

From Little Canada to Marshall: Running North Carolina's Ridges

Leslie Anderson

As each odd characteristic little branch finally drains the fullness of its stream into the French Broad, so each individual person finally pours the ripeness of his personality into the region where he dwells. —Wilma Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 1955

Some western North Carolina communities participating in the Small Towns Revitalization Program have planted trees in their downtown areas.



STEVEN GAI

Walk down Main Street in Marshall, North Carolina, nestled between the French Broad River and the mountain ridge, and you will come to the public library. In the late 1980s, it was cited as the worst public library facility in the state, and it still is. In this former retail store, you will find rain-splattered books, toilets that don't work, limited reference materials—and children in every nook and cranny. It is crowded, and sections of the building are unusable.

Marshall is the county seat of Madison County, right in the middle of southern Appalachia. Poverty, isolation, and lack of formal education and worldly experiences are harsh realities in sections of this and other North Carolina mountain counties. Television, movies, and cartoons have stereo-

typed residents of these mountains as “hillbillies,” projecting images that often are derogatory. They expect that audiences and readers will laugh at Lil' Abner, Snuffy Smith, and the Beverly Hillbillies.

One of the major television networks is currently scouting Madison County for the perfect “hillbilly” family for the latest “reality” show. The concept for “The Real Beverly Hillbillies” is to search the mountains for a back-in-the-holler/untouched-by-progress family, drop them in the lap of luxury, and watch what happens. The assumption is that the family will make fools of themselves for the fun and enjoyment of the rest of America.

Beyond Typecasting

From my experience living in western North Carolina and working in community development for more than thirty years, the complexities of life in these beautiful, nurturing mountains defy stereotyping, caricatures, and cultural pro-

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filing. Yes, some characteristics of mountain people touch close to the image: independent, isolated, poor. Yet on closer observation the reality is broader and multidimensional. The richness of the history, culture, landscape, and people creates a distinctive warp and woof of social fabric. There is wisdom, pride, sensibility, self-sufficiency, ingenuity, artistry, music, and story here.

A miracle is unfolding in Madison County. Despite economic realities, lack of experience, and no money for fund-raising advice, the people got organized, leapt into action, and pursued their dream of a new library. The community raised \$1.6 million for a facility on a new site. Most of the contributions came from local residents, including a generous donation of land by a local family. There also were investments of \$300,000 in state funds and \$450,000 from the Janirve Foundation, based in Asheville. Smiles and pride were abundant the day the leadership announced that it had achieved its financial goal. The dream of a beautiful library will soon be realized. Children will run through the doors, sit in comfortable chairs by a window, and enjoy the treasure trove of books, videos, music, and art surrounding them.

I had a front row seat in the early stages of the project. The planning committee asked me for short-term help in getting organized, collecting thoughts, and preparing a grant proposal. Working together for several mornings in the lower level of the Marshall Presbyterian Church, we wrote a story that flowed from the hearts of these community members. We dreamed beyond bricks and mortar to what a new library would really mean to the community for decades to come. We strategized about budgets, networking, and long-term maintenance. We identified goals and objectives.

Once we laid the foundation, they took it from there—and prevailed. Beyond acquiring books, computers, and reference materials, the successful library project has deepened community confidence, provided a home for local archives, refocused commitment on education, and taught valuable lessons about how to achieve a major community project.

Planning, Persistence, and . . . Payoffs

What a joy it is to work with groups like the Madison County Library planning committee that defy the odds, go for it, and achieve remarkable milestones for their communities. Over the years I have had the chance to watch that process numerous times as I have worked across the mountain region in various settings—as staff for the Girl Scout Council, as an employee of the City of Asheville in recreation and downtown development, and currently as the owner of an organizational and community development consulting firm and an adjunct faculty member of the School of Government. Since launching my firm, I have assisted some fifteen western

North Carolina communities with economic development and human services initiatives. From creek walks to storytelling to historic preservation, coming to know people in these small towns and being involved in their excitement and growth has been a special privilege.

The nonprofit organization HandMade in America offered me an exciting foray into helping communities across the region help themselves. HandMade's Small Towns Revitalization Program assists communities that want to preserve their sense of place, build on their culture and heritage, and strengthen their economic fabric. "The Small Towns program is about honoring the wisdom of our mountain culture," said Becky Anderson, executive director of the award-winning organization.¹ "The people of rural western North Carolina have always survived and thrived by their resourcefulness and creativity. Through the Small Towns program, we provide citizens with the structure to channel this resourcefulness into civic action and concrete results." (For more information about HandMade, the Small Towns program, and Becky Anderson, see the sidebar, page 44.)



