

Rebuilding Braddock

John Fetterman

Will Judy Lecture, September 25, 2012

John Fetterman has served as mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, since 2005.

Thank you for that incredibly warm welcome. Before I came here, I was sitting outside on one of the benches. Some people may have thought I was panhandling, but I was just taking in what Huntingdon and Juniata have that we don't have in Braddock, and that's fresh air and quiet. It's really been a fantastic trip. The last time I was on this campus was twenty-two years ago and I had shoulder pads and a football helmet on. People know I went to Harvard for graduate school, but I actually was an undergraduate at Albright. I forget if we beat you or you beat us, but anyway, I heard you are worse now. At any rate, there are no hard feelings from my football days.

Without any further ado, I'm going to try to devote as much time as I can in the hopes that I can stimulate some questions. No questions are out of bounds; you can ask anything off the record. Anything you want—there are no questions that are improper.

With that in mind I'm going to get started. My name is John Fetterman and I'm the mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Braddock is a very famous community, a very historic community. It's eleven miles outside of Pittsburgh. It was incorporated in 1867 and its current population is somewhere along the order of 2300. Why is Braddock famous? Why does Braddock play an important part in the American experience? Because it was home to Andrew Carnegie's first plant. The Edgar Thompson plant was the first to utilize what was then a revolutionary technology that made stronger steel possible, which allowed for the building of bridges and skyscrapers, much the way that faster microprocessors changed things. Braddock and Lamont Valley, of which Braddock is a part, in a lot of respects were very much like Silicon Valley is today. In 1955 Braddock had 20,000 residents. A photograph of New York or Chicago or Baltimore would be indistinguishable from what my community used to look like when everything was working. In 1929 the business district was only two-thirds of a square mile, so it's a very compact community, and look at the sheer numbers: fifty-one bars, fourteen furniture stores. Fourteen separate, stand-alone furniture stores in two-thirds of a square mile!

When we fast-forward to 2012, all those numbers crash down to zero. Braddock has had a complete and utter implosion of everything that comprised its socioeconomic fabric over the years. We have buildings that haven't been torn down, but instead have fallen down. We had to actually fence one off and apply for emergency demolition funds. So it gives you an idea. Not surprisingly, Braddock is poor. Braddock is the poorest community in Allegheny County, which, for those of you unfamiliar with

western Pennsylvania, comprises Pittsburgh and the surrounding communities. Pittsburgh is roughly 315,000 people; Allegheny County is about 1.2 million. Of that population in the county, we are the poorest community socioeconomically. The median household income is \$17,500 compared to the Pennsylvania average of almost \$49,000 and the national average almost \$51,000. In Cambridge or San Francisco, you can't get a gym membership for what you can get a home for in our community. We once had magnificent and stellar architecture, and now it's a shadow of what it used to look like. When these buildings go beyond the point of no return, the only option is, sadly, that they have to be torn down.

Ninety percent of my community is in a landfill. We went from a population of 20,000 residents to 2,300 and when you lose that amount of population, people are leaving their homes and businesses and with those abandonments come the inevitable decline, deterioration, and unraveling of the rest of the social fabric. So it's not an exaggeration to say that trucks have carted off ninety percent of our community and dumped it someplace.

In 2005, before I took office, I went to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and did a headline sampling. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* is the paper of record for the area and I just typed in "Braddock." The headlines it used just give the sense of what people generally thought of Braddock and what was making the news in Braddock at the time. It was generally perceived as a community where you don't want to go, and if you do go there you're generally just looking for trouble or drugs. It's an incredibly negative outlook.

More adversity in 2009. One of the last crown jewels that the community had—the giant health care provider UPMC—closed its 270,000 square foot hospital in the middle of our community and we lost over 600 jobs. More importantly, our residents lost proximate access to health care. Let me put that in perspective: a 270,000 square foot building is nearly two supersize Walmarts put together in a town our size.

You can see that Braddock is, like me, significantly challenged. So, when you take office, what do you do when you have a community that has lost ninety percent of its population, ninety percent of its jobs, ninety percent of its homes? Before I get started, I want to say I'm not selling a book, I don't have a reality show, and I don't aspire to higher office. I'm just describing what we've done in Braddock. I don't go around saying, "Hey, I can fix your town," because the problems and the challenges in Braddock are fairly unique.

One of the first things we did was to actively engage our young people. We've had unemployment rate for juveniles, young people, approaching three-fifths or two-thirds. When you guys were in high school, did you work during the summer? Can I see a show of hands? Yeah. So what made that possible? Parents who supported you, a second or third car. Unemployment was really rampant, so what we did was create the largest summer employment program in all of Allegheny County and put 100

kids to work during the summer, which on a per capita basis would be the same as if the city of Pittsburgh hired 10,000 kids.

