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## **Small is Beautiful Creative Placemaking in Rural Communities**

*Anne Gadwa Nicodemus*

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**Grantmakers in the Arts**

Supporting a Creative America

4055 West 21st Ave., Seattle, WA 98199-1247

206-624-2312 phone 206-624-5568 fax

[www.giarts.org](http://www.giarts.org)

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## Small Is Beautiful

### Creative Placemaking in Rural Communities

Anne Gadwa Nicodemus

Even folks entirely unfamiliar with the concept of creative placemaking intuitively grasp the potential for artist spaces to catalyze revitalization, and mural projects to animate vacant walls. The usual mental backdrops, however, are down-and-out urban neighborhoods.

How does creative placemaking unfold in rural contexts? In our 2010 white paper, which provided initial framing, Ann Markusen and I include case studies that range from tiny towns to neighborhoods in our largest cities.<sup>1</sup> Art-Place's grantee blog entries and the National

Endowment for the Arts' forthcoming storybook initiative also offer insights into lessons learned by rural creative placemaking grantees. Through its blog, digital atlas, and on-the-ground field-building programs, Art of the Rural aims to create new narratives on rural culture and connect far-ranging communities to each other and resources. But these efforts to understand creative placemaking outside of urban centers just scratch the surface.

People, particularly outsiders, often frame rural communities in negative terms: population loss, racism/ignorance, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, environmental degradation, limited options to earn (an increasingly small) living, resultant diasporas (especially of youth) to seek out greener, if less pastoral, pastures. Places don't just become forgotten; sets of actors working within political and economic systems deprive communities and ecologies of leadership and stewardship.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, both rural communities and low-income neighborhoods struggle with the stigma of deficiency-based narratives.

Yet, rural communities also host unique assets. In *Belonging*, bell hooks speaks to rural places' abilities to foster senses of community and connectedness. She even celebrates self-reliant, "hillbilly" resistance to dominant social and economic practices.<sup>3</sup> Two assets are of particular relevance to creative placemaking. In a country overrun by look-alike strip malls and big-box stores, rural landscapes offer some of our last bastions of distinctiveness. Some rural communities have also retained cultural practices outside of the mainstream, such as craft artisanship, and language, dance, and culinary traditions.

Through creative placemaking, diverse stakeholders strategically shape their rural communities around arts and cultural

activities. Such efforts to preserve and enhance rural communities' living cultural legacies can pay dividends in terms of economic resilience, fellowship, cultural exchange, and physical revitalization. Creative placemaking offers asset-based tools to meet community challenges and direct change.

Through the lens of four case studies, this article explores how arts- and culture-based community and economic development unfolds in rural communities. In Bakersville, North Carolina, community leaders adopted a regional peer-to-peer learning network to better leverage craft as an industry and

physically revitalize their town. In Saint Helena Island, South Carolina, the Penn Center preserves and shares the area's unique Gullah Geechee heritage, drawing over twenty thousand tourists annually. In New York Mills, Minnesota, a town found new life and relevance as a regional cultural hub and home for artist residencies. In Arnaudville,

Louisiana, a cadre of resident volunteers led by an artist reshaped a small town around the arts, its Cajun heritage, and Francophone language preservation. None of the initiatives has yet received grant dollars from leading creative placemaking funders. The sample is decidedly subjective.

I learned of these communities through personal recommendations and interactions at rural-focuses convenings. I researched them over a several-year period by reading articles and write-ups, listening to webinars, and conducting interviews. Despite differences in approach and geographic and cultural context, common threads emerge across the four case studies.

