

OBSERVER

Rural Minds Nonprofit To Be Featured In Public Broadcasting Documentary



Submitted Photos Jeff Winton, Wall Street Dairy's Erma Wolcott, and the three college students from Roadtrip Nation during the filming at Wall Street Dairy.

MAYVILLE — Rural Minds, a local nonprofit focused on mental health in rural America, is set to be featured on a documentary episode of Roadtrip Nation that will air on public broadcasting stations in 2026.

The episode was filmed at Wall Street Dairy in Mayville at the beginning of August, focusing on life on the farm, the work of Rural Minds, and life in rural America. Founder and Chairman of Rural Minds, Jeff Winton, said that the episode may also air on PBS, but everything remains up in the air for PBS at the moment.

Back in July it was approved by the House of Representatives to cut federal funding for the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, which supplies funds to both PBS and NPR, for around the total amount of \$1.1 billion. Since then, the Corporation has announced it is beginning to wind down operations, but according to the New York Times both NPR and PBS should survive as NPR's budget only includes about two percent for federal funding and 15% of PBS's budget is for that.

For Roadtrip Nation, the program takes three college students with specific interests depending on what the program is focusing on, who live in an RV for the summer and travel around to different areas to film their episodes.

Winton said Roadtrip Nation had heard about the work Rural Minds was doing and with their program this summer focused on mental health, the three college students had a specific interest in mental health and traveled around America to learn more about what is being done for mental health. Before they arrived in Mayville, Winton said they had traveled to Boston and New York City and afterwards they were headed to Washington and Atlanta.



Pictured is Jeff Winton, founder and chairman of Rural Minds, during the filming of the Roadtrip Nation program.

“They wanted both urban topics and rural topics, and because we are the only rural national nonprofit organization focused on mental health, they reached out and wanted the young people to come here,” Winton said. “None of the three that were here currently live on farms, but interestingly enough they are all from immigrant

families from other parts of the world where they have a connection with agriculture, but none of them grew up on a farm.”

Winton said when the students and crew arrived they “had a ball” playing with the calves and baby goats, and interacting with the animals on the farm, calling it a “terrific opportunity” for them. He added that he could tell afterwards that they did not want to leave.

For the documentary, the three students interviewed Winton, and he said while the other television and crew members did the filming and set up, the three students that will be featured on the show did the actual interview. The interview took place on the back porch of Winton’s farm house and lasted for about an hour.

“They had done their homework, they knew a lot about what I had done throughout my career,” Winton said. “They knew a lot about what Rural Minds has done over almost four years now, since we launched, and they had a lot of very good questions, because again none of them are from rural America per say, even though the families have a connection to agriculture.”

A lot of questions focused on rural life in general, with the kids having grown up in urban or suburban areas. Winton said experiencing rural America was something that was new for them and something they “truly had a curiosity” for.



The three college students interviewed Jeff Winton outside his house for about an hour.

The film crew filmed the interview and also got a lot of photos and b-roll footage for the program in the spring. While they do not know for sure yet where it will air, Winton said Roadtrip Nation is fueled by companies such as Lulu Lemon, Pinterest and the Lisa Stone Pritzker Family Foundation. He added the three companies backing the program see a need to get young people involved in mental health, especially as they try to determine what their careers might be, which Winton said is what Roadtrip Nation is all about.

“That’s what Roadtrip Nation is all about, they choose a particular topic and then they choose students or recent college graduates who are interested in that topic and they travel around the country to give them exposure, so that at the end of the summer before they go back to school or back to work they have a much better idea, you know, of ‘maybe I want a career in mental health’,” Winton said. “Or maybe they decide they don’t want a career in mental health. But, my goal, having them here and representing rural America was to make sure that they were sensitized about the true challenges and obstacles that we face living in rural America, and that regardless what they do with the rest of their lives, they don’t forget about their experience visiting our farm here in Chautauqua County.”

This is the second filming that was done for Rural Minds at Wall Street Dairy, with the first being done by USA Today around a year ago, when they were doing a program on rural youth and the mental illness issues they are having. Winton said the CDC just released statistics saying young people that grew up in rural areas are 74% more likely to die by suicide than youth that grew up in urban areas. Two other groups will be coming to film in the next few weeks and hopefully before the snow comes to help shine more light on the issues behind mental health and substance abuse and suicide ideation in rural America.

“Our goal is to make sure people don’t forget about the 46 million people that are living in rural areas across this country, including here in Chautauqua County,” Winton said. “We have very unique challenges. Things are getting more difficult, not less difficult because of what is happening in our government, with some of the cuts that are proposed. Some of our hospitals in Chautauqua County could be closed; the tariffs are having an impact on people that live and work in rural America, especially farmers. The whole immigration and deportation issue is impacting people in rural America because a lot of farms rely on foreign guest workers. So, as this debate is taking place on the national stage across this country, our goal at Rural Minds is to make sure that people that raise our food and fiber in this country aren’t forgotten and people remember, the people that are arguing about this and the policy makers in particular, aren’t forgetting that the people that

are being directly impacted are people in rural America. It's not just people in the big cities or the suburbs."

Sometimes people in rural America can be more impacted than people in urban and suburban areas, he added. Winton said the topic of their documentary is very relevant as they face growing mental health challenges, and should be of interest to anyone interested in mental health and rural America. He added that he was very impressed with the three young people from the show, saying they are the future of this country and helped him get a renewed sense of optimism once the filming was over.

"These three people I hope represent the next generation of people that are going to be making the decisions that will impact all of us," Winton said. "So, I think it will be refreshing for people to really understand what young people are thinking, and all three of these young people had been directly impacted by mental health challenges themselves, either in their family, friends or community, and that's one of the reasons why they were so interested in mental health in general and I think they have a new perspective on rural America in general after they were here and spent part of the day on a working, family dairy farm."

Winton added that he hopes people who do not live on farms and in rural America will have a new or renewed sense of what life on a farm is like, and allow people to see what a working farm is like in action. This includes the film crew themselves, as Winton gave an example of the crew arriving an hour early and that he said they had a lightbulb moment of what impact that may have on a working dairy farm, but he added that the people were great and that all of the farm chores still got done before moving on with the production.

Overall, he said his hope was that the documentary will help reinforce the message of Rural Minds and to help sensitize people to the struggles of rural America. He added that what he has been encouraged about through his work is that people are starting to talk more about mental health issues.

"Even in our four years of existence I'm seeing people more readily talking about their mental health challenges, their family's mental health challenges, things that have happened in their family, maybe generations ago," Winton said. "And our whole premise at Rural Minds is, if you can get people to talk about their issues like we readily talk about cancer and heart disease and diabetes and certainly COVID, then they will be much more likely to seek help, as they now see that it is an illness, just like these other illnesses are."

Winton also wants people to remember the 988 number that is open 24/7 for people to call who may not be comfortable going to someone for help yet, and that they can call for a live, trained, mental health expert to talk to any time.

For more information on Rural Minds visit ruralminds.org. More information on Roadtrip Nation can be found at roadtripnation.com.
