to leave. We want to not only offer as much as we can to people, so they don't have to go to Denver, but we want to offer things to people that they can't get in Denver. So even with like our aviation tech program which I view as one of our signature programs, we do it and what we offer different is these experiences, being able to fly and navigate through the mountains. I'm not saying that other programs don't do it, but you're going to get that here, I mean, it's one of the least expensive programs in the nation.

**KRISTAN (narration):** I asked her what she would say to a coal worker considering whether to stay and retrain or leave Craig altogether.

**LISA:** I would say some of the short term training programs, welding, solar technician. I would certainly direct you toward those. If you're wanting to get a job, and you get one right away, I would say do one of our short term programs to get you in there, get you a great job with benefits. But look back our way, if there's something that might interest you in a different area that may take a little longer while you're going through college, because some of our business and industry partners actually pay people to go through our programs and finish. So, typically, in the healthcare area, they do that a lot. And through Bureau of Land Management, they also are paying people who they, who may be interested in working for them in fire safety in some of the Ranger programs. So lots of things that we can talk to people about to get working.

**KRISTAN (narration):** We wrapped up our conversation so that Dr. Jones could continue preparing for her first official day on the job. But before we left, she offered one final thought that might end up serving as a motto for her tenure.

**LISA:** We can be small, but we can be mighty and we can offer the same opportunity as any big place.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** When you're a community college outside a major metro area, building a reputation can be hard. But it definitely helps to have dinosaurs in the basement. Our tour guide is Sue Mock.

**SUE MOCK:** So welcome to Colorado Northwestern Field Museum.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Sue's the paleontology coordinator here. Small and wiry at just five feet tall, she's wearing a T-shirt with a list of dinosaur species. Like me, she's originally from the Hoosier State.

**SUE:** I lived in Indiana most of my life until I had children, and then we decided we were going to move to Michigan. I raised the kids and when I hit that point, that's when I ended up coming out here.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Six years ago, she headed west on a Greyhound bus.

**SUE:** For sure I'm coming to Colorado, where do I want to go? So I started looking at the map, and I'm going no, I went to northwest corner. So I'm northwest corner northwest corner and I'm honing in, I'm honing in, I'm honing in...Craig's the only town in the northwest corner. Okay, I guess that's it. And then I started looking like real estate ads and I started doing some different things. And when I got here I started looking and everything that I had looked up was all from Craig, that I had looked up from northwest Colorado. Every little thing. So I knew I was supposed to be here.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Today, she's leading us through the college's field museum. It was a small operation for many years. A few assorted fossils here and there. But everything changed in 2014 with one big discovery.

**SUE:** The next exhibit we come in to is actually a replica of a tibia from Walter our dinosaur.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Walter was a duck-billed hadrosaur who lived about 74 million years ago. When his remains were found in the nearby town of Rangely, it was big news. Now, he's a celebrity around these parts. Sue points to the replica and revels in the details.

**SUE:** This replica is about two and a half feet long by about a foot diameter, and you can see arthritis on the joints where he had gotten bit at one point in time. The arthritis is actually something that is rare that you can find on there, it's really really pretty cool though.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Walter was a momentous find for an up-and-coming museum. But bones like that usually end up getting sent off to bigger institutions. The head paleontologist Liz Johnson felt strongly that Walter should stay put.

**SUE:** Liz the paleontologist had decided we needed to keep these bones in northwest Colorado. We didn't want them shipped off to Denver. So she said, what do I do to get a repository?

**KRISTAN (narration):** Federal fossil repositories have to receive special certification to house dinosaur bones. It's rare for a small community college to win that level of approval. Pretty much unheard of. But because of the Walter find -- and some persistence -- the college earned repository status in 2015. That moment coincided with Sue's arrival in Craig. When she learned about Walter, she was hooked. She'd never worked in paleontology before. But she knew she'd found what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

**SUE:** In order to get down here and touch the bones. I had to take the classes. Well okay, I have to go back to school. So I went back to school. So I am now working on my master's degree, with the plan of eventually getting my doctorate, I hope, but I'm working on a master's in museum studies, and I'm learning how to do all the things we need here at the museum.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Visitors to the field museum can see the replica of Walter. But now, Sue is taking us to see the real deal.

