

Somewhere Special, N.M.

by Marlon Heimerl



T.J. Parks, Superintendent of Tatum Schools, one of the pilot districts in the Rural Revitalization Initiative, stands in front of the house his students are building.

Photo by Robert Ott.

It has always been peaceful in this little town, but now it's a little too peaceful. Over there, that used to be Main Street. Those shops in a row with the boarded-up windows and buckling foundations, those used to be the lifeblood of this community. Apparently the Mega Mart in the next town was just too darn cheap to resist. After the garage and the bakery closed, there wasn't much of a reason for the children out of high school to stick around — no jobs, no future. Once the school shut its doors, the town just sort of faded away. Those empty homes standing in silence once held hundreds of people — proud people who loved this little town, people who were very mighty sad to leave.

Rural communities throughout New Mexico are struggling to survive in the face of big businesses, changing world markets, and alterations to primary industries driven by technological advancements. Addressing this unfortunate truth, the New Mexico Rural Revitalization Initiative (NMRRRI), an international school-led movement dedicated to revitalizing rural districts through unifying schools with their communities, points out in a summary that “around the world, the largest human migration in history from rural to urban areas is resulting in the degeneration and, in some cases, the death of rural schools and communities. This degenerative process is strongly evident in many rural communities across New Mexico.”

As rural economies collapse, communities must learn to adapt if they are to survive in a global age. Acting as a catalyst in this evolutionary process, the NMRRRI initiates ties and programs designed to fuel economic resurgence, bringing new opportunities and solutions to populations suffering decline due to the challenging task of trying to flourish in a rapidly changing environment.

Inspired by the experiences and philosophies of Santa Fe's own Center for Relational Learning (CRL), the NMRRRI has arrived at a new and remarkable approach to rural economic development. Dr. George Otero, the cofounder of CRL, and John Halsey, the executive director of the Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA), have together fashioned a unique vision, modeling the NMRRRI after 15 years of rural school-led community revitalization in South Australia. The rural branch of the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED Rural Ed) is the third piece to this regenerative puzzle, providing the core funds for initiating programs and giving the NMRRRI a means of access into the New Mexican public school system.

Through the harmonious coalescence of these three organizations, the NMRRRI has successfully launched 13 pilot projects in rural New Mexican communities, including Tatum, Cimarron, Jemez Mountain, Jemez Valley, Maxwell and Loving, with many more to come. Stimulating the economy by inspiring innovative programs, the NMRRRI provides the training, technical assistance, coordination and support necessary to restore ailing communities to viability, through initiating self-sustainable and profitable projects based on the inherent uniqueness, strengths and collective ingenuity of communities in need of new life.

Since schools serve as the nucleus of rural communities, they are the logical place to initiate rural revitalization. In addition to being the focal point of civic pride, schools are the largest employer in most rural communities, with the most advanced communications infrastructure and brick-and-mortar facilities. Thus, schools are resource factories, providing the staff, parent networks, students and facilitators needed to launch a successful renewal campaign.

One of the most valuable assets identified by the NMRRI is the incredible, previously untapped reservoir of youthful creativity and energy found in the schools of rural communities. Capitalizing on the students' know-no-limit mentality and instilling a sense of pride in the community, a domino effect emerges as the entire village is uplifted and invigorated by fresh minds inspired by a desire to preserve the beauty and uniqueness of the place they call home. In the later stages of this process, the programs developed by the community with the support of the NMRRI become a tailor-made, permanent addition to the local curriculum in the form of vocational skills, insuring a permanent and relevant contribution to the community's financial well-being.

"If you are in a situation that doesn't have much hope, and all of a sudden an idea comes into the picture that might make things better for everybody, people really get excited and align behind it," Robert Ott, an associate of the Center for Relational Learning (CRL) declares enthusiastically. Echoing Ott's

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excitement, Susan Jay, Ott's partner at the CRL and fellow rural crusader, explains, "Across the state, people are starting to know each other, support each other, and hopefully uplift the entire state by helping each other out."