Successful initiators rooted strategies in arts and culture but identified shared values that allowed them to attract private sector buy-in, build partnerships across sectors, missions, and levels of government, and overcome community skepticism to build public will. Speaking about Bakersville, HandMade in America's former executive director Gwynne Rukenbrod explained, "It's about changing the way you think and operate — convincing the agricultural extension officer that it might be important for him to talk to the economic development officer, craft artists, and the county commissioner." John Davis, founder of the Cultural Center in New York Mills, recounted:

*I realized I needed a language of business and economics when talking about art projects in a small town. You have to market to everyone — whether a farmer, the business community on Main Street, schools and families. And you have to get people in the door, whether it's by offering free hotdogs or an exhibit of fish decoys.<sup>4</sup>*

These rural initiatives not only leveraged distinctive cultural traditions, they also yoked strategies to natural assets and agricultural practice. Three out of the four case study areas are part of federally recognized national heritage areas, “places where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape.”<sup>5</sup> In Bakersville, citizen leaders identified ways to tap into the region’s competitive advantage in craft and marry it to Bakersville’s natural amenities: the Blue Ridge Mountains and the world’s largest natural rhododendron display. Cultural nonprofits in New York Mills and Saint Helena Island actively supported both artisans and farmers as entrepreneurs.

The rural ethos of generosity and self-reliance also surfaced in multiple case studies. By maintaining “cultures of abundance” (as Laura Zabel coined), these rural communities fostered goodwill and reciprocity and accomplished incredible outcomes, often primarily through volunteer labor.<sup>6</sup> Two different property owners donated buildings for the New York Mills Cultural Center, and the mayor and school superintendent stripped the hardwood floors.<sup>7</sup> The organizers of NuNu Arts and Culture Collective in Arnaudville exude Southern hospitality. They have welcomed visitors and participants with pot-lucks and dancing. On neutral ground, people of different races and cultural traditions have engaged in discourse and exchange. Through folk school models, New York Mills and Arnaudville have made platforms for residents’ skill sharing a central offering. In Bakersville, HandMade in America’s community development model emphasized peer-to-peer learning across a regional network. Rukenbrod explained, “rural people prefer to learn from each other rather than an outsider coming in and telling them what to do.”

This last observation alludes to challenges that a number of interviewees pointed to: parochialism and fear of outsiders. Initiators in Arnaudville adopted a regional strategy (radical for their area) to promote artistic and cultural offerings across a series of nearby towns and sought support from stakeholders outside the town’s border, from parish tourism offices to the Consulat général de France à La Nouvelle-Orléans. Bakersville struggled against long-standing municipal rivalries. It took a flood to catalyze the goodwill that allowed community leaders to work across town borders and access new levels of county support.

Creative placemakers in Arnaudville, New York Mills, Saint Helena Island, and Bakersville also voiced the challenges of

assembling adequate financing and sustaining initiatives in the face of ebbs and flows of resources (monetary and people power). To generate earned revenue, Penn Center has raised cattle, sold hay, and leased farmland. Regional camaraderie in HandMade in America’s community development model allowed citizen leaders in Bakersville to counter volunteer burnout. They clarified strategic goals that allowed them to track down funding without being stopped short by resource limitations.

For resources on how to carry out and finance rural creative placemaking, I have identified the following. Both the



1998 Bakersville flood. Photo courtesy of Bob Hensley.

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and ArtPlace fund rural creative placemaking initiatives. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) participates as a strategic advisor on the ArtPlace initiative, and its Rural Development Program has supported creative placemaking initiatives through loans, grants, and technical assistance. In addition to its Our Town Grant Program, the NEA’s Citizens’ Institute on Rural Design offers funding and technical assistance through community design workshops. Art of the

Rural offers a range of digital platforms and on-the-ground programs to empower and connect rural cultural initiatives. Lastly, the NEA, Arts & Democracy, Americans for the Arts, and CommunityMatters offer archived webinars and conference calls on matters relevant to rural creative placemaking.

### **HandMade in Bakersville, North Carolina**

“Furniture and textiles went poof.” That’s how Bob Hensley, a longtime resident and civic leader in Bakersville describes the loss of over three thousand manufacturing jobs in Mitchell County in the early 1990s. Rhododendrons, craft artisans, and grassroots citizen organizing may seem like unconventional tools to counter small-town decline. Nevertheless, Bakersville is working hard to weave a tapestry of resilience with just those threads.