We set out to restore and save the architecture that we had left in the community. We put a new stained-glass window into our new community center, which represented the first time in over sixty years that stained glass has gone into a church in Braddock, instead of being harvested from one.

We have abandoned houses in Braddock, but we don't have a beautiful Victorian mansion or anything like that. So what we did was, we took over a house and we created foster housing for young people who had been displaced or exited from the foster care program. In the largest open-air lot in Braddock, horribly overgrown with weeds and things, we put in a new 3,000 square foot playground, courtesy of Kaboom. On the other side of the playground was one of the first JC Penney stores in the country. We replaced that with playhouses for the children. I want to emphasize that all of this has been paid for by people who have been foolish enough to have me come speak. For example, 100 percent of the generous amount that Juniata has given me will go to items exactly like this playhouse. So I want to thank Chad Herzog and the college because that makes a lot of these programs possible.

The old Main Street Hotel on Braddock Avenue was a giant beautiful old structure. Once it was gone, we created a two-acre urban farm that produces, of course, produce and summer jobs, and that also beautifies the main drag.

If I were going to buy a house here or open a business, I'd drive by and check it out. Our original welcome sign was not very welcoming. It might as well have said, "Welcome to Braddock, sponsored by the Crips." Not the kind of handshake you want. Our new "Welcome to Braddock" sign was made by our young people and it actually was named "Best Neighborhood Public Art" by *Pittsburgh Magazine* in 2009. It's twelve feet by twelve feet, so it's a nice change.

We have a lot of abandoned buildings, so we harvested the honeybees from these structures and now Braddock hosts its own small-scale apiary that teaches beekeeping to middle school students. They can take it as an elective and they produce enough honey to sell it in small quantities online.

Who here is a Steelers fan? Dumb question. Who has heard of Franco Harris? He came out for Braddock Community Day, so we were very excited about that. Community Day was one of the things we instituted this year. We had over 1,100 people come out. In other words, over half the town showed up and it was a fabulous event.

We make a big deal out of holidays in our community because a lot of the parents aren't able to afford things. Trick-or-treating, as you might imagine in a community facing Braddock's issues, wasn't popular, but every holiday now—Christmas, Halloween, Easter—we make a big deal out of celebrating. Our Christmas party last year had 600 kids and we had a Christmas present for every one of them, thanks to the generous help of donors.

Braddock is an actual food desert. Braddock doesn't have a restaurant in it, so there's no place to eat. I was at a TEDx food talk and they said, "Harlem is a food desert!" And I said, "No, it's not." I stayed in a large hotel in Harlem and I walked to a Starbucks in thirty-eight seconds, so that is not a food desert. During the summer months, you might imagine that our kids are hot and there's not a lot to do, so we contracted with an ice cream truck. We send it around several times, twice a month and the kids are able to get free ice cream and cold water.

We took an abandoned Catholic middle school and we turned into the first art gallery of its kind in the four-town region. It hosts the venues that we partnered with, from the Andy Warhol Museum and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh all the way down to small-scale dance and other performance venues.

Is anyone familiar with the Levi's "Go forth" campaign? Back in 2010, I got a creative e-mail. I thought it would be punk or something, but it said, "Hi, we're Levi's, and we want to come talk to you." I'm like, "Okay, come on. It's one of those Nigerian e-mail scams." But I give my wife credit; she was like, "Are you crazy? You've got to see it through." I actually did, and they came out and visited. They described a partnership where they would like to feature our community in a 2010 ad campaign, and in return for that they would give the town a significant donation and all the people featured in the commercial would be Braddock residents. And that's exactly what we did. To the credit of Levi's and our residents, people thought we used real models . . . which explains why I wasn't in the ad.

It was a very important milestone for us because it got our name recognition out there, but more importantly it helped us create our local community center, which has been a runaway success. We just put a new boxing gym in our community center, again with the help of Levi's. I tell people, and this is the God's honest truth, we're all basically volunteer driven and I didn't even get a free pair of jeans out of the deal. With the Internet you can get some flaming, and some people were upset with the partnership. Again, I respect their views, but at the end of the day, when you are dealing with one of the poorest towns in America and you have all these things to accomplish, there are a lot worse things you can do. After our presentation, if anyone has any negative views on this campaign, I'd sure like to hear from them because I do enjoy the feedback.

