

SMALL-TOWN HEROES

It's easy to forget while exploring a town's cultural institutions, shopping districts or green spaces that someone has to make all this stuff work—from keeping the traffic moving and the rivers clean to fostering a sense of community. Here, we profile four dynamic and resourceful leaders from around the world who, as small-town mayors, have taken it upon themselves to ensure that the places we visit are worth the journey.

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Wilmot Collins

THE NEIGHBOR



that he smokes himself.

Collins started life here working in child protective services, and quickly became immersed in the local community. He joined the Navy Reserve, sang in a church choir and coached middle- and high school soccer. He also earned a master's degree in human resource management, and is working on a doctoral dissertation in forensic psychology at Helena College, where he taught business management and intro to psych before mayoral duties became too hectic.

While Collins had talked about running for local office for years, he didn't take the plunge until his son challenged him to put his money where his mouth was. "I try to live up to what I say, especially in the eyes of my kids," he says. Unseating a four-term incumbent made for a tough campaign, but his stated goals of improving public services and providing affordable housing resonated with voters. He credits the campaign's success to his willingness to knock on doors.

"Instead of sitting in your comfort zone, you get involved in your community," he says. "When people get to know you, the door opens up." >

HELENA, MONTANA

Wilmot Collins is a Liberian refugee, a small minority in Helena. In 2017, he was voted mayor of the Montana state capital, which got its start in the 1860s as a rowdy gold mining settlement.

When asked how he earned votes, Collins adopts a matter-of-fact tone. "It boils down to getting to know your neighbor," he says.

Located midway between Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, just east of the sublimely beautiful Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Helena is known for attracting hikers and fishing enthusiasts. Collins moved here in 1994, a couple of years after his wife, Maddie, came to pursue a nursing scholarship in the city. He says he was immediately enchanted by the town and its people, if not the weather.

"It was so cold—I had not interacted with snow in my life," he says with a laugh. "But the surprising thing was that the people of Helena were so warm, I felt at home." A quarter-century later, he couldn't be happier out in the Montana wilderness, hiking, biking or fishing for trout

Helena sits at the foothills of mountains that run north to Glacier National Park



“

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”

KEVIN LEAGUE PHOTOGRAPHY

Gema Igual

THE MODERNIZER

SANTANDER, SPAIN

Visitors come to the small coastal city of Santander for the majestic Palacio de La Magdalena, the sandy beaches and world-class museums such as the striking Botín Center. What they don't see is the tech behind the scenes, spearheaded by thousands of data-collection sensors measuring everything from traffic volume to soil moisture to carbon monoxide levels.

The technology is part of the SmartSantander initiative, launched in 2010, when Gema Igual served as tourism coordinator, six years before she became the city's mayor. Raised in the small town of Isla just up the coast, Igual moved to Santander at 14 and watched it transform from the modest capital of the Cantabria region into one of the most tech-forward cities in the world, a distinction that she aims to maintain.

Part of her job is to keep the city beautiful, clean and functioning smoothly, but she also sees Santander as a kind of urban lab, demonstrating how technology can improve people's experiences of a city, whether helping them to plan a bus journey, find a parking space or see how busy local beaches are through live video feeds.

"Having technology like this is enormously positive—it allows more efficient and coordinated management, cost savings and improvements to the quality of the services provided to citizens," Igual says. She's now expanding the tech-savvy approach to governance with City Brain, an online forum where residents can propose, debate and vote directly on urban improvements.

Igual is also about to introduce a Smart Citizen card, which allows people to keep track of



Left: The Palacio de la Magdalena at the eastern tip of Santander
Below: The town's waterfront on a sunny afternoon



municipal services, pay for public transportation and find out about public events. It builds on the SmartSantander initiative by monitoring the flow of visitors at popular attractions, such as the Medieval Walls Archaeological Center and the Palacio de La Magdalena, to better allocate resources. Plus, there'll be 15 interactive tech hotspots installed throughout the city that offer wayfinding help, phone-charging stations and video games to occupy the kids.

