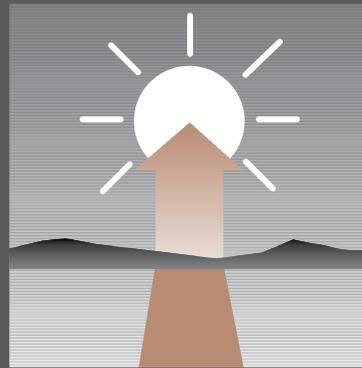


EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS IN ORDINARY COMMUNITIES:

Transforming
Towns
and Growing
People



VAUGHN L. GRISHAM

A STUDY FOR THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an operating foundation rooted in the tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

The interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Kettering Foundation, its directors, or its officers.

About the Author

Vaughn Grisham is director of the McLean Institute for Community Development and professor of sociology at the University of Mississippi. He has been studying what he calls extraordinary communities for close to 40 years and is the recipient of numerous achievement awards both as a researcher and as a teacher. Grisham has helped develop leadership development programs in more than 300 U.S. counties and has shared the results of his community studies in national, regional, state, and local meetings across the nation. He has written four books, authored more than 100 papers and articles, and produced and directed two films. He can be contacted at vgrisham@olemiss.edu.

Executive Editor: Carolyn Farrow-Garland

Editor: Ilse Tebbetts

Copy Editor: Lisa Boone-Berry

Design and production: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Copyright© 2010 by the Kettering Foundation

ISBN 978-0-923993-34-4

PREFACE

AS DIRECTOR of the McLean Institute for Community Development, I have been privileged to work in more than 30 U.S. states and 2 Canadian provinces for some 40 years, seeking answers to the question of what makes communities successful. This particular project had its beginning more than a decade ago when I made the decision to focus on what I believe were the most extraordinary communities among those with which we had worked.



Subsequently, the Kettering Foundation asked that I select four exemplary communities on which to focus our efforts. My wife, Sandy, and I became partners in this project. We lived and worked in each of these places over a period of three years, studying the community settings and recording their efforts to deal with entrenched problems. We attended public meetings and interviewed hundreds of citizens. We visited church groups and civic organizations. We sat with breakfast, lunch, and dinner groups and attended local festivals, performances, and sports events. We talked to customers who visited local cafes and other public places.

Our purpose was to understand how citizens come together to address local problems and issues. In the first part of this report we tell the stories of these communities as told to us by those who live in them. In the second section, we report on what we learned about community leadership.

—*Vaughn Grisham*

INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER REPORTS ON RESEARCH conducted in a number of small rural communities struggling to deal with persistent problems that threaten their very existence. The report tells the stories of four of these places: Bakersville, North Carolina; Haven Acres (a neighborhood in Tupelo, Mississippi); Houston, Minnesota; and Colquitt, Georgia. And it tells the story of how citizens in these communities worked together—one difficult step at a time—to breathe new life into their struggling communities.

Each of these places was originally rooted in an agricultural economy. In time, many of their citizens and institutions had to adapt to manufacturing and now, they must find their place in what management guru Peter Drucker calls a “knowledge” economy, and which urban theorist Richard Florida describes as a “creative society.” This is a frightening and unknown world for most small towns.

Like all places, the communities in this study must adjust to macro changes in the economy and shifting demographics of aging and urbanization, over which they have little control. In addition, they must cope with internal challenges: How do they mobilize themselves? How can they overcome the divisions and diversions that dilute their strength? Once mobilized, how do they sustain the work?

Clearly, this struggle with external forces and internal schisms and distractions is a never-ending process, and there is no “happily ever after.” As long as their environments change, the citizens and their communities must continually adapt to those changes. Community and democracy building is an iterative process, a theme that permeates these research findings.

The stories of these communities appear in Part One of this report. The findings are presented in Part Two, which outlines the commonalities of mind-set, leadership style, and democratic process that have spurred these very different communities to overcome both internal and external challenges.

PART ONE: THE STORIES

BAKERSVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

BAKERSVILLE, THE COUNTY SEAT of Mitchell County, is located in a beautiful setting. The town was built near the base of Roan Mountain. A rushing mountain stream dissects the town. The citizens of Bakersville had long recognized the asset of its geography. The top of Roan Mountain is home to more than 600 acres of native wild rhododendron. Late June brings many tourists to see the rich deep pink of these blossoms. The Rhododendron Festival is the second oldest festival in the state and, for more than 60 years, has drawn outsiders to the village.

However, neither natural beauty nor the Rhododendron Festival could protect the community from the larger forces at work in the nation. As in other North Carolina mountain towns, there were declining numbers of agricultural jobs, especially in tobacco. Furniture factories in nearby Spruce Pine provided jobs for a time; then they moved offshore. The town's high school was consolidated with that in Spruce Pine and relocated to the even smaller village of Ledger, in between the two. It was as though the energy had gone out of the town. By the early 1990s, there were empty storefronts, and the town itself appeared unloved. Even public buildings, such as the city hall and the county courthouse, looked dowdy. To an outsider, Bakersville had the appearance of a dying town.

The revival began slowly. Lee Roy and Sue Ledford, sixth-generation residents of the county had talked to one another about the need to restore pride in their community. Bakersville, they thought, needed identity and a sense of self-respect. They proposed a renewal of the Christmas

parade. The high school band director agreed to have his students lead the parade. The couple posted notices in all the prominent places, urging individuals to put candles in their windows and to join the parade with lighted candles in their hands. Approximately 100 citizens (almost a third of the population) joined in the celebration. This was the “baby step” that often characterizes early stages of community development.

Buoyed by their initial success, the couple sat at their kitchen table and looked through the telephone directory to identify individuals who shared their love of the community and might want to help move it forward. Between 10 and 20 people showed up for the first meeting at

Helen’s Restaurant. Teaming with Bob Hensley, long-time chair of the Rhododendron Festival, they agreed to form an organization whose sole purpose would be to bring improvement to Bakersville. The name came easily: Bakersville Improvement Group, or BIG.

BIG was to experience a very common phenomenon; some of its key members drifted away from the group and in time, ceased to be involved altogether.

THE COUPLE POSTED NOTICES IN ALL THE PROMINENT PLACES, URGING INDIVIDUALS TO JOIN THE PARADE WITH LIGHTED CANDLES IN THEIR HANDS. APPROXIMATELY 100 CITIZENS (ALMOST A THIRD OF THE POPULATION) JOINED IN THE CELEBRATION. THIS WAS THE “BABY STEP” THAT OFTEN CHARACTERIZES EARLY STAGES OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

It was a common, painful lesson: networks essential for community development often come undone even faster than they can be assembled. This critical point occurs in almost all community development.