Through employing a three-stage facilitated approach to economic development, the NMRRI holds hope for revamping the struggling rural communities of New Mexico. At every step of this NMRRI process, the CRL and PED Rural Ed each play unique and active roles in the development of sustainable communities.

Phase one of this plan is the "leadership phase," in which "discovery conversations" and "community conversations" identify ideas for economic revitalization. During this phase of "capacity building," community members participate in an "asset inventory" to identify resources and ideas unique and specific to the strengths of the community. An asset assessment, as apposed to a need assessment, is a crucial component of the NMRRI vision, as building self-esteem through identifying what is possible within communities is often a crucial step for ensuring success.

Ott and Jay work with the NMRRI as the mediators and facilitators of the "community conversations," meant to derive from the population a sense of the strengths and resources the community has to offer. These conversations draw together a variety of community



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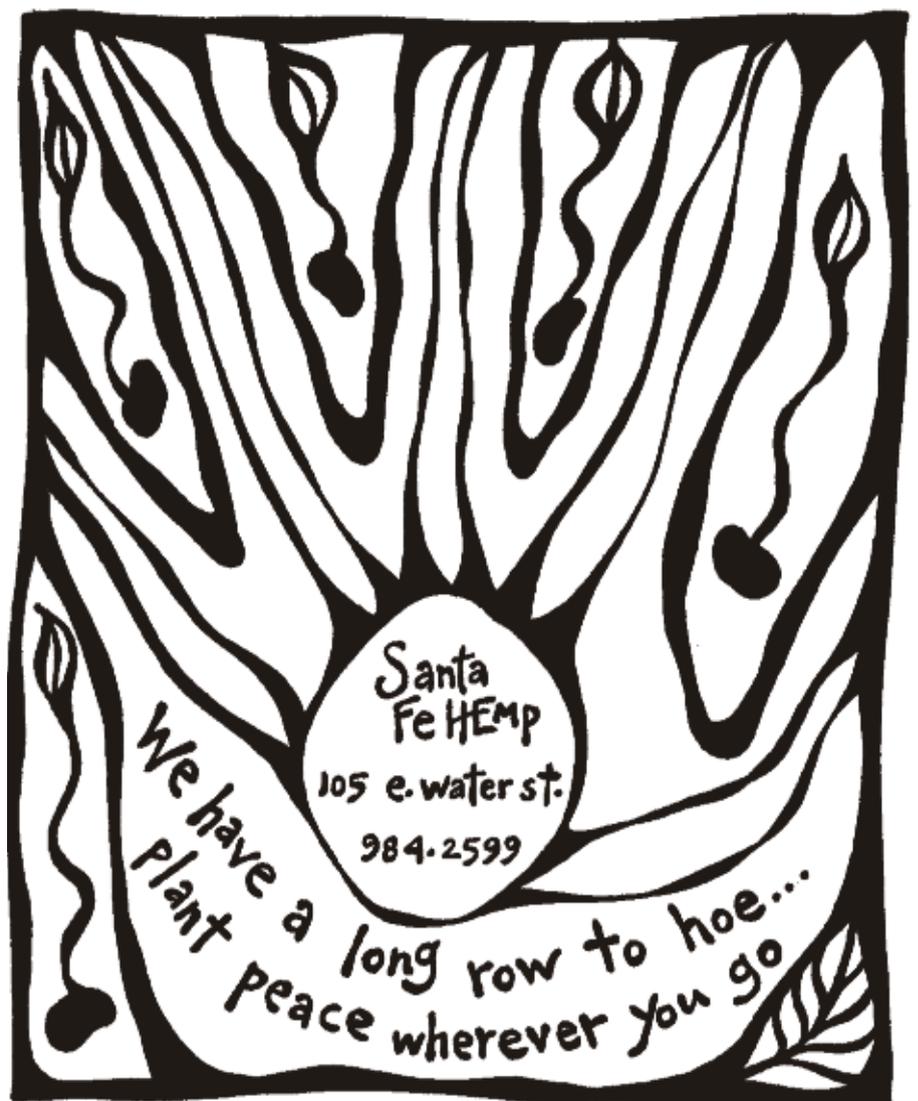


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members to identify what they love most about their town. Attendees often include the superintendent of schools, parents and teachers, and local business owners, as well as representatives from community service organizations: the water company, disability center, parks services and police department. The collective genuine desire to find solutions at these gatherings is almost palpable as creative energies swirl and brainstorming flourishes.