For all the technology she's helped usher in, Igual's favorite way to learn about her city (and spend a Saturday afternoon) is simply strolling with her 10-year-old daughter through Mataleñas Park, chatting with locals and visitors as they overlook the beach. "It's gratifying to be in day-to-day contact with people, have a dialogue and know that you're contributing to improving lives," she says. Plus, the view can't be matched on any screen. ➤

P.T. Wood

THE MODERATOR

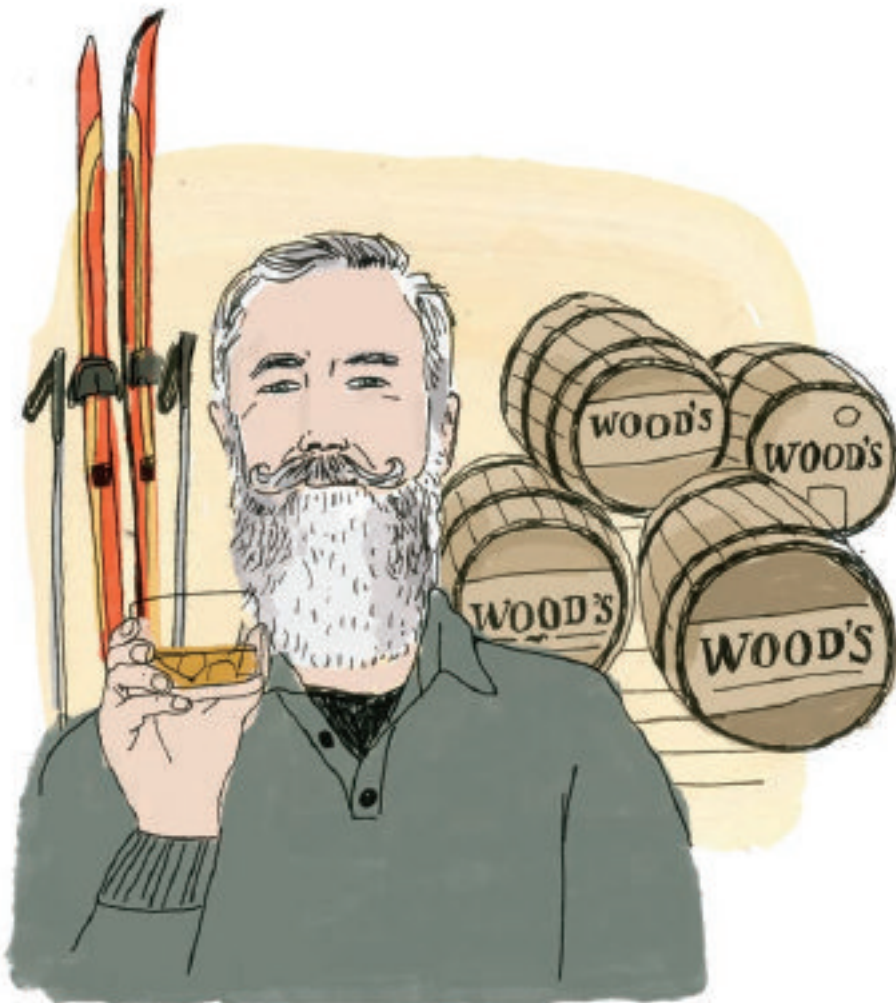
SALIDA, COLORADO

"I retired when I turned 18 and had to get a job at 50," jokes P.T. Wood, who originally moved to Salida, Colorado, to serve as a river rafting guide. "Although I'm not sure running a distillery is a real job. Being the mayor sure can be, though... at times."

Self-deprecation aside, Wood is a busy man. In 2012, over 20 years since arriving from Durango, he came out of "retirement" to found Wood's High Mountain Distillery. In 2017, he was elected mayor on a simple platform of civility, attentiveness and responsible growth. You can find him on most afternoons working in his distillery's tasting room, where he offers three gins and three whiskies made on site as well as craft cocktails you'd expect in a hip urban lounge, rather than a mountain nook with a population of 5,600.

Located three hours southwest of Denver on the banks of the Arkansas River, Salida is a mecca for outdoorsy types—Monarch Mountain ski resort is a half-hour away, and there are mountain biking and hiking trails surrounding the town, as well as rafting and trout fishing on the river, but it wasn't always a destination. "The first winter I was here I ran an outdoor store right on the river, and we'd literally go months between customers," Wood says. "There were more tumbleweeds than people."