The Bakerville Improvement Group withstood that setback and agreed to go forward despite its diminishing membership. Over the next five years, progress seemed glacial. The group needed a spark. That electricity came in the form of a connection with HandMade in America, a regional North Carolina organization whose mission is “to grow handmade economies through craft, cultural heritage and community assets.”

With the help of this organization, the local group identified the beautiful trout stream, Cane Creek, as a symbol for the community. A nearby town that had built a boardwalk along

their waterway inspired BIG's leadership. Rip-rapping the creek to prevent erosion was the first step. However, the course of community development rarely follows a direct path. This time, nature was to intervene.

In January 1998, a sustained rain produced the worst flood in the history of the community. Water covered much of the town and filled many of its stores. The interior of the Methodist Church, more than 300 feet from the creek, was under 3 feet of water. The town was devastated. The National Guard was called out to assist, students from nearby Mars Hill College joined in the recovery effort, and, for more than a week, the Bakersville Baptist Church served daily meals to the more than 500 people who had come to help.

Perhaps the unity and focus unleashed during the flood and its aftermath carried over. BIG seemed more determined than ever to build a walkway along the water. They leased the right of way and began raising money locally to build their Creekwalk. Citizen leaders with experience in grant writing went to work as well. With the combination of money raised in Bakersville and grant money, they were able to build almost a mile of asphalted, lighted 10-foot-wide walkway with a gazebo, fishing piers, and picnic tables. HandMade brought in landscaping experts to help.

Today, many men, women, and children stroll along the well-lighted Creekwalk day and night. The walkway has also provided an important place for Rhododendron Festival merchants to sell their wares. It serves as the main component of the Trout Festivals for youth and professionals and is the site of the newly established Creekwalk Arts Festival. It is clear that the Creekwalk has become a center of activity and a source of pride in Bakersville.

Anita Connelly, moved to the town around the turn of the 21st century, bringing with her not only her love for antiques, but also her art and framing business. Two other new citizens came at about the same time. John Lara and David Trophia opened their art gallery, featuring locally produced pottery. These new residents infused the locals with even more energy. Connelly set about putting out awnings and flower boxes and encouraged other merchants on the main street of town to do the same. She persuaded the mayor to make the town hall more attractive by tearing off the ugly siding and going back to the original brick facing. Others joined her in beautifying the downtown. BIG members bought old whiskey barrels, cut them in half and used them as huge flowerpots. Even some of the traditional naysayers were quoted as saying, "By Jove, Bakersville is a pretty little town, isn't it?"

Other members of BIG began to operate within their own spheres of competence. Ron and Libby McKinny, were natives to the area, both teachers and educational administrators and newly retired. They applied their skills and interests to health-care issues.

First, they linked Bakersville and Mitchell County to a statewide group, Healthy Carolinians. Today, Bakersville is home to a medical clinic boasting five physicians, a nurse practitioner, a nurse midwife, a part-time psychologist, and a dental clinic with a full-time dentist and staff. There is also a children's clinic. These groups represent a commitment to ongoing health care that serves the tiny town of 357, as well as approximately 9,000 residents in the catchment area. A new heliport was built to transport needy patients to major hospitals in other parts of the state and a multi-county dialysis program was set up in nearby Spruce Pine.

**TODAY, BAKERSVILLE IS HOME TO
A MEDICAL CLINIC BOASTING FIVE
PHYSICIANS, A NURSE PRACTITIONER,
A NURSE MIDWIFE, A PART-TIME
PSYCHOLOGIST, AND A DENTAL CLINIC.**

Daniel Barron, a professor of library science who grew up virtually on the banks of Cane Creek, returned to his boyhood home at retirement. As an active member of BIG, he has spearheaded an effort to save the old courthouse and produce new life for the state-ly 100-plus-year-old building.

The cost of remodeling the courthouse was far more than this small county could afford. Therefore, in addition to grants, BIG sought partners to share in the costs, as well as the use of the building. Four such partners emerged. The Mitchell County Historical Foundation was given a lease for the whole building, though they will only occupy a small part of the space; the library will hold GED classes there; and the tri-county community college will have classes in the building using state-of-the-art technology. Finally, BIG and other groups will have access to the performance venue.

No story of community development would be complete without reference to the public sector. Unlike officials in many other small towns, the mayor, Charles Vines, and alderpersons George Wilson and Sue Ledford have actively supported the activities of the community outreach organizations from their inception. That cooperation is a rarity in many places, but it is essential for any community to progress.

HAVEN ACRES, MISSISSIPPI

THE MOORE FAMILY'S FARM lay just a few miles outside of Tupelo, Mississippi. The farm had been the home and the source of livelihood for this African American family for several generations. But by the 1960s, Tupelo was developing a strong manufacturing base. One by one, the Moore siblings gave up the farm for better pay and shorter hours in the factories. One sibling, Willie Moore, a veteran, and his wife, Ophelene, a schoolteacher, made the decision to buy the farm from their family and give it a new life. They wanted to provide land on which to build affordable housing to go with the good factory jobs in town. They platted the land and sold the pieces in small affordable lots so that all the residents could own their own homes. It was a dream come true for the Moores and all those who took up residence in this little neighborhood.

The county barely took note of the fledgling neighborhood and provided only minimal services. And Tupelo had no authority to provide services outside the city limits. Thus, because of neglect from the county and the failure to build a community that cared for itself, Haven Acres gradually began to deteriorate.

Gangs and drugs made their appearance and eventually took over. Residents of Haven Acres became hostages in a besieged community. Law enforcement officers no longer responded to calls for help. Many officers explained that they faced two threats: one was the good chance of being overwhelmed by the gangs; the second was that arrests of these young African Americans often brought charges of racism against them. Moreover, many potential witnesses were either intimidated or refused to provide the necessary support to gain convictions.

Some residents conceded that the situation was hopeless. They felt trapped. They could not sell their homes because no one wanted to move into the gang-infested neighborhood. And, in any case, the value of their property had sunk far below original investments. The dream was now a full-blown nightmare.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, a series of changes occurred. The first was incorporation of the neighborhood into the Tupelo city limits. The second was the outreach of the Spring Hill Baptist Church in North Tupelo. Several members of this longstanding African American congregation initiated a Sunday school program for Haven Acres.