The 350 people that call Bakersville home and the several thousands in the surrounding unincorporated areas served by this county seat know Bakersville as “Gateway to Roan Mountain.” The entire mountainside turns pink every June with the world’s largest natural display of rhododendrons, a feat Bakersville celebrates each June with its Rhododendron Festival.

Bakersville claims not only this unique natural heritage but also distinctive cultural assets. The renowned Penland School of Crafts is located just a few miles to the south.

Each year it enrolls more than twelve hundred students from forty-eight states and overseas and attracts over fourteen thousand visitors. Mitchell County also claims the distinction of having the largest per capita concentration of artists in the country. Penland School was founded in 1929, but not until the mid-1990s did Bakersville awaken to the potential for tourism, physical revitalization, and entrepreneurship that craft artisans presented.

In 1996, Bakersville took advantage of a fledgling experiment. The Small Town Revitalization Program grew out of the then-new HandMade in America's effort to publish a guidebook to entice travelers to journey off the Blue Ridge Parkway and patronize craft artists tucked away in area hamlets. Civic leaders soon identified an opportunity to build on the effort by engaging municipalities. With a \$100,000 grant from North Carolina Rural Center, HandMade launched the program. Bakersville was one of the first four guinea pigs in a program that was expanded to fourteen towns.

HandMade's Small Town model adapted the National Trust for Historic Preservation's successful Main Street program specifically for towns with populations under two thousand. The seven-step process begins with community assessment. A small group of professionals with expertise in economic development, design, historic preservation, marketing/PR, and organizational development, *and an artist* guide citizens and local and county officials in an intensive three-to-four-day process. The outcome is a community assessment "cookbook" with recipes of potential projects and funding resources that could work toward revitalizing the town.

Borrowing from Main Street's vetted framework, citizens and officials figure out what they need to do to make things happen. They write grants, provide leadership, define projects, fund them, see them through to completion, and develop work teams. By clarifying goals and strategies, they start working incrementally on change, even before securing funding.

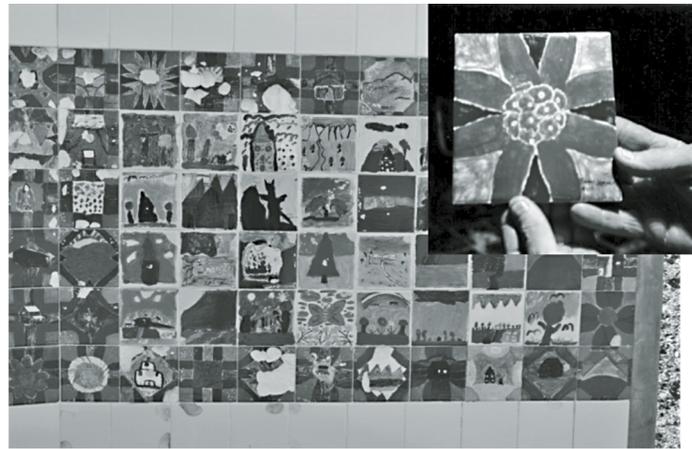
Two defining features set the Small Town Revitalization Program apart: a cross-sector orientation and peer-to-peer learning across a regional network. Varied players from economic development officers to craft artists to county commissioners come to the table and have conversations about everything related to their town. Through regional peer-to-peer learning, towns overcome provincial tendencies and cultivate grassroots civic leaders. Via area clusters, leadership groups from different towns regularly share their

trials and triumphs and learn from one another. Larger, biannual summits inspire healthy competition. Participants have five to ten minutes to "stand up and brag like crazy," said Henley. He jokes that they practice R&D, which stands for rip off and duplicate. Henley claims that five years into the program fifty people with the equivalent to bachelor's degrees in civic leadership were spread out across the region. As peer mentors, more seasoned leaders now share their expertise with other area communities.

