It's been an exciting, exhausting, inspirational and fun week for us at the Institute for Emerging Issues.

On Monday, we met with a group of western North Carolina leaders, including UNC Asheville Chancellor Nancy Cable, to hear about how they are building community.

On Wednesday, we had separate meetings with rural church leaders and leaders of five “community participation” initiatives across the state who are working on connecting more closely to address the challenges the places they live are facing.

In between, we had the first of our ReCONNECT NC Emerging Issues forums—with 400-plus people in the room, a statewide audience tuning in on UNC-TV’s NC Channel and a live stream audience watching online. This one focused on how—and why—places around the state are rebuilding their sense of community.

My brain is loaded with ideas and a heapin’ helpin’ of hope. Here’s what I think I learned about reconnecting a community—one that works for everyone:

1. Building community is important.
2. Building community is hard.
3. Building community is possible.

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That's a Wrap: ReCONNECT to Community Forum

Thank you. YOU helped us launch our ReCONNECT NC initiative with our first ever forum outside Raleigh, ReCONNECT to Community! The civic engagement-focused forum drew in over 400 attendees as well as thought leaders from across the state and nation, discussing the many different ways we can keep our communities better engaged and more connected.

Held at the beautiful Renaissance Asheville Hotel in Asheville, the forum, more intimate and interactive than forums of the past, featured speakers like New York Times columnist David Brooks, community activist Tru Pettigrew and five North Carolina communities speaking about the real-world, innovative ways that they’re tackling civic engagement issues in their part of the state.

This was the first time in IEI’s more than 30-plus years that we held a forum outside Raleigh, in an effort to carry our work and mission to the state’s many diverse regions. “It was exciting to me to see so many people in the same room at the same time (and online and through the broadcast) putting their brains together to help us figure out this reconnection question,” said IEI Director Leslie Boney.

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Five Communities

One of the more interactive features of our ReCONNECT to Community forum involved the selection of five community initiatives from around the state working on increasing civic engagement in innovative ways. Selected from over 30 applicants, the initiatives represented a diversity of disciplines and regions across the state. Explore Elkin is a marketing and engagement effort revitalizing the community spirit and economy of a former mill town. One Team. One Goal. One Community is an Elizabeth City State University effort aimed at increasing city and university collaboration. The Community Innovation Lab is an offshoot of the Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts that uses the arts to start conversations about crucial social issues. The Choosing Equity Series is part of the Asheville City Schools Foundation’s work on talking about racial disparity in the school system. The Rural Opportunity Institute is an Edgecombe County effort to educate people on the lasting effects and ways to overcome childhood trauma.

Join us at the ReCONNECT Rural and Urban forum!

The second Emerging Issues Forum in the ReCONNECT NC series, ReCONNECT Rural and Urban, will take place Feb. 11 and will examine the interconnectedness of rural, suburban, and urban economies and ways to use these connections for shared prosperity. The forum, taking place at the Raleigh Marriott City Center, will explore the origin of the perceived “rural-urban divide,” discuss and debate the barriers to and opportunities for cooperation between rural and urban communities. The Forum will also highlight examples of rural and urban communities working together to build shared prosperity in ways that will inspire and energize other communities across the state.

Call for Communities is now open! Deadline has been extended to Dec. 18, 2018. Click here to submit.
Spotlight: Simone Collman, IEI's event coordinator

You can still hear the lilt of Jamaica in Simone Collman's voice, even though the 43-year-old has lived in this country since she was nine.

But her Caribbean roots go deep, they're in how she views family, how she sees life and in the commitment she brings to her role as an IEI event coordinator.

It's a role she was made for, or raised for you could say. Back in Jamaica, in the small community of Connors, about an hour west of the country’s capital of Kingston, Collman’s family still runs a general store, but more than that, they take care of people. “We make sure people get fed. If they don’t have enough money for food, we make sure they get fed anyway.”

Learn more about Simone in this month's staff spotlight!

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This month on First in Future

Be sure to tune in and subscribe to IEI's weekly podcast, "First in Future: Where Emerging Ideas Take Flight."

This month on the program, we celebrated our 100th episode with special guest Anita Brown-Graham, former IEI director and current nCIMPACT Director at the UNC School of Government. We also spoke with Jeff Eidson of Explore Elkin, Peter Hans, president of the North Carolina Community College System and IEI Policy and Program Manager Sarah Langer Hall, who'll be forum lead on our upcoming ReCONNECT Rural and Urban forum.

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