A third significant change was the missionary-like activity of a newcomer from New York—a white Bible teacher who came to embrace and respect the hardworking people of Haven Acres. As a new resident, he knew only a few people, but among his acquaintances were Mr. and Mrs. Glenn McCullough Sr., the parents of Tupelo’s mayor. He invited the couple to accompany him on his visits to the neighborhood. They made a counteroffer: ask some of the people of that neighborhood to be guests in their home. At this meeting, the local people shared their dream of improving their neighborhood and ultimately building a community center. The McCulloughs offered \$1,000 to be matched by the locals as a beginning. More important, McCullough contacted his son, the mayor, and suggested that the city become more active in helping these people reach their goals. The mayor promptly responded by requesting the town’s chief operating officer (COO), Phil Sullivan, to make this issue a priority.

GANGS AND DRUGS MADE THEIR APPEARANCE AND EVENTUALLY TOOK OVER. RESIDENTS OF HAVEN ACRES BECAME HOSTAGES IN A BESIEGED COMMUNITY. LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS NO LONGER RESPONDED TO CALLS FOR HELP.

Meanwhile, a more dramatic event took place. Haven Acres resident, Teena King, observed a drug deal in front of her house. She, like many others, had called the police on other occasions, but had never gotten a satisfactory response. She had been told that Robert Hall, the deputy police chief, and an African American, would be a good liaison. When the dispatcher answered her call, she insisted on speaking to Hall directly. The dispatcher

said she would take the message and pass it along to the deputy chief. “No,” King said, “I want to talk to him directly.” Again, the dispatcher resisted, saying that he was busy. “Then, I will just keep calling you back until you let me talk to him.” Her persistence paid off. Hall took her call.

“Robert,” she said. “There is a drug deal going on right now in front of my house. I have called several times before about similar incidents, to no avail. If you don’t come out here to do something, I am going outside in my robe and house slippers and make a citizen’s arrest.”

“Now, Ms. King,” Deputy Hall responded. “Don’t do that, these people are dangerous and you could get hurt.” “I don’t care,” Ms. King said, “I am tired of this nonsense going on and nobody doing anything.”

Hall responded to the call, and brought other officers with him. The criminals had departed, but he talked with King. He recommended she contact the director of a new city program called Weed and Seed, designed to weed out criminal elements and seed healthy replacements. King followed up and developed a relationship with the director of the program. This was Haven Acres' second connection to city government. Robert Hall, like the missionary from New York, performed the vital task of serving as a "connector." He linked the community to external resources.

Tupelo COO Phil Sullivan, visited the neighborhood and spoke to the two community development groups already at work there. He informed them that the city would not work with two groups; the residents would have to unify so they could speak with one voice. And so, they came together. Even so, it was difficult in those early days to get people to attend meetings. At the first session, fewer than 10 people came. Mattie Mabry recalls that they cried, then they prayed, and finally, they rolled up their sleeves and went to work to recruit more members into the organization.

Officer Hall put together a hand-selected, specially trained unit of police officers—composed of white and black officers in equal numbers—to work with the citizens of Haven Acres. At a meeting held at the Morning Star Church, Hall told the attendees that they would have to make a full commitment to community policing. Mabry proposed that the neighborhood support a "no tolerance" policy. Hall told them that police would set up checkpoints, and ticket anyone who violated any law. He insisted that the citizens become full partners in the process. They agreed.

The officers began by introducing themselves to all the residents and giving them their cell phone numbers with the promise to come if called. They got out of their patrol cars and walked the neighborhood. They played in pickup ball games after hours with the youngsters in Haven Acres. Crime was reduced by more than 75 percent in a single year. Within three years, the police record showed that the most serious violations in Haven Acres were barking dogs and loud music.

The newly formed Haven Acres Neighborhood Association began to address the issues of building pride and "cleaning and greening" the area. They held weekend clean-ups in which hundreds of volunteers came together to remove litter and trash. The city provided garbage trucks for the first few weekends. By the end of the first year, the cleanliness of Haven Acres rivaled even the most affluent residential areas in Tupelo.

They next turned their attention to a 20-year-old dream: building a community center. Working tirelessly, the community raised \$100,000 and obtained a matching amount from the city. COO Sullivan knew, however, that \$200,000 was nowhere near enough. They would need many more partners, and he took it upon himself to help identify those partners. He met with the leaders of a large number of organizations, including city departments, foundations, religious and civic groups, Head Start, the Boys and Girls Club, and many others and personally took them to Haven Acres.

The dream came true. The community center, valued in excess of \$2,000,000, houses Head Start programs, a Boys and Girls Club, and the neighborhood police department. Senior

citizens meet there as well. It has become exactly what they envisioned: a true community center.

Mattie Mabry, who had worked tirelessly for many years to build the community center was appointed director of the Boys and Girls Club. She takes great pride in the fact that none of the children in her program have been in trouble with the law. Moreover, she has much bigger plans than just keeping them out of the orange suits. She is preparing these

children to be active citizens. Among the activities they engage in are weekend clean-ups, visiting nursing homes and playing checkers with or reading to the residents, as well as helping with planting and cultivating community gardens.

The Haven Acres Neighborhood Association became the model for all such organizations in Tupelo. Members visited other neighborhoods, including white ones, and helped them organize their own groups. In time, more than a dozen such associations were formed in the city.

THE DREAM CAME TRUE. THE COMMUNITY CENTER, VALUED IN EXCESS OF \$2,000,000, HOUSES HEAD START PROGRAMS, A BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB, AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD POLICE DEPARTMENT. SENIOR CITIZENS MEET THERE AS WELL. IT HAS BECOME EXACTLY WHAT THEY ENVISIONED: A TRUE COMMUNITY CENTER.

HOUSTON, MINNESOTA

HOUSTON IS A PLEASANT, SMALL, agricultural village of slightly more than 1,000 residents in the Root River Valley of Minnesota. By the closing years of the 20th century, the demographics of small communities were weighing heavily on this small place. The population was aging, and fewer children were being born. Inevitably, the shrinking number of births posed a threat to the schools, and in places like Houston losing a local school is perceived as tantamount to a death sentence

In 1997, the retiring superintendent wrote a public letter assuring residents of the village that their school system was in excellent condition. He expected that the community would build on this solid educational foundation. However, when the state auditors came they discovered a severe shortfall in the funding. Investigating further, they concluded that the school had been reporting more students than actually were attending. In practical terms, the school system was in statutory debt and owed the state of Minnesota money that had been appropriated based on improper figures. Compounding the problem, school enrollment had slipped below the magic number of 500, the minimum number of students needed for a system to remain independent.

