

# Out & About: In Q&A, Woodstock Native Discusses Film He is Producing on Vermont Towns



Woodstock native Mike Leonard visited all 251 towns in Vermont with two high school friends while in college. He is making a film about the experience. (Courtesy photograph)

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Just like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, people tend to take their hometowns for granted until they move away. That was true for Mike Leonard, who grew up in Woodstock before leaving to attend college at New York University in Manhattan. In the process of adjusting to his urban surroundings and talking with classmates, Leonard realized not only had he not properly appreciated Vermont while he lived here, but also that didn't know his home state very well.

So, during a summer between semesters at college, Leonard set out with two high school friends to remedy that shortcoming. The trio joined the 251 Club, whose members' goal is to visit each of Vermont's 251 towns and cities. They packed a road atlas and a handheld camcorder (this was in 2006, before smartphones made both navigation and video recording a much simpler matter). And they chatted with people they met along the way.

After college, Leonard lived abroad for over a decade, most recently in Iceland. Now he's returned to Woodstock, along with his husband (who's from Ireland), and is producing a film, *One Town at a Time*, about his college adventure. The film will combine retro footage with contemporary footage and narrative to examine Vermont's unique landscape and its community spirit, he said.

Leonard will talk about *One Town at a Time* at a dinner program on May 30 at the Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock (cost is \$20; for reservations, call 802-457-3277).

In an email Q&A, Leonard discussed his film, the Vermont 251 Club, and why there truly is no place like home. The exchange has been edited for length and clarity.

**Question:** What inspired you to take on this challenge?

**Answer:** By traveling in one's backyard, not only is there a sense of learning more about what's around you, but it's also a means of securing an identity in a world that has gotten very loud and confusing in recent years.

There's probably some biological reason for why it's satisfying to check off lists and rack up town names, but I don't know what it is. All I know is that there are a lot of people out there like me. And when you combine the urge to feel a sense of accomplishment with a love of place, you get something like the 251 Club.

**Q:** How did you learn about the club?

**A:** My paternal grandparents had been members of the club when I was a kid. They were always traveling the world, so I probably have them to thank for the genetics that led to my persistent wanderlust. I thought the 251 Club might give me a bit more legitimacy and, if not that, then at the very least, I was going to have a lot of fun driving around all summer, turning the radio up, rolling the windows down, eating maple creemees, and generally being a 20-year-old happy-go-lucky Vermonter.

**Q:** Aside from visiting all 251 towns, did you have any other self-imposed requirements, like visiting a post office or town hall?

**A:** One of the marvelous and curious things about the 251 Club is that there are no rules, yet everyone seems to invent their own to provide boundaries to their journey. A common rule is to take a photograph in every town, but I've met all sorts of people who have other ways of marking their experiences. These range from parameters about mode of transport, like bicycling, walking or canoeing in every town, to requirements concerning documentation, such as having to photograph every "Welcome to..." sign or speaking to a person in town.

We, too, created self-imposed rules. We took a photo in front of a sign identifying the name of each town. As other 251 Club members know, it's not always easy to find town signs, but, proudly, there was only one town that required us to make our own sign. And that town, unsurprisingly, was Lewis, which is notorious among 251 Club members for being difficult to reach.

**Q:** You also kept a record of your travels on video.

**A:** I find that footage extremely compelling for a couple of reasons. Firstly, there is a real cinema verite quality to it (as there is with most home videos), in that we didn't discriminate or plan anything that fell in front of the lens. We'd simply talk to whomever was around when we showed up in each village. But, also, we were filming this at a time just before the advent of things "going viral" on the internet, so people were much more open to chatting with weirdo kids holding onto a camcorder.

**Q:** As you traveled around the state, what surprised or impressed you the most?

**A:** I don't think I was prepared for the diversity of Vermont's beauty. The landscape varies so much within our little state. Perhaps the biggest surprise, topographically speaking, was how flat the western part of the state is, thanks to the Champlain Valley. Having grown up to the east of the Green Mountains, I never expected to see such flat farmland in Vermont.

One of the things that was both surprising and alarming was how many town names I didn't know how to pronounce. Having grown up near Quechee, I've giggled my fair share as visitors stumble to pronounce its name. But, the tables really turned on me when I went to towns like Leicester and Calais and caught the locals looking at me sideways.

Most importantly, I was surprised by the diversity of Vermont's communities and the people living in them. Not to dismiss my hometown (because I love it), but there are many more towns in the state that look remarkably different from the postcard image. I think the most impressive towns in the state are those where you can really feel the pulse of a community spirit bringing people together. I'm thinking of towns like Bethel and White River Junction that are undergoing a renaissance of sorts that I believe is wholly attributable to the people living in those communities.

**Q:** What sort of distribution do you have in mind for the film?

**A:** My goal is to have *One Town at a Time* screened throughout the state and, hopefully, shown on community access stations and Vermont PBS. But I also believe *One Town at a Time* has more widespread appeal as well. As our culture grapples with the idea that our lives exist more and more online, the reality that Vermont still cultivates communities where you know the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker by name is a really powerful concept.

*Editor's note: For more information about One Town at a Time, visit: [www.onetownatatime251.com](http://www.onetownatatime251.com); Instagram: @onetownatatimevt251; Facebook: @onetownatatime251. For more information on the Vermont 251 Club, visit <http://www.vt251.com>.*

### **Correction**

Woodstock native Mike Leonard is working on a film about visiting each of Vermont's 251 cities and towns during the summer of 2006, when he was still in college. An earlier version of this story incorrectly described the status of the film.