

When you think about “The American Dream” what usually comes to mind is bettering your socioeconomic situation, and thus reaching your dreams. If you are successful in doing this, it means that you have the power to change the chances of what others might say is impossible.

In this book overview, an American hillbilly’s transformation into a thriving businessman will be narrated. Against all the odds starting with family dysfunctions to economic obstacles, J. D. Lanc was able to land on top in his entrepreneurship, leading to successful investments.

In this summary, you will find out,

- the reason why hillbillies are called that;
- why a region died out; and
- how a sweet grandmother and three requests helped with the struggles of a boy

Chapter 1 - J.D.’s grandparents were raised as suburban “hillbillies”, which would not be possible today.

J.D. Vance was born into a poor, struggling family in a neighborhood in Ohio that was so far away from prosperity. Because of this, Vance finds many white people from lower classes who are uneducated and the cycle of poverty runs through generations of their families relatable.

Yet in order to really get an understanding of his ancestry, it is necessary to know about his grandparents. They also came from a similar socioeconomic background, and it was the norm to experience this.

Frequently called Mamaw and Papaw, these two people were born in the 30s in Kentucky. They were a part of a group called hill people/ hillbillies, as inhabitants of Appalachian Mountain. This name sometimes suggested an insult.

They moved from their homeland to Ohio, because Papaw had landed a job there in Amco, which enlisted many other workers from Kentucky to join their company in the 50s. This resulted in people like Vance’s grandparents overcrowding the place.

This employment opportunity helped many experience upward class mobility from lower classes. However, nowadays things have changed. Places like the homeland of Vance’s grandparents have been deeply affected by financial hardships.

And thus, hillbilly started to be used as a term that entails poverty. A big chunk of Jackson’s population became penniless. Education also became deeply affected by this, and people had to involuntarily send their children to schools that did not give many graduates.

These people are also not in good condition in terms of health. According to a documentary aired in 2009, their children suffer from dreadful issues in their teeth.

However, although Jackson's situation shows the general property in this region, it can also be seen throughout this whole region of Appalachia as unemployment runs rampant in these places. Next, you will find out the effects this change in the industry had on the people of this region in the USA.

Chapter 2 - Vance's mother was born into a household that was in poor condition socioeconomically.

According to Vance's uncle, he and Vance's mother Bex lived in a peaceful home. However, from a different point of view, how this was a lie was obvious. Indeed, their household was almost about to collapse. Here is the truth;

After Bex's birth in the 60s, their father's alcoholism was becoming unmanageable. Once during Christmas time, he came home intoxicated and asked for supper immediately. As his request was not fulfilled, he took the Christmas tree away from the house.

Another one of his drunken instances was when he became so aggressive that Mamaw said that she was going to murder him if this happens again. She was not lying. The next time he came home like that she tried to set him on fire with some diesel fuel. Fortunately, he was not burnt that deeply however this clearly shows how troubled their family life was.

J.D. Vance was born in the 80s in Ohio in a town that dealt with poverty. This situation they were in became apparent to him when a thief took two bicycles in one week. The situation the town was in had worsened since Bex's time.

At the same time, the job opportunities in Amco were not on the same level as they were in his grandparents' youths. The company started to offer more jobs in Asian regions instead of America just as many other businesses also did at the time.

The so-called hillbillies now found themselves in a hopeless situation with no options to better their situations. Their economic conditions prevented them from being able to leave the towns they were based in. These conditions are still prevalent today. There are not many enterprises that can be called successful. A road that previously had been the center of trade is now running rampant with drug dealers and addicts.

Chapter 3 - J.D. came from a tough childhood background which affected him profoundly.

When Vance had just started walking his mother and father were separating. After a while from their divorce, his distance from his father grew deeper and deeper until he was taken in by his mother's spouse, Bob.

Around the same time, his mom became a nurse. Even though she did not go to university, she had a great self-disciplined attitude concerning her schooling. She gave Vance this same attitude as well, and they were a mostly peaceful unit.

This, however, did not continue. At the age of 9, Vance started to witness turbulence in this household too.

Around this time, his caregivers agreed to live in Preble County. But, their fights still continued which affected J.D. deeply.

As a result, his grades started to drop, and the traumatic events he experienced were disturbing his well-being.

Still, there were even more hardships to come. When Bob, at last, accosted her about how he was cheating on him, she would try to kill herself for the first time by crashing their vehicle.

Following this harrowing experience, Vance and his mom went back to Middletown, which had become the place of junkies. His mother was also an alcoholic. When she drive him to the shopping center as a way of apologizing for her alcohol abuse one day, she almost caused both of their deaths. She purposefully put her feet on gas because of some remarks J.D made that upset her.

In the end, she, fortunately, stooped before causing a deadly accident, but instead beat him up quite violently. She became so unmanageable that the cops had to restrain her.

Thankfully, his birth father was about to enter his life again. He was turned into a really religious Christian, and J.D was also about to treasure both this religion and his estranged dad.

Chapter 4 - As a young boy, Vance moved from place to place because of his mother's institutionalization.

As his mother was often with a different romantic partner, Vance's paternal figures also were unstable beings. The only solid father figure he knew was Papaw.