The new school superintendent, Kim Ross, knew nothing of these twin shortfalls when he took office. He met immediately with his school board to share the devastating news. They agreed that this information should be made public and quickly called a meeting of the entire community. One month into his new job, Kim Ross faced the stunned and irate citizens of Houston. Though he had not precipitated this mess, he stood in the front of the room and said, "I take the blame. Now let's figure out as a community what we should do." In addition to Ross's bold move, it was the presence and actions of Ron and Rae Evenson that calmed the troubled waters. Evenson and his wife were widely regarded as the most trusted people in Houston. He had served as mayor, alderman, and president of the school board.

The school crisis consumed almost every resident in Houston. A number of local citizens who had never served on the school board offered themselves as candidates. After the election, all the school board members except one were new. They took as their first task gaining community support for the school. However, even with new board members, a school bond referendum failed because of lack of trust. It was a devastating blow to the school. It now lacked adequate revenue and sufficient enrollment, which could have signaled the end of the schools in Houston.

In this bleak environment, two suggestions came forward over the course of the next two years. A recently created regional bicycle path presented the opportunity for a bicycle shop that would repair and sell bicycles. The school took on this task when no private individual stepped forward. They originated a program they called “Classic Cycles.” In this program the students would manage and operate the bicycle shop. Among their challenges: the requirement that it finish in the black. This had a dual purpose of allowing students who might otherwise be inclined to drop out of school to work and teaching entrepreneurial skills.

The second suggestion involved the pastor of the local Lutheran church, who resigned his position in order to establish a print shop in the school. The format was similar to that of the bicycle program—the school would fill an unmet commercial need for the county. The students would operate the shop, it must make a profit, and they would learn business and printing skills.

THE STUDENTS WOULD MANAGE
AND OPERATE THE BICYCLE SHOP.
AMONG THEIR CHALLENGES:
THE REQUIREMENT THAT IT FINISH
IN THE BLACK.

Terry Ryberg, chair of the school board, recognized the need to rebuild trust and involve more citizens in the schools. She helped create committees whose jobs were to gain the participation of townspeople in as many phases of the school as possible. They held weekend “clean and green” rallies where they met at the school, picked up all the

litter, and worked on the landscaping. They helped with painting and other maintenance in the school building itself. They worked to strengthen the parent-teacher association.

The school board meetings themselves took on a more professional aura. Citizens were invited to participate in the meetings, but order was maintained through the use of Roberts Rules of Order. Ryberg remembered those early meetings, filled with angry citizens, as potentially explosive situations. In those days, Marilyn Fronkron-Bayer, the director of community outreach, sat by a telephone in the back of the room, prepared to call the sheriff if the need arose.

In time, the meetings took on a more civil tone, and citizens became more confident that the school board was doing a good job managing in very turbulent times. This acceptance was a necessary part of the plan to rebuild trust so that the next election for school bond monies would not fail. In fact, the bond issue did pass, but much remained to be done.

As an initial step, some of the existing leaders participated in leadership training. Fronkron-Bayer contacted the Blandin Foundation in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. This foundation has established a national reputation for its strong leadership and community development programs. Houston sent several emerging leaders to take part in the yearlong program. This core of leaders, including several school board members, refer to this experience as a critical turning point in both their individual and community lives. The training stressed the importance of broad-based community involvement, an approach that was much in evidence as Houston evolved.

One citizen, for example, stepped up with an idea that would prove to be a launch pad for major change in the community. In a knowledge economy, he thought, all people need to be computer literate. Yet a majority of the town's residents not only lacked computers, but also lacked computer skills. Who might have a large number of outdated computers, he wondered. He found the answer less than two hours from Houston: the Mayo Clinic had many outdated computers slated for replacement. Once contact was established with hospital administrators, the school system became the recipients of those older machines.

Over the course of the next several months everyone in the town who wanted one received a computer. Those who were unable to pay received them as gifts. Others paid a minimal amount. Once all the computers were delivered, the school held classes to teach the proud new owners how to use them. The school took on the responsibility of becoming the server for the town and arranged with the local telephone company to provide service at a reduced cost. All the citizens who wanted it were now connected to the school and the 21st century world of technology. The school communicated daily with all the citizens, embracing them as part of the new, broader "school community."

The capstone of the transition from near disaster to success was the move to online courses. Superintendent Ross recognized the potential almost immediately and set about creating a virtual school. He would meet the needs of students, such as young patients at the Mayo Clinic who could not attend a traditional school, and home-schooled students. Prime users of this technology were those who needed only one or two courses, but were unable to get them through their own schools. This became the key to increasing the enrollment well above the 500 students needed to remain independent.

These positive changes seemed to inspire a whole host of innovations. The state of Minnesota offers professional services to qualified small towns that apply. These services are provided

by planners, landscape architects, and other young professionals. They come to the community, listen to what citizens have to say about their dreams for their town, and provide recommendations on how to achieve their goals. Houston applied for and was awarded such a visit from the Design Team in the late 1990s. In the culmination of their three-day intensive stay, the professionals offered 20 recommendations. Surprising even the state representatives, within a year, Houston had acted on 17 of the 20 suggestions. Among other projects, the town established a nature center and a library.

A sense of confidence began to spread through the community, spilling over into the school's athletic programs. Houston's football team had rarely even achieved mediocre status. In 2004, the football team under a new head coach, lost every game. But the coach assured boosters that he would chart a four-year program and the results would make them proud. True to that promise, the 2007 team fell one game short of the state championship playoffs. The 2008 team went undefeated and won the Minnesota state championship for nine-man football. It was the first state championship in the history of the school.

Not to be overshadowed by the athletic achievements, the academic program has had its successes as well. In 2008, Minnesota led the nation in average ACT scores with a score above 22. Houston's average score was 24. One hundred percent of the freshmen who entered high school graduated. The Houston school program was cited in a December 2008 report by *US News and World Report* as one of the nation's best schools. A week later Jim Lehrer's *News Hour* honored the Houston schools as being among the most innovative in the United States.

In a single decade, the school system had gone from virtual extinction to being among the nation's best.

COLQUITT, GEORGIA

COLQUITT, GEORGIA, POPULATION APPROXIMATELY 2,000, is located in Miller County, an hour north of Tallahassee, Florida. The county has relied on an agricultural economy from its inception. It never really had a manufacturing base, so when the farm jobs were replaced by agricultural technology there was no alternative means of earning an income.

By the 1970s, it was apparent that Miller County would continue its downward spiral unless local citizens banded together to alter this path. While the leading male citizens gave little

thought or effort to supplementing the farming jobs, two women, Joy Jinks and Dot Wainwright, had been talking about it for some time. They sent out a notice calling for citizens to meet at the courthouse to discuss ways of raising the quality of life.