**SUE:** There's more!

**KRISTAN (narration):** We descend into the basement.

**SUE:** So we're going down to the morgue, it feels like. I love it though.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Sue's joking - sort of. It's not really as cold as a morgue, or as creepy. But we enter a modest sized lab filled with fossils. Some are laid out on pallets. Others are on gurneys donated by the local hospital. For Sue, this is a place to uncover Craig's ancient past.

**SUE:** The area we're about to enter is called the repository. This is a federal and state curatorial vertebrate fossil repository. Long story short, we are stewards of bones found on BLM land, which is the Bureau of Land Management. We are taking care of their bones, and the state has also allowed us to do curatorial for them. We can't go to Walmart and buy replacement bones, so we ask you keep your hands to yourself unless I hand things to you. You will get to pet a lot of things, and it's kind of fun.

**KRISTAN (narration):** She opens up a large cabinet to show off more Walter fragments.

*(cabinets rattling open)*

**SUE:** So this is the fun stuff. This is what we call bone impression. It's a very smooth, smooth surface. And this actually laid on the pelvis, and when the pelvis was being fossilized, minerals leached out and made this very thin layer that is like a mirror of the bone, and it's something that I found a lot of in Walter, and it's really fun. And then skin, this is skin. Different size skin. Once again, it just, it looks like chicken skin, except this is a little bit -- this is more like turkey skin, I guess would be a better description.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Students can get a two year associate's degree in paleontology, an affordable way to start a career in an expensive field. And unlike most other programs of its size around the country, students start on fossil work quickly.

**SUE:** One thing unique about our paleontology program is students come in and get to work on specimens while they're learning. So they're in here they're touching bones as they're learning these things that doctorate level people are just now getting into. And so it's, it's fascinating. We get people from all over the country, we've had from Texas, Florida, some of the local ones, Oklahoma. I forget where she said somebody coming from this year. New Mexico I believe or something. We do offer the field season where you get to go out for two weeks in the summer and dig dinosaur bones in the quarry. And we do that for credit, or for not credit either way you want to go. It does cost about two or three grand, but you got to figure that cost covers your cost, your food, cost of materials, cost and all that kind of good stuff. So it's really not a bad deal to go dig dinosaur bones.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Walter is also a potential tourist draw. Visitors can come to the museum and feel a cast of his turkey-like skin for themselves.

**SUE:** The big push has been building up the tourism. I'm pushing, and it wasn't my idea, it came from someone a couple years ago but they said -- "pet a dinosaur." I would like to have us have

something out at the airport to say, come pet the dinosaur. When you come into Craig: “pet the dinosaur.” Directions on where to come pet the dinosaur. Because it's unique, and the fact that this is here instead of Denver, and we're keeping it here. Come to northwest Colorado and pet the dinosaur.

**KRISTAN (narration):** We mentioned earlier those crucial building blocks that Craig needs, and cultural attractions are one of them. Dinosaur tourism can have significant economic impact. In 2017, visitors to Dinosaur National Monument in Utah spent over 18 million dollars. Craig is right on the way there from Denver. Sue hopes the town can begin to capture some of that revenue along a new dinosaur corridor.

**SUE:** Whatever it takes to get them to stop in town. If it's to stop here to pet the dinosaur on the way to Utah or to Dinosaur National Monument -- the goal is to get them to stop here.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Sue was at a different point in her life when she came to Craig all those years ago on the bus. But she stayed because there was something here for her. A passion. An opportunity that wasn't tied to coal. We asked her if she felt optimistic that the next generation will be able to find the same.

**SUE:** There's a lot of hope. I have a lot of hope for Craig. I see so much potential and so much growth, just in the six years I've been here, it's really really grown. The, the community as a whole has grown. And I think part of that has to do with coal going out, because people are realizing, you know, we're not going to have coal to rely on. So what are we going to rely on, we have to rely on each other. We have to rely on the community.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** Sue might be onto something. Seemingly everywhere we went in Craig, we heard about new cultural ideas sprouting up. Projects rooted in place and heritage. Things that aren't related to mining or the energy sector at all. Take public art, for example.