It hasn't been all smooth sailing for Bakersville or the overall Small Town Revitalization Program. The burgeoning community leaders had to counter a prevailing culture of distrust of outsiders and even of each other. Ironically, a flood that devastated Bakersville in 1998 generated an unusual amount of open-spirited support — the typical walls and silos came down, to the envy of towns in the program — allowing Bakersville community leaders to overcome long-standing parochial rivalries and access county-level support. The Small Town Revitalization Program also struggles with ebbs and flows of support resulting from volunteer burnout and the vagaries of political receptivity.

Across its communities, however, the Small Town Revitalization Program boasts dramatic results. Since 1996, 385 businesses have opened, and 1,590 jobs have been created in ten towns, with net gains of 271 businesses and 539 jobs. HandMade in America has tallied a four-to-one private-to-public return on investment over its eighteen-year history and over 200,000 volunteer hours. According to Hensley, "without HandMade we'd be sitting around saying, 'duh, we don't have enough money.'"

In Bakersville, the Small Town Revitalization Program has helped spur physical and economic redevelopment and even provided a tool for arts-based healing. For instance, the disciplined framework allowed civic leaders to use a \$5,000 grant for a modest expansion of the Cane Creek Greenway to leverage an additional \$25,000 in city, county, foundation, and private matching funds. The town doubled the size of the greenway and added new amenities, from a gazebo to public art. Mosaic tiles designed by youth through a collaboration with the Penland School not only proudly identify the Cane Creek Greenway but also served as a healing platform for kids to process the trauma of the 1998 flood. The Cane Creek Greenway expansion also provided a venue for the Creek Walk Arts Festival, a successful new add-on to the annual Rhododendron Festival. In addition



Bakersville Youth/Penland School of Craft post-flood art project. Photos courtesy of Bob Hensley.

to the greenway, craft artisans and gallerists cited physical upgrades in Bakersville, catalyzed by the Small Town Revitalization program, as important factors in their location calculus. For the first time, Bakersville has really tied in to the region's competitive advantage in craft. Bakersville now has a cluster of galleries (two nationally renowned) and thirteen artist studios in different disciplines. All told, since 1996, Bakersville has seen thirty-two facades redone and forty-four building renovations. Whereas before HandMade, Bakersville lacked even a restaurant, the community now hosts a nice bed-and-breakfast and five restaurants. Over eighteen years, some businesses have closed, and others have opened, but Bakersville is still coming out ahead with eleven business expansions and a net gain of eleven new businesses and thirty-seven jobs in a town of only 350. The town tallies total public and private investment of \$7.1 million through the HandMade program. Bakersville has not fully recovered from economic restructuring in manufacturing, agriculture, and mining, but travel, tourism, and the arts have kept it viable.

### **Penn Center, Saint Helena Island, South Carolina**

Far before *creative placemaking* entered the national lexicon, the Penn Center refused to fit neatly into any siloed "box." Is it a museum? A historic district? A catalyst for sustainable economic development? A hub for social justice? An early-childhood learning center? A cultural center? Yes. The fifty-acre historic campus not only draws thousands of heritage tourists annually, but also, as Walter Mack, director of the Land Program, explains, is an integral part of the community's "heartbeat." Residents come to Penn for assistance with housing, child care, and legal advice. Though it doesn't specialize in social services, Penn often serves as a first point of contact, connecting residents to other resources.

Penn Center carries a mantle of responsibility as stewards for a unique cultural legacy. Saint Helena Island, in the heart of South Carolina's Sea Islands, is the epicenter of Gullah Geechee culture. The Gullah Geechee are direct descendants of slaves, primarily from West Africa. Slaves on the geographically remote Sea Islands remained very isolated during days of slavery and even as late as the post-World War II years. Plantation owners fled in the summertime to avoid disease. Consequently, slaves managed and operated entire plantation systems with little interference. Because of this, they maintained more of their Africanism than slaves in any other part of the United States.

The Gullah Geechee claim the Creole language, kinship systems, a close connection to land and fishing, and unique crafts, music, and dance. The Penn Center was originally the site of one of the country's first schools for freed slaves (the Penn School, founded 1862). In the 1960s, it served as the one of the few places in the South where interracial groups could congregate. It hosted Dr. Martin L. King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Peace Corps and provided a venue for citizen training in voter rights and community empowerment.