Twelve people attended the meeting; ten of them were women. They agreed that they would need some agency to work full time on the improvement of the area. The first step was to establish a chamber of commerce. Unfortunately, there was never enough money to adequately fund the chamber, and, predictably, it had only limited impact.

The women did not give up. A core of four women, Jinks, Wainwright, and two others came together to consider what they could do personally to change the course of Miller County. They hit on the idea of using a fruit that grows naturally in the swamps of the area: the mayhaw. Since mayhaws grow wild, local unemployed men could harvest them. Local women were hired to make the end product, initially jelly. It was a simple plan and, in fact, yielded excellent results. They succeeded in selling their jellies to wholesale markets in Atlanta and New York, and ultimately to Cracker Barrel restaurants in their region.

Before long, they were extremely successful. However, only 15 to 20 men and women were employed during the season and when the season was over, so were their jobs. The core group of women had learned business skills that they would use later, and it did infuse more money into the town. But it did not cause the full transformation the women sought.

They viewed this as a delay in dream fulfillment rather than as an end. As occurs in all groups, some members had dropped out, and a few new members were added, but Joy Jinks and Dot Wainwright remained central. The women had grown through each experience and recognized that there were still areas within their own talents that they had not yet explored. In 1989, they began yet another organization, which they hoped would become the vehicle to make the changes they wanted. This was called the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council. They had some knowledge of the arts field though no really clear vision of what might emerge.

Jinks visited Chautauqua, New York, where she met a Northwestern University PhD candidate who was completing a degree in theater. Richard Geer was intrigued with the concept of using local folk tales to produce plays. His trip to Georgia was the beginning of a long, fruitful relationship.

They were able to plot the strategy of collecting local stories as the raw material for theater productions, but there was no money. They pursued a variety of means to raise the funds, although there were few believers in the project. Even Jinks' husband refused to contribute,

saying no one could use plays for economic development. Nevertheless, in the end, they had quilted together enough money to produce one play.

It was Wainwright, the president of the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council, who hit upon the creative name for their project. She called it, "Swamp Gravy." This would be their version of stone soup, the old tale of a stranger who comes to a village where hungry natives were dying of starvation. He invites each villager to contribute something to a pot of water in which he has placed a stone and by this means provides enough soup to feed the entire town.

It seemed an appropriate metaphor for what they were trying to do. Swamp Gravy would be a total effort by all the citizens in the community. Some would make costumes, some would sell tickets, others would contribute their stories, a few would act in the play, and some would write and sing songs. Still others would clean the restrooms and direct traffic.

Humanities scholars trained the local citizens in the art of collecting oral history. The Arts Council assembled the stories and sent them off to an established playwright with a national

reputation. This was what the funds had been raised for because the women knew that the writing and directing was what could make or break their production. The only paid people involved were Richard Geer, the director, and Jo Carson, the playwright.

They performed the play before a sold-out house at the Miller County

Elementary School auditorium in October 1992. The original plan was to mount only one production. But there was so much demand to see the play from local citizens and neighboring communities that they agreed to perform small segments of the play before civic organizations in the surrounding area. The response was so gratifying that they began to collect money for a second production. It was the beginning of a successful string of productions that continue to this day. Each year they use the collected stories to produce a new play.

Today, tourist-filled busses and automobiles clog the streets of Colquitt for two months every year. The Arts Council has expanded its offerings to include May Haw in the summer (a local version of the television show, *Hee Haw*) and a Christmas show.

A CORE OF FOUR WOMEN, JINKS, WAINWRIGHT, AND TWO OTHERS CAME TOGETHER TO CONSIDER WHAT THEY COULD DO PERSONALLY TO CHANGE THE COURSE OF MILLER COUNTY.

The project began with a budget of less than \$2,500. In time, the budget increased to more than \$2,000,000 a year. By 2009, the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council had more than \$4,000,000 in assets. They took their earnings and began to buy abandoned buildings. One became a small hotel with a restaurant whose best-known culinary offering is swamp gravy. For the uninitiated: swamp gravy begins with fried fish. The fish are removed from the grease, and the cook adds potatoes, onions, tomatoes, peppers, shrimp, corn, and any other ingredient one might have around the house. In fact, if there were no fish caught that day, one would simply begin with the vegetables.

The success of the plays has continued to provide the Arts Council with a revenue stream. They have acquired buildings that now house a mini-mall, a community center, a bed-and-breakfast, and two-bedroom apartments. In another building the council installed an after-school program for children whose working parents would not be home when they got out of school. Over the course of the next 17 years, the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council itself became one of the largest employers in the county.

The goal of these innovative women from the outset was to transform their community and raise the quality of life for *everyone*. They recognized from the beginning the need for affordable housing in their small town. Accordingly, the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council formed another organization, Community Development Corporation of Southwest Georgia, with a dual purpose. The CDC is charged with job creation for the region. Its second priority is to develop affordable housing. Through an extensive partnering process, CDC has now completed 32 units of housing for working people with limited incomes.

There have also been other benefits. Almost everyone interviewed agreed that, while racism has not been erased, Swamp Gravy has helped to blur the lines between black and white and has made it much easier to discuss these basic issues. Moreover, it has helped to bridge age gaps by bringing together people of all ages in the productions. Class differences, too, are becoming less visible.

More than 2,000 residents of Miller County have participated in some facet of Swamp Gravy. In addition, local citizens have contributed more than 150,000 volunteer hours to the effort. Citizens believe they now have a sense of community that was lacking before.

PART TWO: THE FINDINGS

PART ONE TELLS THE STORIES of four communities in rural America. Small towns like these usually receive limited attention from the rest of the nation, but they constitute 20 percent of the national population. As Danville, Virginia, foundation president Karl Stauber often reminds us, they are the nation's largest minority. All of these places feel they are in a struggle for their very existence. They are dealing with major issues that may, in fact, determine their ability to survive.

This section of the report seeks to identify the elements common to the communities described here, as well as others like them. Note that none of these places has any intrinsic economic or demographic advantages. There are no metropolitan engines to drive the economy. They have limited access to interstate highways. Only Haven Acres is close to both air and four-lane transportation. Western North Carolina's natural beauty provides a built-in asset but the mountains that attract outsiders also serve as barriers to the outside world. These are poor places: western North Carolina is part of Appalachia whose poverty has been well documented for nearly a century. Haven Acres is located in Mississippi, one of the two poorest states in the country. Miller County, Georgia, is part of the ninth poorest congressional district in the nation. Houston, Minnesota, is strongly dependent on a shrinking agricultural economy. Moreover, rural America historically has the poorest schools—a deadly weakness in a knowledge economy—and the fewest health-care services.

