



Why Rural?

How the Cranwell Family Foundation Is Living Its “Locally Grounded, Globally Minded” Ethos

As the Cranwell Family Foundation (CFF) continues to grow in impact and clarity of purpose, we regularly reflect on the “why” behind our philanthropic priorities and the organizations that are part of our philanthropic portfolio. One of those “why” questions is: **Why rural?** Why is CFF engaged with and supporting local nonprofits in their efforts to **improve educational opportunities for rural students** and to otherwise **invest in the next generation of rural leaders** who can navigate and contribute to both local and global communities. Why is CFF interested in programs that focus on **rural identity, opportunity, and belonging**?

For a foundation rooted in Southwest Virginia, a region shaped by rural landscapes, traditions, and values, it’s a question that strikes close to home. The answer is both deeply personal and fully aligned with our mission: **our commitment to unlocking opportunities and unleashing potential starts with honoring the places and people who shape our own story.**

In recent years, CFF has invested in programs that strengthen rural identity, expand educational pathways, and cultivate leaders who value both their local roots and their role in a broader, interconnected world. This work is not a shift in our priorities. It is a natural expression of **our belief that rural communities hold unique strengths, and that empowering rural youth benefits us all.**

From Appalachia to Abroad: Rural Stories with Global Connections

Across all our giving – whether in the mountains of Virginia, the refugee camps of Kenya, or the valleys of Switzerland – we seek out communities that are often overlooked or underestimated. We focus on education as a means to foster dignity, agency, and a sense of belonging.

As we focus on that within the rural context, two standout examples of our “locally grounded” engagement are our partnership with and support for the [Center for Rural Education](#) (CRE) at Virginia Tech (VT) and the [Community Foundation of the New River Valley](#) (CFNRV).

Center for Rural Education: Advancing Rural Opportunity Close to Home

Founded in 2022, Virginia Tech’s **Center for Rural Education** (CRE) is all about collaborating with rural communities in and around Southwest Virginia to improve educational opportunities for rural students: ensuring quality K–12 educational experiences, increasing college and career access, improving availability of the latest technologies, and investing in local enterprises. CRE integrates knowledge from across disciplines to bring greater attention to the talents and needs of rural schools and communities.

CRE’s Founding Director, Amy Azano, has studied how structural challenges related to poverty and educational inequities can adversely affect rural schools and communities. As a first-generation college student from a rural community, Azano, understands these challenges both professionally and personally, and also believes in the power and promise of rural schooling.

Some examples of CFF’s rural-focused engagement with CRE include our support for the [Summer Enrichment Experience at Virginia Tech \(SEE VT\)](#) and the ***Rural Belonging in Local and Global Contexts*** study abroad program.

SEE VT: Inspiring Rural Youth to See Their Value

In 2025, CFF provided funding to support CRE's [Summer Enrichment Experience at Virginia Tech \(SEE VT\)](#) summer camp. The camp serves 50 students from low-income rural communities, most of whom would be first-generation college students. Over several days, these students experience a mix of academic instruction, wellness activities, hands-on learning, and residential life on campus.

Beyond building skills, SEE VT is about cultivating identity – helping students recognize the inherent value of their rural communities and see themselves as capable of shaping their future without leaving their sense of place behind. By introducing students to new ideas and opportunities while affirming their rural roots, SEE VT helps them see college not as a departure from home, but as a step toward becoming leaders within and beyond it.

See related VT News stories about SEE VT:

- “Deepening rural knowledge through academic experiences,” Virginia Tech News, July 12, 2024, https://news.vt.edu/content/news_vt_edu/en/videos/k/2024/07/1_s5br3mke.html
- “Virginia Tech offers summer enrichment for students from rural communities,” Virginia Tech News, September 12, 2022, <https://liberalarts.vt.edu/news/video/summer-enrichment-experience-virginia-tech-2022.html>

Rural Belonging in Local and Global Contexts: Expanding Horizons

In 2026, CFF will help make possible a unique opportunity for rural students to take part in *Rural Belonging in Local and Global Contexts*, a spring semester course followed by a two-week study abroad experience at Virginia Tech's [Steger Center for International Scholarship](#) in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland (*NOTE: CFF is proud to be engaged with the Steger Center and to provide annual support for their important work*).