Today, through its museum, classes, and monthly community sings, the Penn Center preserves and shares Gullah Geechee culture with both Gullah Geechee themselves and visitors. In particular, Penn Center's Annual Heritage Days Celebration draws twenty thousand people from all over the country and world for demonstrations of Gullah art forms and cuisine and generates an estimated multimillion dollars for the county economy.

But Penn Center's commitment to cultural preservation extends far beyond the strict "museum" sense to include active community stewardship. For instance, Penn Center currently partners with the US Department of Agriculture to help farmers market their products through farmers markets and online. Through its Land Use and Environmental Education Program, it helped area residents respond to increasing land development pressure on Saint Helena Island by leading training sessions and conversations with

residents about "heirs property ownership," tax abatement options, and advantages of leasing versus selling. Penn Center successfully negotiated a landmark proviso with Beaufort County to preserve tens of thousands of acres of black-owned land through an heir's property exemption and led land-use planning efforts with county officials and environmentalists to protect and preserve valuable cultural and environmental assets through zoning. Most recently, in 2008, Penn Center partnered with the county library and a regional health services provider to develop a multimillion-dollar library and health center complex.

Despite these efforts, Penn Center recognizes the continued need to develop models for sustainable, local economic development. Many residents currently commute four hours per day by bus to Hilton Head Island for employment. Through roadside stands, artisans ranging from quilters to boat, net, and basket makers earn a couple thousand dollars over the three-day Heritage Days festival. Penn Center



Low Country African Drummers and Dancers, Penn Center Heritage Days Celebration. Photo courtesy of Penn Center, Inc.

is exploring ways to expand opportunities for year-round sales through a bold vision of Penn Center as a counterpart to Colonial Williamsburg that functions as a living museum employing artisan entrepreneurs, not actors. They are hopeful that a 2006 federal designation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor will aid their efforts to cultivate tourism and leverage sustainable local economic development in their own backyard.

### **Cultural Center, New York Mills, Minnesota**

In the early 1980s, prospects for New York Mills (an old Finnish farming enclave located three hours from the Twin Cities) looked bleak. The local hospital, the farm implements dealer, and a snowmobile dealership all closed within a single year. Ten percent of the town was out of work.<sup>8</sup> Today, New York Mills boasts a population of nearly twelve hundred people, twice the projected forecast. It has seen new businesses open, storefronts renovated, and the arrival of a new medical clinic. New York Mills has even been named one of nation's top five culturally cool towns by *USA Weekend* magazine. The town's Cultural Center deserves much of the credit for this transformation.

Housed in a restored 1885 general store, the center hosts everything from gallery exhibits to film festivals to the Great American Think-Off (a philosophy competition for everyday citizens). Theatrical and musical performances, such as the Longest Night Music Festival on the winter solstice, showcase rosters of regional artists. Activity spills outside its doors through a sculpture park and annual puppetry pageant. The center emerged out of a modest artist-in-residency program, which still continues as a core offering. It has recently expanded to include an incubator program for creative entrepreneurs and classes offered through the Continental Divide Folk School, both to be housed in a historically significant former creamery building.

The germ of the idea for a cultural center took hold as John Davis, an artist transplant from Minneapolis, painted houses and barns for money and got to know local community members. He discovered, contrary to his preconceptions, that many rural people had an interest in arts and culture but lacked existing outlets. He started to envision an artist residency program. Instead of following a colony model, the New York Mills Arts Retreat Program would host a single artist at a time and require that artists propose and complete a creative project that would benefit the community. Agenor Martí Fernández, a recent artist in residence from

Miami, researched the history and landscape of the region and incorporated this into his work. One media artist fixed computers in residents' homes.<sup>9</sup>

The journey from an artist-in-residency program to a cultural center that catalyzed community transformation involved persistent coalition building. Davis learned that his push to convert the abandoned general store got more traction with elected officials and bankers when couched first and foremost as an economic development project rather than promoted for its arts, cultural, and social merits. For instance, at a chamber of commerce meeting, he presented