Citizens in each of the study sites, and in other communities that refuse to fade away, recognize that their human resources are a key to their survival. In addition, they have learned the lesson so often verbalized by George McLean, publisher and CEO of the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, that there is no Santa Claus in the state capitals or in Washington, D.C.

At the same time, they understand that local people alone cannot endure without access to external resources, although the final use of these resources falls on their shoulders. Much of their success depends on their ability to borrow, to adapt, and ultimately, to mesh these once-foreign elements with their own culture.

THE CATALYSTS

THE PROCESS BEGINS because one or more individuals step forward. In the words of Jean Monnet, the chief architect of the European Union, “Nothing is possible without men (or women); nothing is lasting without institutions.” We chose to call these men and women “catalysts,” a term that was emphasized often by the respondents themselves. These catalysts are not superheroes. Many of them describe themselves as being very ordinary, but there is no doubt that they were necessary to achieving their project’s goals. In many cases, their greatest contribution was to get other people involved in the work at hand.

Jim Collins, in his important book, *Good to Great*, examines corporations that have transformed themselves from “good to great.” The transition begins, he says, by having “the right people” involved. The “right people” we encountered in our research share many similarities with those described by Collins. As he noted, the term *leader* was in and of itself not sufficient to characterize them. There are, rather, clear levels of leadership, as we found in each setting. There were those who were completely competent, those who were good managers, and those within a particular sphere of expertise. Our key catalysts were very similar to what Collins called “level-five leaders.” The primary characteristic of level-five leaders is that they are focused on reaching organizational goals rather than on advancing their own self-images. They have the strong will to persist until the work is completed.

Collins chose to use the term *will* as a key characteristic of a level-five leader. In our study, the term most often used by others to describe these people was *passion*. Like Collins’ business leaders, our “level fivers” insist on excellence. They are willing to do “whatever it takes” to achieve that excellence. They work very long hours and make numerous personal sacrifices. They have a laserlike focus on reaching the desired goals. At the same time, they deflect praise for high achievement by crediting the work of others.

The catalysts in our study understand their limitations. They see their task as one of mobilizing and engaging the citizenry. They are not in and of themselves, the problem solvers. They are consistently able to mobilize fellow citizens. They do not always initiate the vision, but are eager to assist citizens in reaching their desired outcomes. Linking those community workers to external resources, these leaders are also able to help them integrate outside assets with local assets.

In our research, private citizens took the lead in addressing the persistent problems of their communities. Only a few elected officials were among our key catalysts in these settings. The public sector was a valuable and sometimes necessary partner, but in all of our cases, they focused most of their energies and resources on infrastructure issues. Only Haven Acres was able to partner with the public sector early in their efforts to revive their neighborhood.

Private citizens have little or no coercive power. They must learn to lead without the traditional forms of authority. Our catalysts recognized the power that is derived from being inclusive. They recognized the power that comes from shared concerns and visions. One of our most successful catalysts articulated that the best leaders create an environment in which things get done.

We found that level-five leaders encouraged others to take leadership roles as well. In each of our successful communities, we could identify at least 20 key leaders without whom the overall projects would have failed or been less effective. These communities are, in fact, “leaderful.” Certainly there were times when all these “leaders” were not in complete agreement with one another, but they found ways of working together.

Initiators often use their own area of competence to help their towns develop. Anita Connelly, architect of an arts festival in Bakersville, said, “I don’t know anything about politics: I leave that to those who do, but I do know how to make things pretty and that is what I like to do.” One of the most active women, Mattie Mabry, in Haven Acres concluded that she was successful in dealing with delinquents because, in her words, “I know how to raise children.”

One of our surprising and most consistent findings was that these catalysts come in pairs. Without exception, each of these leaders had a partner who could stimulate and sometimes challenge him or her. These individuals, not necessarily a spouse, provided support in even the most trying of times. When burnout affected one, the other was there to be a cheerleader. If a particularly difficult barrier appeared along the road to progress, the two were able to work together to minimize its impact. The locals often found it difficult to speak of one without the other, and these partners often joked about having a Siamese twin.

Less surprising, we found a disproportionately large number of women in leadership positions. In all but one of our settings, local respondents concurred that a large number of leaders in their successful efforts were women. This research is too limited to draw any definitive conclusions, but there can be no mistake in noting the predominance of women as catalysts

in these data. Tentatively, we observed that women were especially likely to lead in the efforts to establish a creative economy built around the arts, such as occurred in Colquitt, Georgia, and western North Carolina. Haven Acres had an unusually high number of women leaders who saw their challenge as dealing with children, in this case, delinquent children. Clearly, all of these women look to their own networks for partners, and in most cases, they reached out less to male groups. In Colquitt, most men scoffed at the idea that the economy could be built around an artistic endeavor such as storytelling. In fact, none of the early participants were men. While one might assume that these women were unemployed or had more free time than men, this did not prove to be the case in our research. In these towns our catalysts, by and large, were not stay-at-home moms. All but a few were employed.

There may be such a phenomenon as a “born leader,” but we did not find any examples of these in our research. All of these catalysts work very hard to improve their own skills as leaders. They begin their journey not so much by working on community projects as by working on themselves. For example, both Joy Jinks and her close friend, Dot Wainwright, went back to college as adults to improve themselves. Jinks earned a degree in social work and later worked as a community developer in South America and the Caribbean. Wainwright took a degree at a local college. Almost

PRIVATE CITIZENS HAVE LITTLE OR NO
COERCIVE POWER. THEY MUST LEARN TO
LEAD WITHOUT THE TRADITIONAL FORMS
OF AUTHORITY.

all of the key leaders in Houston, Minnesota, received leadership training from the Blandin Foundation. The catalysts in western North Carolina received community-development training through HandMade in America.

None of the key catalysts in the entire research were under 40 years of age. It would appear from this study that it takes a period of personal growth to become an effective leader. Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, uses a gardening metaphor for the evolution of a good leader: He says that when you are in the process of becoming a leader, you must grow yourself. Once you become a leader, it is your responsibility to grow others. Our research bore this out.

Trust is the most basic component of leadership. Leadership experts Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner use the word, *credibility*, and note that it consists of two components. First, leaders must earn the trust of their colleagues, which means doing what they say they will do, being consistent, keeping confidences, and not being ego-driven. Second, they must know how to get things done.

In examining successful corporations, Collins states, “You have to have the right people on the bus, and in the right position.” In all of our cases, there was a good fit between the catalyst and the setting in which she or he worked. They understood the culture. One of our key leaders said, “I know the culture of these people and I understand their values. I may not *share* their values, but I do understand them.”