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Research conducted by the Institute of Government on the Small Towns Revitalization Program revealed that small towns believe the HandMade model to be very effective.² As one citizen leader said about the program, "Things start[ed] out as a pipe dream . . . HandMade showed us what is possible." Another said, "A number of things have changed; . . . mostly it has been a result of the fact that the local people have realized they have the power to direct their own future."

Working with local citizens to seize the destiny of their communities is fascinating, invigorating, and, at times, frustrating. Restored courthouses. New businesses. Tree plantings. More pleasing facades. Special events. Better signage. Community pride. When results are evident and citizens know "we did it," it is a thrill for participants and consultants alike.

Losses and Lessons

Growing up, I lived with my family along a tributary of the St. Johns River, in Mandarin, on the outskirts of metropolitan Jacksonville, Florida. Mandarin was known as "the sticks," and the city kids called me and my friends "river rats" and "country bumpkins." Today Mandarin consists of walled residential communities, exclusive subdivisions, and franchised commercial areas. The old Mandarin, with its orange groves, alligators, sweeping live oaks, and stories of famous winter resident Harriet Beecher Stowe, is almost invisible.

Losing my home community to highways, stoplights, and concrete provides keen motivation to help communities in western North Carolina avoid the random and rampant development wave. After years of serving as Asheville's down-

Becky Anderson: Western Carolina Trailblazer

Ten years ago, hoping to revitalize the economy of western North Carolina by establishing the region as a premier source of exceptionally fine handcrafts, area residents formed the nonprofit organization Handmade in America. Handmade published a guidebook, *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina*, covering the twenty-three counties in the area, and tourists and collectors began to follow.

Some of the area's smallest, most remote communities, however, seemed to have little to offer visitors and no staff or budget for ambitious redevelopment plans. "How do you assist a town that has only a mayor and maybe a part-time clerk? That's a big issue," says Becky Anderson, director of Handmade since its formation. "That's how the Small Towns Revitalization Program began, to help these very small, rural communities prepare themselves for a new tourism economy."

Having worked in regional development for three decades, Anderson knows the economic strengths and weaknesses of western North Carolina better than most. In the early 1970s, she ran the first federally funded day care program in the mountains, under the auspices of Land of Sky Regional Council, and later became director of community development for the council, which serves Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania counties. She moved on to lead community and economic development efforts for the City of Asheville, North Carolina, and the Asheville Chamber of Commerce but soon perceived that "industrial recruiting was not going to be our economic future here," she says. "Tourism was becoming more and more dominant, and we began to look at a creative economy. That's how HandMade began."

Three communities listed in the *Trails* guidebook and another, not included, wanted to do more to attract tourism, Anderson said, and so the Small Towns Revitalization Program was born. Starting with those four

communities in 1996, the Small Towns program has helped twelve communities, to date, market themselves by sprucing up their main streets with murals, pocket parks, tree plantings, or new entryways. The program, which was highlighted in a national study called *Solutions for America*, sponsored by the Pew Partnership, is successful, Anderson says, because communities must "have a team, a core group, before they come to us; it can't be one person." In addition, the program asks them "to go back to their history and heritage as the foundation for their development."

West Jefferson, for example, originally thought to market itself as a Bavarian village, Anderson said. The Ashe County community had historical ties to the railroad, but there was no longer a railroad or a depot. Eventually, reflecting the heritage of stunning frescoes in small Episcopal churches throughout the county, residents settled on creating a series of murals in the town. One West Jefferson mural highlights the seasons around Mt. Jefferson, another the area's musical heritage, and a third the old Virginia Creeper train that used to run through the town. The murals "set the tone and atmosphere that the arts were a dominant factor in the community and had a customer base," Anderson said. Since the murals were painted, twelve shops and galleries have opened on Main Street.

A key part of the Small Towns program is mentoring, meeting, and networking. Each community chooses as a mentor a town in western North Carolina it hopes to emulate, and because the twenty-three-county area is so large, meetings are held in regional clusters. At different meetings the mentoring towns present a how-to session and are invited to at least one other meeting a year. The towns share their problems and learn from one another. "This pulls us together as a region and gets us interested in each other," Anderson says. "What they have to do is forget that they are in



competition and remember that there is synergy. Synergy is far better than jealousy. A rising tide really does lift everybody." Bakersville and Chimney Rock, for example, shared information about developing creekside walks, including issues of right-of-way and access. Also, Chimney Rock followed Dillsboro's lead in installing decorative streetlights.

Whether other communities can revitalize around heritage, culture, and history remains to be seen. Can the model work in city neighborhoods, for example, where there may be more people living in two blocks than in all of West Jefferson, a small mountain community?