George Biltz (resident, physician, and small-business owner) helps install Cultural Center in New York Mills' *Labyrinth*. Photo courtesy of Cultural Center in New York Mills.

a compelling alternative to the economic development director's proposal of a fast-food restaurant. Instead of providing travelers with an easy option to get off the highway, gas up, eat, and quickly leave, perhaps they could entice them with glimpses of a sculpture park to turn off and venture into town, where they would discover the arts center and would stop, stay a while, and spend their money.<sup>10</sup> With persuasive tactics like this, Davis and a small board of civically active leaders convinced the city council

to donate \$35,000 a year for the center's first two years. The property owner agreed to donate the historic building. Davis cultivated local support by hiring area construction workers and completed the redevelopment 50 percent under budget because of donated labor and supplies. The town contributed \$10,000 annually toward the director's salary, with a stipulation that the center also serve as the regional tourism hub.<sup>11</sup>

Now in its twenty-second year, the Cultural Center affirms a commitment to relevance and accessibility to a broad swath of constituents. The annual fish and duck decoy exhibition, for instance, celebrates local artists that do not necessarily identify as such and entices new audiences in the door. Current executive director Jamie Robertson explains that they strive to be democratic with a small *d*, connecting people with the tools and assets that allow them to collectively craft a richer community life. Through its Continental Divide Folk School, launched in 2012, people from all over the region exchange their skills and knowledge, from maple sugar tapping to Slovenian egg painting to yoga to gardening. This positions the Cultural Center as a broad hub for civic life rooted in, but not limited to, the fine arts.

Successes notwithstanding, the center is still struggling to crack the code for sustainable financial models. Even though the property owner donated the creamery building, the McKnight Foundation contributed \$100,000, and the

center has applied to the US Department of Agriculture's rural development arm for loan and grant funds, the board must still raise an additional \$100,000 from the business community and individuals to complete capital renovations. They remain hopeful that the creamery expansion will allow the center to increase earned income through folk school offerings and that the artists entrepreneurs benefiting from the incubator training will continue to enhance New York Mill's economic and community vitality.

The center has evolved into an integral community institution. The first time the town polled community residents about building an arts center, more than 60 percent said that it would not be an asset. One year after the center was built more than 70 percent of respondents said that it was good for the town, a percentage that has climbed in subsequent years.<sup>12</sup>

### **The NuNu's Experiment, Arnaudville, Louisiana**

Arnaudville's past is defined by its French, German, Spanish, Native American, and especially Cajun influences. A group of stalwart citizen volunteers led by painter George Marks have set a trajectory for its future.

This town of a thousand residents in the heart of Louisiana's Acadiana region has hosted UN ambassadors, senators, visitors from Haiti, Canada, and Senegal, and delegations of French artists, educators, and students. Community-building tools range from potlucks to dancing to quilting to cooperative art galleries to profit sharing to regional cooperation. Residents that span from artists to elders developed NuNu's, a hub for art and cultural development. Supporters from the town, region, and even other countries helped rebuild NuNu's after a tragic fire. The next major test? Whether visionaries can successfully lead the charge to wrestle control of a defunct local hospital from multiple government bodies and forge the partnerships necessary to fund-raise and operate the facility as a French immersion school and cultural business incubator.

The Arnaudville experiment started as the quintessential "local boy makes good" tale, but it has evolved into a robust platform for citizen agency. In 2005, artist George Marks returned to his hometown to care for his ailing father. Marks had gallery representation. He had considered moving to New York City to advance his career but was struck by

Arnaudville's decline. Storefronts had been torn down, his favorite bakery had closed, the old meat market was now a drug house. Instead of moving to New York City, Marks decided to lay down roots. He bought an old auto parts store and transformed it into NuNu's, which housed his studio, a cooperative gallery, a nightlife café, and Fredrick l'Ecole des Arts, a school that emphasized skill sharing. The school harnessed the existing talents of residents from culinary arts to language to environmental stewardship. Marks reflects, "Everything we do is an amalgamation of all of these different folks. We provide a platform for what people do best." Over time NuNu's has evolved into more than a forum for peer

exchange of talents, crafts, and traditions. It serves as a focal point for residents to imagine and develop a vision for rural development rooted in culture.