This connection between setting and catalyst provided some fascinating dimensions. One of the most prominent leaders in our research had the unpleasant experience of failing in a similar role in the same county in which she ultimately succeeded. She left the earlier setting where she had been unproductive, took the lessons learned, and experienced great success in her new environment.

Some of our catalysts failed in their initial attempts to bring about change because, in their words, “the timing was not right.” What they found was that partners who were needed for the project were evidently not ready to come on board. Or the community was not ready to accept a certain project. In Colquitt, Joy Jinks and Dot Wainwright found that new ways of thinking about community and building a creative economy would have to wait until the time was ripe.

Our catalysts were all boundary spanners. They had worked and learned their craft in a variety of settings and geographic locations. They took this experience and built on it.

Each of our communities has been working diligently for a decade or more on their problems. All of the key participants agreed that persistence characterized their success in reaching specific goals. In some of our communities, key citizens wondered aloud whether they would have begun their projects if they had known how long they would take. A few participants said they would not. But the most critical catalysts all agreed that, even if they had foreseen the difficulties, they would have taken on the tasks.

Initiators who remain flexible in their approach were consistently successful. These individuals were able to keep their eyes and energies focused on the end goal, but they knew that the

course was rarely a straight line from one point to another. Political scientist Thomas Cronin refers to such leaders as “broken field runners.” We thought of them as distance runners rather than sprinters.

The most effective catalysts seem to have active antennas in continually seeking new ways to bring about change. Whether through voracious reading, wide-ranging networks, or extensive travel, these people—like Kim Ross, who introduced the idea of a technologically based high school to a rural town in southern Minnesota—are comfortable in finding new approaches to existing problems.

As noted, these leaders are not superheroes. They share the same flaws that are common to all humans. Those with strong self-knowledge often revealed to the researchers their own weaknesses. Some who had strong partners noted that the partner’s strengths compensated for their own weaknesses and vice versa. One of the best leaders acknowledged that he was too impatient and often alienated people whose support he needed. He accommodated that weakness by his willingness to be the “big picture” person and turning over detailed operations to fellow leaders. Others suffered from a lack of confidence, but they overcame this flaw by identifying competent mentors.

Many books on leadership state rather emphatically that leaders have very clear visions. No doubt this is sometimes true. We, however, found a number of complexities and nuances. Our experience indicates that there are often competing visions in a single community. There may be agreement on the problem, but the vision of how to solve it becomes a battleground. In the case of Haven Acres, their inability to come together over a period of 20 years thwarted the achievement of their goals.

Moreover, there are sometimes cross pressures. All of our subject communities found themselves torn apart over the issue of change. Almost everyone recognized that there must be new ways of earning a living, but the resulting shifts in culture that would accompany these changes frightened citizens. Nearly everyone we interviewed acknowledged this paradox and indicated that it sometimes paralyzed any meaningful change.

In fact, visions evolve over a period of time. Subsequently, they may, in fact, become clear and guide the action of those involved. In our research the initial vision was often a rather amorphous dream, and the term *dream* was frequently used.

Haven Acres began as the dream of Willie and Ophelene Moore to provide affordable housing for African Americans in the post-World War II era. After the dream became a nightmare filled with crime, gang members, and drugs, the vision was altered. Instead of providing land for housing, citizen safety became the dream. A community center where children could play without fear was a refinement of the earlier goals. Today, that vision has become a reality.

Houston, Minnesota, just wanted to keep its identity through its school. That vision continues to be enlarged through community bands, the nature center, the library, and a school with a national reputation as one of the best.

THE MAKING OF A CATALYST

A KEY QUESTION IN THE RESEARCH dealt with why individuals are willing to become engaged in addressing community problems. What catalyzes the catalysts? The researchers interviewed hundreds of people who were involved in some aspect of community improvement. We asked each one the same question: “Why do you get involved?”

Many people surprised us with the answer that they had simply become intolerant of existing conditions. They stated in a variety of ways that they could no longer live with the situation they found themselves in. They were sick and tired of being sick and tired.

There are many people who have grown so conditioned to the status quo that they accept even the negatives as “normal”—at least for a time. Some of these folks were moved to engage after a change that worsened their personal circumstances. For example, in Haven Acres, they may have been victims of a crime themselves or found that one of their own sons was in trouble with the law. In other towns, people became involved after the loss of their jobs. Sometimes people were galvanized by disasters or looming catastrophes, such as the school crisis in Houston, that required immediate action.

A large number of our most active respondents indicated that they had learned the importance of community involvement from their parents and their parents’ examples. They had been taught from an early age the value of “giving back”—a value reinforced by their churches.

Yet another response came from a dentist. When asked whether religion had influenced his decision to become involved, he laughed, and said, “Hell, no. I just wanted to have a say in things that affected my life.” This need to affect outcomes was another common response.

Obviously, many of the catalysts were motivated to become involved in community projects because of their own self-interest. One of the most powerful cases began with a working class couple with limited funds who had a son with a form of palsy. They would take their son on a six-hour drive to Atlanta for treatment. The loss of work time and the costliness of the travel forced them to pursue a new course. They made an appeal through their church to other families with children who had special needs, inviting them to meet in the church basement. Only one other couple came to the first meeting. The two couples used their minister as a connector to other churches. Crossing all religious lines, they made their plea to other young parents, expanding their cause to include families with serious, long-term illnesses. Their numbers grew—slowly, at first. But as new members joined and utilized their networks, the numbers expanded rapidly.

A local physician who learned of their efforts joined the group. He, in turn, became a key connector to other health-care professionals. Once again, the initial involvement of professionals was small, but those people used their networks. Here, too, the numbers multiplied. They linked themselves to political officials and hospital administrators. Continuing to expand, they eventually integrated all necessary resources, including funding agencies. The end product was a health clinic to treat long-term care patients. Over the course of the next 20 years, their organization served more than 100,000 patients from five states.

The process was spurred by self-interest, but spread to others whose personal involvement provided each of them with a sense of meaning. This combination of self-interest and depth of meaning was common in a number of our cases. Many of the most deeply involved businessmen and women were those who not only profited financially, but also were those for whom the project provided purposeful meaning.

The impression that their involvement in community issues gave deeper meaning to their lives was pervasive in every case we studied. We found that many of these people were so deeply engaged they were almost one with their projects. Those activities were an extension of themselves. One such citizen said it would be like an amputation if she were separated from her volunteer activities.