Salida was on the verge of becoming a ghost town, but that changed in the 1990s. Cheap real estate attracted artists and entrepreneurs and a new river park became the centerpiece

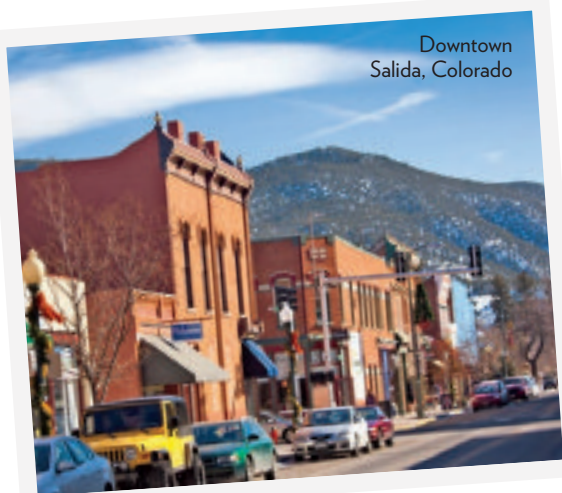


“I’m not sure running a distillery is a real job. Being the mayor sure can be, though.”

of downtown for rafting, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding and even swimming. Growth snowballed from there and the town now boasts a vibrant downtown full of restaurants and retailers. But as Salida's popularity has boomed, it's become a more expensive place to live.

One of Wood's major goals is to make the city affordable for the workers who support the thriving tourism industry. That means incentivizing developers to build more housing and creating zoning ordinances to maintain reasonable property prices, especially along the revitalizing Highway 50 corridor. It's the type of growth that ensures locals can continue to enjoy the town as much as the tourists—a goal that, for Wood, is personal as well as political.

"One of the things I love about living here is that I can wake up at five, get a few rounds of skiing in, and be back in town before anyone notices," he says. "I just love watching the sun rise." >



Downtown
Salida, Colorado

GETTY IMAGES

Naomi Koshi

THE TRAILBLAZER



ÔTSU, JAPAN

Ôtsu, near Kyoto in central Japan, is best known for the beauty of Lake Biwa and the splendor of its temples, several of which are certified as National Treasures and UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Though full of tradition, it's earning a reputation as one of the most progressive cities in the country, thanks to its young mayor, Naomi Koshi.

Koshi took an interest in government while growing up in Ôtsu, back when politics wasn't a viable career path for Japanese women. After graduating from law school, she lived in Tokyo, then traveled to the U.S. for a Harvard fellowship. That was in the thick of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, which reignited her childhood passion. "When I was at Harvard, everyone was very excited," she says. "I was so surprised, because in Japan, young people aren't interested in politics."

That enthusiasm was one factor that led Koshi to return to her hometown, but she also missed her family, along with the large and lovely lake that skirts the city to the east, particularly during cherry

blossom season. Today, she lives close enough to the temples to feel like she's living inside history.

In 2012, Koshi ran for mayor against a 70-year-old incumbent, despite the fact that only two percent of Japanese mayors are female. It was a tough race, but at 36 she became the youngest female mayor in the country's history. Now in her second term, she's been making strides for gender equality while tackling the nation's biggest challenge: depopulation.

"In Japan, many women have to choose between work or family," says Koshi. She sought to address this issue by increasing childcare options and limiting overtime at City Hall to encourage a better work-life balance. It's already having effects: The local birth rate is on the rise and the number of full-time working mothers with children under the age of 5 has doubled.

Koshi's emphasis on equality doesn't stop in the workplace. In 2018, she challenged sumo wrestling's rigid gender roles, which forbid women from stepping into the *dohyô* (wrestling area). Aware that it's also tradition for a mayor to give a speech before a match, she insisted that if she were to speak, it would be from the ring, just like a male mayor. As a result, Koshi wasn't invited to the event, but feels that she is part of a larger movement working to improve human rights.

"We have a lot of temples in Ôtsu, and recently I met with a monk who said that tradition should change," she says, "because if it doesn't change, we don't survive." **AW**



Left: The torii gate, outside the ancient Shirahige Shrine
Below: The view overlooking Ôtsu, with the lake beyond



TOP PHOTO: ALAMY; BOTTOM: GETTY IMAGES