Though inexperienced, a small cadre of allies employed sound instincts. They reenvisioned the town's perceived impediments as assets. Off the I-10 and I-49 beaten paths, strip and big-box retail had bypassed Arnaudville. Straddling two parishes, Arnaudville was the stepchild to both. By nurturing an indigenous arts and cultural identity, perhaps Arnaudville

could finally be celebrated and embraced by both while retaining independence from superstore retail. Organizers encouraged partnerships and programming that spilled beyond NuNu's walls and the town's border. For instance, they adopted an atypical regional approach; they collaborated on and promoted events in other towns, such as literary festivals in Grand Coteau. By profit sharing with local businesses that hosted events and exhibitions, they ensured these establishments had skin in the game.

Marks and his fellow instigators also adopted the mentality of act first, apologize later. (Marks later admitted that he has had to apologize very often.) They didn't initially seek formal support from town officials. They waited until there was a noticeable impact — more people gassing up, getting groceries, and eating at restaurants. In 2008, Mayor Kathy Richard and the town council sought and won a Louisiana cultural district designation from the state's Cultural Economy Initiative. Within the Deux Bayous Cultural District borders, developers and property owners can now access historic tax credits, and arts patrons owe no sales tax on purchases of original art. The town aldermen also agreed to sell an old, defunct water-processing center to an out-of-town sculptor for his studio.



An international delegation's tribute to Cajun Mardi Gras, as part of the 2013 *Semaine Franc* creative placemaking summit, Arnaudville, LA. Photo © Metris Arts Consulting, April 2013.

NuNu's has attracted a cadre of unusual supporters to champion a vision of Arnaudville as a rural hub of cultural activity, from the area recycling plant to a local brewery to the tourism offices of Saint Landry and Saint Martin Parishes. Elder Mavis Frugé spearheads monthly French conversation tables, keeping the town's native tongue alive and attracting international visitors. The Acadiana Center for the Arts — the regional arts council — taught NuNu's organizers how to write grants, helping free them from bootstrapping operations when and if Marks sold a painting. They subsequently won grants from the Consulat général de France à La Nouvelle-Orléans, South Arts, and the Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation, though NuNu's still struggles to sustain the mostly volunteer-driven initiative. With the support of the Consulat général, Arnaudville has even sent delegations to France and sponsored an annual international symposium on rural creative placemaking and Francophone cultural traditions.

The effort to build and sustain political will, however, is also a perpetual challenge. A fear of change, a fear of outsiders, racism, and homophobia — these are the local cultural undercurrents that NuNu's supporters are up against. As an out gay man, for instance, Marks faces homophobia; he even faces perceptions of being an outsider because he grew up on the town's outskirts instead of in Arnaudville proper. NuNu's strives to serve as neutral ground, a platform where cultural exchange and dialogue between the Cajun, Creole communities (both black and white), and various Native American tribes can occur, but its taken dedicated persistence to change some hearts and minds through this radical approach.

NuNu's has survived fire, successfully navigated small-town politics, and garnered staunch allies in their immediate backyard, the region, and across the Atlantic, but to what end? Monthly French conversation tables draw from forty to seventy people, from schoolchildren to grandparents, from as far away as Canada, Haiti, and Africa. People like Kevin Robin, who launched a successful café and catering company, are moving back to their hometown. Artists from outside the area, who wish to celebrate, not change, Arnaudville's distinctive rural cultural heritage, are starting to take up residence. A relocating fiddler, for instance, converted the former drug house into Tom's Fiddle and Bow and now hosts weekly fiddle jams. Property values have stabilized and increased, bucking national trends. A powerful vision and persistent leadership have awakened a small forgotten town to its own assets.

*Anne Gadwa Nicodemus is principal at Metris Arts Consulting.*

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#### NOTES

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