This sense of meaning has other ramifications as well. When people decide what is important to them, it enables them to set priorities. One of the most frequent rationales for not becoming involved is a “lack of time.” Our research leads us to the conclusion that those who regard volunteer work as meaningful are better able to arrange their daily schedules to create the time for their chosen activities.

BUILDING TEAMS

A FIRST STEP IN MOVING TOWARD even the most amorphous of dreams occurred when catalysts sought to identify individuals who shared their point of view. Many of the discussions began with friends or family members over a kitchen table. One person's concern spread to two or four. Some community leaders said that they sat at their kitchen table with their spouses, opened the telephone directory and asked each other, "Who shares our concerns about our community?" They might call a meeting at a local restaurant. In some cases, they supplemented their phone calls with ads in the newspaper aimed at recruiting anyone who shared their anxieties. In one local community that lacked a Presbyterian church, two couples talked about the need to establish a summer church. They listed all the Presbyterians they knew and engaged them in a meeting that resulted in rehabilitating an abandoned church building, creating a small home for visiting ministers, and launching the Wee Kirk in Linville, North Carolina.

The issue most fraught with tension and controversy was the school crisis in Houston, Minnesota. In this case, there was little time for kitchen table discussions. A few individuals held telephone conversations about what they thought should be done. Through Herculean effort, the old school board was replaced with all but one new member, and the superintendent created a coalition through a series of public meetings. In the end, they were able to get the school back on a stable foundation and move from there to create a successful community.

But clearly, in even the best of outcomes, there are those who do not come on board. Both the superintendent and the chair of the school board in Houston received threats on their lives. Ten years later, there are still individuals who seek to remove the superintendent for what they regard as a violation of trust a decade ago. Some differences of opinion die hard.

At its best, the team-building process seems to work as follows: A core of committed individuals rally around a particular issue. The group begins an outreach that resembles expanding concentric circles. As new volunteers and new leaders emerge, they create their own concentric circles around issues that are more pertinent to their own values. Thus, in the case of Houston, there is a core group whose primary focus has remained on the school, but whose secondary

interests have helped to create the library, the nature center, the community band, and the co-op grocery.

As described in Robert Putnam's study of social capital, the process is accelerated when volunteers reach out to established institutions, such as churches or volunteer fire departments, in these rural areas. We use the term *connectors* to describe those critical people who link individuals into these established social institutions. While the "connector's" role was absolutely vital to success in every community, those who told the story often overlooked the names of these people. When pressed to explain exactly how these important connections were made, a respondent might say, "Oh, yes. So-and-so linked us to those organizations." Suddenly they saw that the connector was critical.

In most cases there were outside agencies that were essential to the team-building process. The Blandin Foundation helped in Houston. HandMade in America worked with communities in western North Carolina. Public servants cooperated with Haven Acres. Colquitt has created its own leadership development program that has helped to advance the process of networking and team building.

The team-building process often focused on the effort to identify partners. Every key leader stressed the importance of finding partners from a wide variety of sources. Community leaders consistently stressed that, in their view, building and sustaining partnerships was the key to community development. Relationship building was an ongoing process in all of our cases. Those communities that did the best job of building relationships were consistently extraordinary.

Pride is the cornerstone in community development. In many cases the transformation of a downwardly spiraling community began with relatively simple projects that would have high visibility. The most common effort was beautification, which could be accomplished with a

A FIRST STEP IN MOVING TOWARD
EVEN THE MOST AMORPHOUS OF
DREAMS OCCURRED WHEN CATALYSTS
SOUGHT TO IDENTIFY INDIVIDUALS WHO
SHARED THEIR POINT OF VIEW.

minimum of resources. Nearly every respondent indicated that once the projects were finished, local people began to feel better about themselves and about their communities.

With their confidence bolstered, all of the communities moved to a stage that we refer to as “possibility thinking.” At this stage, citizens began to move beyond the simpler tasks of “cleaning and greening” to take on projects that would build on their initial efforts. In this phase, people began to consider community development that would address some of their more persistent problems. Participants began to think about the changes that would be both meaningful and possible. They pondered their own assets, looking first at the internal resources to which they had immediate access, and next, at how to pair these assets with resources that lay beyond the community but to which they could gain access.

At some point in the community-development process, each of our communities established a formal organization to oversee ongoing projects and coordinate their efforts. Colquitt formed the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council. In Haven Acres, it was the Haven Acres Neighborhood Association, and in Bakersville, the Bakersville Improvement Group. These organizations write grants, identify new projects, provide for much of the funding of many local projects, and recruit new members. They also help to create and spin off other agencies. A prime example of this function is the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council, which created a committee focused on affordable housing. That group is fully engaged now in efforts to improve the quality of life for local citizens.

These organizations vary in size, and their membership rolls tend to enlarge or shrink depending on the task at hand. Thus, while an average attendance at a Haven Acres Neighborhood Association meeting is less than 25, it expanded to more than 200 to go to city hall to protest a license to allow the sale of beer and other alcohol in their neighborhood. On volunteer days, Haven Acres numbers swell even beyond that.

These organizations are totally under the control of their local memberships. While outside agencies provide requested assistance, the tasks and goals remain the responsibility of the community. The meetings provide structure, have set agendas, and allow for input of all members. There is room for open disagreement but also respect for others’ opinions. It is a fundamental democratic process: citizens acting for the betterment of their town.

CONCLUSION

THE EXTRAORDINARY COMMUNITIES WE HAVE STUDIED provide insights into how towns can and do transform themselves. Each of them has been working diligently and persistently for a decade or more on their problems. Their willingness to address the differences of race, class, gender, age, and newcomers vs. natives indicates a potential for continued progress.

Still, it is important to note that this view of these towns is just a snapshot taken at a particular point in time. Almost all of the communities remain at risk, so we would have to follow their progress in the next 10 to 15 years to see whether the word *extraordinary* continued to hold true.

Perhaps the most important and potentially longest lasting forms of reinvestment come with the growth of people. We alluded earlier to the fact that Swamp Gravy has helped to develop leaders who in turn have gone on to establish after-school programs and new businesses and to reenergize citizens. Members of all the organizations have attested to the fact that they, themselves, have grown as individuals and citizens. They attribute their growth to being a part of meaningful tasks and have found power in working together.

One of our respondents articulated her involvement in this way: “I am this little bitty person in all this stuff. It takes a lot of little bitty pieces to make the big stuff. I am one of those little bitty pieces and I say that with pride.” Her statement captures the essence of democracy and community building: I am a part of the whole, and I make my contributions.



Kettering
Foundation

www.kettering.org

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657
444 North Capitol Street, N. W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016