**ARIANE CALDWELL:** My name is Ariane Caldwell and I'm the secretary of the Northwest Colorado Arts Council.

**MELANIE KILPATRICK:** And I'm Melanie Kilpatrick, I'm the board chair for the Northwest Colorado Arts Council.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Ariane specializes in charcoal portraits and Melanie creates upcycled mixed material sculptures. Both under 40, they want to expand the regional art scene beyond Steamboat Springs. So they partnered with the Craig Chamber of Commerce to open a public studio and showroom.

**ARIANE:** Craig is a, it's a very artistic and creative place. There was just really no central area for those artists to come together and work off of each other.

**MELANIE:** We tend to have a strong heritage arts community, so textiles, metalworking, saddlery, which is yeah, pottery ceramics things that are really authentic to our community and our kind of rural setting here. So I think we have a unique offering. We just really needed to



create the organization where people can really network together and take advantage of collaborating with other artists or maybe learning some skill sets, as far as arts as a business.

**KRISTAN (narration):** In recent years, they've hosted downtown art walks and gallery events. With the encouragement of the Chamber, they're hoping art can become a bigger part of the post-coal future here.

**MELANIE:** We've seen examples of other communities such as Moab, Salida, that have been former energy-centric economies that have really taken the arts and evolved that into more of their economy and being a primary source of quality of life, you know bringing tourism in I think it's just a huge element, and just thinking creatively about how we move forward. I think it's not always just visual arts but just how we are thinking outside the box to keep the momentum forward of how our community is going to look in 5, 10 years from now, I would really like the arts to be a huge part of that.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Art is one potential path for reinvention in Craig.

**MELANIE:** When I try to advocate for the value of the arts, I try to encourage people that maybe aren't, or don't like label themselves as an artist, or, you know, just people that would like to support the arts or, I mean we go to the movies, we enjoy maybe a mural downtown, artwork in a coffee shop just creative interiors and just maybe as we rehab some of our infrastructure and buildings downtown just what that creative space looks like and how we stay authentic to our communities.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Coal has been the center of gravity here for so long that it would be easy to overlook all of this new creative energy in town. But people are noticing. People like Scott Pankow. He's the superintendent of the Moffat County School District. At a busy Chamber event, we pulled him aside to ask what he's seen that gives him optimism.

**SCOTT PANKOW:** You know what's really stood out to me, the pride that people have in the community, and the boomerang kids that are coming, and I call them kids, they're probably in their 20s and 30s. But when you're my age, everyone's a kid, but the boomerang coming back, and just really the passion, how much they just love this area.

**KRISTAN (narration):** That term, boomerang kids, is fascinating. Many we've talked to embody that. I think of Kirstie, the wine bar owner from earlier in our series. And Brittany from the Chamber of Commerce. And Sasha from the college. They all went away. But they all came back. The next generation in Craig will find very different opportunities than their parents did. Some may still choose to leave. But for the people here now, there's a responsibility to build a strong foundation for all those still to come.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** The Yampa River is the lifeblood of northwestern Colorado. It could bring tourism and new business opportunities to the region. But this wild stretch of water is also under threat like never before. In our next episode of *Coal at Sunset*, we'll hear one Craig resident's deeply personal story of a life spent on the river, and his hopes for the Yampa's role in a post-coal future. Be sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

Coal at Sunset was created by the Institute for Science & Policy, a project of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, produced in partnership with House of Pod. I'm your host, Kristan Uhlenbrock. This show was written by Trent Knoss. Our producer is Juliette Luini. Our executive producers are Trent Knoss and me, Kristan Uhlenbrock. Our field recorders are Nicole Delaney and Juliette Luini.

Our story editor is Catherine Jaffee. Sound Design and Mastering by Jason Paton. Graphic Design by Nicole Donde-linger. Web Design by Carlos Mosqueda. Special Thanks to George Sparks and the town of Craig, Colorado.

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