Papaw educated him in all kinds of things from mathematics to how to treat a woman, which Papaw didn't succeed at.

So, when his grandfather died, it affected Vance deeply as a preteen. The effect this death had on his mom was also quite apparent. After this loss, she was ushered into a psych ward at last.

During this time, she was with a firefighter called Matt. As Bex was having a hard time with her father's loss, her erratic behavior continued to escalate as she went on hurting those she loved too. She started using pills to help her control herself, and yet she would also be fired from her job as a nurse after a rollerblading incident.

After a while, she again tried to kill herself. This time she was sent to a psych ward and a rehab for her to recover.

J.D then had to stay with Mamaw for a while but his "nomadic" lifestyle would continue throughout his youth. After his mother was out of the psych ward, she went to stay with his birth father. Although Bex begged for him to come to Ohio to stay with her, he strongly declined this.

Later, he was back at Mamaw's again. Though his father had provided him a somewhat serene life, his grandmother missed him, and he missed her too.

Even though he seemed to have a stable place in Mamaw's house, it would not continue. After his mother found a new spouse, Ken, she made J.D come and live with them. This was house number four J.D. has lived in two years.

He was naturally tired of this situation. Constantly changing his location like this had weighed upon him.

Chapter 5 - Staying with Mamaw changed J.D. as he felt balanced in the army.

At Ken's household, J.D was feeling captured and alone, more than he had ever felt.

As a result, he again was not doing well in school as he even almost quit it all together. However, after his mother and Ken separated, he would again live with Mamaw, which would help him turn his life around.

Mamaw cared about three things: J.D had to do well in school, become employed, and provide aid around the house. She was rigid in applying these rules, and J.D. was happy to follow them.

Around this time, he was taught so many things by Mamaw. She paid for his additional mathematics courses, and the gadgets he needed in them as well as making sure he knew the values of discipline and responsibility.

In spite of her authoritarian attitude, he finally found peace and enjoyment in life. Everything seemed to be going fine.

More importantly, this stability did not offer him a short-term break from the hardships he's faced, but rather prepared him for greatness in the future. Not only did he get great results in his SATs, but he was also finally content in his life.

Yet, he had no idea what his aspirations in life were. He would either apply for university or for the Marines. In the end, he chose the Marines.

So, he spent the formative years starting with the age of eighteen in the military. There, he was getting educated from all walks of life from fitness to finance to how to maintain one's personal health and economics.

More significantly, he learned how to become a true leader; someone who does not order people about, but someone who is collaborative and thus respected among peers.

Chapter 6 - Being part of the military made J.D successful, but with it came the recognition of his otherness.

As J.D. was in the military, Mamaw died. Her lungs could not function after her lifelong of smoking. Needless to say, she was the greatest gift life bestowed upon J.D., and her efforts would not go to waste.

He was accepted to Ohio State University in 2007 mostly because of the support Mamaw provided. He was exhilarated to turn a new leaf in life in this place.

The military helped him gain self-confidence; he was doing great grade-wise and was able to meet his own personal needs. The striking contrast between his contentment and the misery of his acquaintances in Middletown was apparent.

At last, being able to find a profession with good benefits seemed like a real option for him. In 2009, he finished his double major in the university with honors.

His drive in law continued as a year later he went to Yale to focus on law. He found himself dazzled by this experience in a good way.

At Yale, he was able to find a challenging environment that helped him grow. Before him, there was no one else that had gone to university in his immediate family, and none had ever gone as far as further postgraduate education in his extended one.

As a result, although he marveled at school and found a job as a team member of a senator, he was an outsider in Yale. He was one of the only students who came from poverty, and the contrast between him and his peer was apparent to him.

Chapter 7 - By saving himself from his socioeconomic fate, Vance sends us all an important message.

As a Yale student, J.D. fell in love with a fellow student, Usha. As they began to see each other, J.D. started to feel more at home in this environment. The importance of this change really cannot be undermined as who you hang out with matters a lot at Yale.

What he learned from this was what has been called social capital, meaning all the people one knows that could help them in financial gain. This practice is a typical way of finding jobs for many at Yale. People do not apply for jobs, but rather appeal to someone they already know from their networking practice, and get a favor.

J.D. was also aware that the only way to get the job with an influential judge that he applied to was through putting someone in the middle. He asked a professor for his help and then got the job. He turned his luck, and would never face poverty again.

This story of success is truly remarkable when you consider how children who experienced traumatic events as Vance did are more likely to suffer from serious mental and physical health issues which further complicates their already complicated path to success. J.D., however, was able to conquer all these obstacles, and he built a good life for himself.

What can we take away from his story?

We can change the system that prevents many others like J.D. to reach their dreams. This way, we can address the real issues children face in their family lives. We can make a law that ensures those who face poverty are not segregated from others.

Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis by J.D. Vance Book Review

J.D. Vance came from a troubled household in Ohio with lots of issues. Even though the environment he was raised in was less than ideal for a poor boy like him, he overcame all the obstacles life threw at him and achieved his dreams. His life is an example of how what we might call a hillbilly is actually capable of anything they desire to do.

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