

# How a Halloween Tradition Helps Hone Community

And why that's important

---

Thursday, October 29, 2015

•  
•  
•



*Halloween is in the air and soon little ghosts and goblins (and minions and Miss Luigis) will be gracing doorsteps with pleas for sweet treats. UNH Today spoke with Geoffrey Sewake to find out how events such as trick-or-treating help build an atmosphere of community in cities and towns and why that's important. Sewake is a community and economic development field specialist with UNH Cooperative Extension.*

**UNH Today:** What does the simple act of trick-or-treating do to enhance community?

**Sewake:** Trick or treating helps build placemaking. You're going out into the community with your family and meeting neighbors and business owners. Or, you're opening your doors to neighbors, saying hello to folks. You're connecting with people, having conversations. You can't really feel part of a community until you've built relationships with others. Events like trick-or-treating provide opportunities to start building those relationships.

**UNH Today:** Tell us more about this idea of placemaking.

**Sewake:** Placemaking is building a sense of community around a space, place or event. A traditional venue for placemaking was church — the place where a community gathered. Today, placemaking still happens at church, but it also happens at festivals, ball games, Fourth of July parades and other events or places where a community comes together. Even pocket parks serve as a setting for placemaking.

**UNH Today:** Why is it important for towns to create opportunities for placemaking?

**Sewake:** Festivals, traditions and events give people a chance to celebrate together, which is key to community building. They also bring people into downtown, which helps bolster the economy and lets people know there are businesses there.

**UNH Today:** Why bother? What's the advantage to having a "community" atmosphere?

**Sewake:** Beyond building social capital, promoting the local economy and other valuable equity, having a community is thought to positively contribute to the physical and mental health of residents.

**UNH Today:** Give us an example of a town that has done this very well.

**Sewake:** Littleton, New Hampshire, has a driving, committed spirit toward revitalization. There's a lot of excitement about the community among residents, and they are motivated to go after different grants to help fund events, festivals and other great placemaking opportunities. The business community gets excited to donate to community projects. It's not easy to put on a festival, but in Littleton they have a real commitment to betterment. It takes a go-getter attitude.

This results in Littleton's very positive, happy and friendly vibe. It makes people, even myself, feel like it'd be an awesome place to live. As a Millennial, it's hard to find that in a rural community. I mean, hey, they have a brewery, a bookstore, coffee and teashops and a ton of amazing eateries and other cool shops. It really is a cool place with an exciting atmosphere.

**UNH Today:** Can you provide an example of a unique way a town has built community?

**Sewake:** There's a great example in my own town. It's a community of 700 in a very rural area of mostly farms and rolling hills. Townspeople wanted a place to gather and get coffee or a sandwich or a cup of soup. There's no way that type of business would ever locate there, as there wouldn't be enough of a return on investment. So community members got together, fundraised and created a café cooperative, owned by the community. The person who operates it sources products locally. So the produce comes from a mile down road, the meat is local, the cheese is made fresh. The café provides ongoing opportunities to build community not only because townspeople are bumping into one another at the café and having conversations and food, but also through the deep connection to the farms and farmers. You're eating the apples grown on so-and-so's trees. The pig you're tasting was raised nearby. This dynamic brings people back to their community. It's a special sense, a special thing within the social

construct, especially at a time when in many places (albeit, less so in New England) we're so disconnected from one another.

**UNH Today:** Disconnected? Aren't we more connected than ever?

**Sewake:** Yes, virtually. Over time we have stepped away from more of the traditional sources of community, where people interact with one another in a physical space. More of our relationships are built online. Most younger people don't have the traditional sense of community, and this is a critical piece missing in some communities.

**UNH Today:** What would you say to municipal leaders looking to bring more of a sense of camaraderie to their jurisdictions?

**Sewake:** A good first step would be to really look at what sort of assets your community has — conduct an asset inventory. Find out what positives exist. Once you're done with that, look at what challenges you see in your community.

Maybe ask some other community or Extension to help with this. Those outside your community will have different perceptions about your town. For example, in a community that has telephone or power lines running along Main Street, many residents might feel the lines are an eyesore and detract people from patronizing downtown businesses; but a visitor to the town might see the empty storefronts as more of a detractor than the utility lines. Outside perspectives can help inform this early work.

By doing this work you'll gain a different perspective of what your community needs to be; then you can start action planning. Action planning is important because it helps you identify the low-hanging fruit. You can use the low-hanging fruit to help get more people involved. That's a good way to get things started.

Extension has community and economic profiling and other programs to help communities take their first steps toward community building.



*Sewake will be a featured speaker at [TEDx Littleton 2015](#) in November, where he'll discuss the need for young people in rural communities. Sewake is based in Extension's Grafton County office in North Haverhill, New Hampshire.*

- COMPILED BY:  
[Sarah Schaier](#) | College of Life Sciences and Agriculture

## COMMUNITY



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.  
The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).  
Email us: [unhtoday.editor@unh.edu](mailto:unhtoday.editor@unh.edu).

[MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION](#)   [CONTACT US](#)

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Follow us on YouTube

Follow us on Instagram

Find us on LinkIn

UNH Today RSS feeds

UNH Today • UNH Main Directory: 603-862-1234  
Copyright © 2022 • TTY Users: 7-1-1 or 800-735-2964 (Relay NH)  
[USNH Privacy Policies](#) • [USNH Terms of Use](#) • [ADA Acknowledgement](#)