So what does this all translate to? I had our police chief run the call volume on the county 911. In 2006 there were 7,100 calls and as of 2011, the latest number that we have, there were under 4,000 and that represents a forty-six percent drop in call volume. Serious crime is down by a corresponding amount. In 2010, we had 230 calls for service, which is the lowest number of calls for service ever recorded in the community. The thing of which I'm most proud, something I certainly don't take full credit for, is that Braddock's last homicide was almost four and one-half years ago. When that happened, it was an epic gun battle that involved assault rifles—AK-47s—and that really drives home some of the circumstances

then. Now, thankfully, knock on wood, we haven't had a loss of life in four and one-half years and ultimately, my goal is to never get that proverbial phone call at 2:30 in the morning.

The Braddock Carnegie Library was recently named a National Historic Landmark, which will also help us leverage more funding. It was actually the nation's first Carnegie Library and I'm very proud to live across the street from it. We were able to get surveillance cameras in two hot spots to make sure that we eliminate what residual gun violence there is.

However, this is what has happened more recently. I alluded earlier to the fact that everything isn't sunshine and lollipops and rainbows in Braddock. The last time gun violence was visited upon us was back on March 14 of this year. I'd say the worst part of my job, the most difficult part of my job, is that every time my phone rings, my chest kind of tightens because I think, "What's waiting for me on the other side?" This was what happened. Two people were shot—they were grazed, so fortunately no one was seriously wounded or killed. But that was a possibility, in an environment where there are people who will actively and willingly drive by with firearms and shoot at people, completely oblivious to the fact that there are innocent bystanders there. That barbarism does exist. Thankfully, this has been the last instance of gun violence that we've had in our community this year, but again, when I'm done here I could have a voice mail from my police chief waiting for me. I want to emphasize that it's something that will always be with us.

We have had some recent successes. The hospital was torn down and we were able to get a new twenty-million-dollar redevelopment plan that's being built on the former site. That will include a MedExpress, an emergency care center that will go a long way in bridging the enormous gap left by the hospital for our residents' health care needs.

Who knows who Christian Bale is? He has played Batman; maybe you've heard of him. This was another call I thought was a punk. I was at Costco getting supplies for the after-school program and I got a phone call. I don't recognize the number and it's like, "John, this is Scott Cooper, the movie director! Have you ever seen *Crazy Heart*?" I'm like, "Yeah" (For people who haven't seen it, Jeff Bridges plays a washed-up country singer.) "There's a movie that I've written. We've got to film it in Braddock and it stars Christian Bale." And I'm like, "Come on!" I thought it was one of my friends or whatever. Turns out that it wasn't and earlier this year we had the movie *Out of the Furnace*. The director described it to me as a cross between *The Deer Hunter* and *No Country for Old Men*. So it's going to be great for tourism, you can just tell. It stars Christian Bale, Woody Harrelson, Willem Dafoe, Zoe Saldana, and Forest Whitaker. Forest Whitaker plays a police chief, so I have to tell you how surreal it was to see Forest Whitaker in the Braddock police uniform. And again, that's due in part to Levi's and the story that inspired Scott Cooper to write this as his follow-up to *Crazy Heart*.

This year we started taking kids on field trips because we have movies in town. Who has ever wanted to have a dance party in a forty-foot bubble? You missed your chance in Braddock about two weeks ago. This was a national travelling arts project called “Space Buster.” It terminates in Flint, Michigan, and what they do is inflate this giant bubble and you have a dance party in it. I wondered, “How is this going to go over?” And it was fabulous, with about 250 people showing up. Everyone had a great time. It just represents the kinds of activities we do in town to change people’s perspectives. We had a lot of people from outside of the community, but we also had a lot of residents come out for it.

Anyone here follow professional wrestling? Do you know Big Show, champion of the World Wrestling Federation? I got another call that I thought was a punk. Big Show was in town to film *Super Ninjas* with Nickelodeon and he needed a body double. So last week I was Big Show’s body double while filming, which is funny because every now and then, especially when I’m out of state, I’ll get stopped and get flattered for an instant when someone asks me for my autograph. Then, when they realize I’m not Big Show, I of course have to disappoint that nine-year-old.

If you're free October 6, we're having a giant event in Braddock called Tapped. It features the beer from the Brew Gentleman, which is the new micro-brewery that is opening in Braddock. They are four Carnegie Mellon students who are just out of business school and are starting a new brew operation. It'll have food trucks and a lot of other fun things happening. I hope to see you at there, but more than that, if I don't see you, I really want to thank you for this opportunity to come out. I want to thank everybody and open the floor up to some questions.