The program begins on the VT campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, where students examine their own place-based identities and reflect on how rurality shapes their worldview. It continues abroad, where students engage with rural communities in southern Switzerland, exploring sustainable agriculture, cultural heritage, and the arts. Guided by local experts, they will walk restored valley trails, learn from farmers and artisans, and see how rural ingenuity thrives in another part of the world.

For many students, this will be their first time traveling internationally – a transformative experience that allows them to compare and connect rural life in America with rural life abroad. By the time they return, students have not only expanded their academic and cultural knowledge but also developed a richer understanding of the value of their rural identity in a global context.

CFNRV: Building Community Through Philanthropy

The **Community Foundation of the New River Valley** (CFNRV) was established in 1994, and is one of 26 community foundations in Virginia. CFNRV's mission is to encourage charitable giving, nurture collaboration, and invest in lasting solutions that enhance the quality of life for all in the New River Valley. The foundation helps individuals, families, and businesses create and sustain a vibrant, supportive community, now and for generations to come. They match donors' unique interests, ideas, and passions with the many charitable organizations making a positive impact in the region every day. Since 1994, CFNRV has worked with donors to create more than 200 endowed funds, which support nonprofit organizations and students in the local community each year through grants and scholarships.

Regarding [scholarships](#), CFNRV currently manages 50+ different scholarship funds, and awards scholarships once a year to high school seniors as well as undergraduate college students and trade/technical school students. CFNRV believes that a thriving community depends on supporting the educational aspirations of students so they can meet their full potential, help create a talented and skilled workforce, and become a future community leader.



Some examples of CFF's rural-focused engagement with CFNRV include our **annual support as a Diamond Sponsor** and the establishment of the **Cranwell Family Foundation Scholarship for Rural Students**.

Diamond Sponsor: Sustaining Community Impact Year-Round

In 2025, CFF was a year-round Diamond Sponsor for CFNRV. Our giving provided support for their general operations, including the [Fund for the NRV](#), which is the engine that fuels all of their work, as well as the [GiveLocalNRV Giving Day](#) event and related in-person events.

CFF Scholarship through CFNRV: Opening Doors for Rural Students

By the end of 2025, CFF will finalize the establishment of the first Cranwell Family Foundation Scholarship for Rural Students, which will be an endowed scholarship fund that is managed and awarded by CFNRV, starting with an initial award of \$2,500 in Fall 2026. The scholarship will be designated for a rural student with financial need from Southwest Virginia, with preference for applicants from [Richlands High School](#), the town of Richlands in general, or elsewhere in Tazewell County.

As part of the scholarship, there will be an opportunity for additional support to attend a short-term (“Maymester”) study abroad program through the [Center for Rural Education](#) (CRE) at Virginia Tech at the university’s [Steger Center for International Scholarship](#) in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland (student must meet all academic and other university requirements for the program).

Locally Grounded, Globally Minded

So, what does all of this have to do with the Cranwell family?

Everything.

Our work in rural education is rooted in the same philosophy that guides all of CFF's giving: **be place-conscious and globally aware**. We see rural engagement not as looking inward, but as building outward from a strong foundation, **investing in the next generation of rural leaders who can navigate and contribute to both local and global communities**.

By supporting programs like SEE VT and the *Rural Belonging in Local and Global Contexts* study abroad experience through CRE, and by supporting organizations like CFNRV and creating a scholarship through CFNRV for rural students, CFF is helping rural students see themselves as part of a larger story that honors where they come from while equipping them to shape where they, and their communities, can go.

What's Next

Looking ahead, CFF will continue to deepen our engagement in rural education, seeking partnerships that honor rural strengths, address systemic barriers, and connect local identity to global opportunity. We will also look for ways to integrate our rural and international work, building bridges between programs in Appalachia and initiatives abroad.

Final Thought

Rural is not a single story. It is a diverse and dynamic set of communities, rich in culture, creativity, and resilience. Too often, rural areas are defined by their challenges rather than their strengths. But we believe that **when rural youth are supported to value their roots and engage with the wider world, they can drive innovation and lead with a deep sense of belonging**.

By including rural education as a core part of CFF's philanthropic portfolio, we honor our origins, strengthen our communities, and live out our ethos as a small foundation with a **bold vision** – one that is committed to the long-term ripple, not the short-term splash, and that remains proudly *locally grounded and globally minded*.