Anderson says there has been interest in the program from North Carolina state agencies, the tourism industry in the state's Piedmont area, and even from groups in Houston and Brooklyn, wanting HandMade's help in arts-based revitalization in city neighborhoods. For her, however, the question is not Can the model work elsewhere? but Why do people love where they live, and how do they share that with others? If a community can answer that question, it may attract others to live, work, and do business there.

—Eleanor Howe

town development director and helping smaller communities across the region through HandMade and the School of Government, I know that communities *can* chart their own futures, avoiding the fate of Mandarin. They can build sustainable economies that respect heritage, landscape, and culture and strengthen their civic health to boot.

Lessons from Communities

Helping a new community is like entering a new classroom. Here are some lessons that communities have taught me:

- Preconceived notions and assumptions must be released. Outsiders must enter communities with an open heart and an open mind. They must listen to the people they serve, to honor and integrate those people's values and beliefs into the work.
- Positive personal relationships are at the heart of effective development.
- Local ownership of a project is essential. Seeking out and developing the talents of local citizens, and motivating them to be engaged in a common purpose, are perhaps the most important tasks. Emphasis should be on building a community's capacity to sustain the program over time.
- Locally based community development work usually requires an extended investment of time and money. Assessing the situation and finding out the real reasons help is needed are vitally important, but putting time and money into direct service should be the goal.
- Collaboration and partnerships are essential in strengthening the economic and civic fabric of communities. The most important partnership is with the local people. Mountain people have been "done to" for generations. "Doing together" is the only respectful approach.
- Young people often are overlooked in community-building efforts. Children and youth should be included more intentionally and meaningfully.
- Progressive ideas and projects must show respect for the local setting and place: the landscape, the culture, and the history of the people they will affect.
- Community developers can be valuable linchpins between the community and outside resources, practices, and ideas.
- Comprehensive, custom-designed approaches are best. The fabric is complex; the problems are multifaceted. One size does not fit all.

Five Tons of Stuff

My first mountain home was in Cullowhee, where I enrolled at Western Carolina University in 1968. I was a social science major and probably acquired a touch of "wanting to fix it" as I learned more about the conditions and poverty of some mountain people. Then I heard about and visited Little Canada, in Jackson County.

In 1970 our college service club, Campus Gold, affiliated with the Girl Scouts, was asked to start a troop in Little Canada. Working on the project, we learned firsthand the difficulties of that poor, remote, desolate community. We set out to have an impact. One member mentioned the conditions to her former troop and church in Goldsboro, and the next thing we knew, a semitrailer truck arrived in Cullowhee. It carried five tons of stuff, mostly clothes. My club's concern and compassion suddenly became a major challenge. The dean of women wanted to know, "Where do you girls plan to put all this?" For the next few weeks we sorted, pitched, and packed clothes.

Then came another difficulty: finding someone, somewhere, to take what Little Canada could not use. The Jackson County Department of Social Services as well as departments of social services in several other counties agreed to take the excess, and several trucking companies consented to make deliveries for free.

As a young college student, I was one more in a long line of helpers who, although well intentioned, had to learn a valuable lesson. Through the tons of clothes, I learned that good intentions and stuff are not enough. I learned that throwing "things" at a situation does not change much for the better. I learned that making an impact requires pervasive strategies and time. I learned that I could not impose my imported cultural assumptions on a community.

As I reflect on years of promoting sensitive and sensible development, the scenes that replay for me are hundreds of successful civic projects similar to the Madison Library, and many community turn-around stories. I remember hard work, deep commitment, creative solutions, and close friendships. The memories are of sacred, sacrificial, and transformational moments. They defy the "hillbilly" image. Instead of laughing at television fiction, people should come and see the real thing—communities all over the mountains proudly taking control of their future—and applaud!

How do we, as public officials, leaders, helping professionals, and volunteers, approach the complex topics of poverty, economic development, and community development? As we work to improve our communities, let's remember: communities can be poor in cash and other resources, yet rich in fellowship, faith, and family; in scenic beauty and nature; in ideas and energy; in concern for their children. How can we connect with the community so that these treasures are preserved and together we have a positive impact?

Notes

1. Becky Anderson is not related to the author, but they are kindred spirits.

2. The Institute of Government participated in Solutions for America, a national research project sponsored by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. From 2000 to 2002, Institute faculty examined HandMade in America's Small Towns Revitalization Program to understand why it has been successful in helping communities plan and carry out civic projects. The findings for the Small Towns project were aggregated with those for eighteen other sites across the country. For more information, contact the author at lesliea@ioa.com.