Capitalizing on the enthusiasm generated by these conversations, before moving on to the next phase the NMRRI leads expeditions of rural New Mexico educators to Australia. In the Southern Hemisphere, these educators visit 10 once-ailing rural communities, now thriving and vibrant thanks to the successful application of the Australian model. "When they come back from Australia," explains Jay proudly, "they suddenly see how this can actually be manifested, how it can really exist, and there's a new level of energy and excitement; it's very transformative." Adds Ott, "It's one thing to talk about change and quite another to witness it directly with one's own eyes, heart and mind."

One of the 10 communities surveyed on this tour is Cowell, a South Australian village. This rural community illustrates a vivid picture of the revitalization of a "Somewhere Special, Down Under." In this agricultural settlement, local farmers could no longer con-

Community members participate in an "asset inventory" to identify resources and ideas unique and specific to the strengths of the community.

tend with the agricultural megacorporations taking over their town. Due to means of mass production and technologically advanced methods and equipment, Cowell was struggling to compete and was quickly crumbling beneath the pressure of rural degeneration.

If it wasn't for a "community conversation," there's no telling where Cowell would be today. Fortunately, during one of these meetings, a local man posed the question, "If we can't farm the land anymore, then why don't we farm the ocean?"

Today, an oyster farm bobs rhythmically with the ebbing and swelling of the ocean just off the coast of Cowell. Buoyed cages — a testament to the inventiveness of the youth of Cowell — hold precious cocktail oysters, a commodity marketed by the students and exported to Japan — the source of a now booming and sustainable economy. "Cowell was really dying," reflects Ott. "Now it's a vibrant community and educational center for aquaculture in Australia."

Unraveling before the eyes of amazed New Mexican educators, this stop demonstrates the success of a postrevitalization community. Through gaining a firsthand understanding of the importance of building strong relationships, introducing vocational skills into school curriculums, utilizing hands-on learning practices, and forming partnerships within the community, the potential of this movement becomes clear, as excitement levels hit the ceiling. "When these educators see

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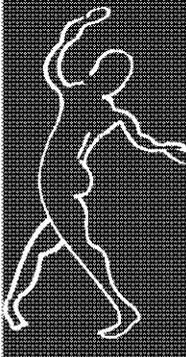
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Students in Jamestown, South Australia research and cultivate native plants of the area on land adjacent to the school. After harvesting their crops, they bake delicious cakes and hors d'oeuvres from their produce, which they serve in an elegant tea prepared in their hospitality class. Their recipes are so successful that they have been published in a cookbook, also written and designed by the students.

Photo by Susan Jay

with their own eyes what's happening in Australia," says Ott, "that's when their minds get opened to the real potential of the NMRRI."

A community on the banks of the Murray River provides yet another example of the innovation of rural Australian youth. Everyday a tour boat would pass by this rural community and elementary school, and everyday it would virtually go unnoticed. Following a community meeting, however, a fifth-grade girl asked, "Teacher, why don't we invite the people on the boat to stop at our school?" Today, the school is the most popular stop on the tour. Between arts and crafts and other handmade souvenirs, tourists walked away with over \$20,000 in school projects last year. Thus, no idea, no matter how small or silly it may seem, is rejected out of hand under the Rural Revitalization model.

Step two of the three-stage facilitated process implemented by the NMRRI is referred to as the "relationship phase." Here, networking is established on both the state level, financially, and within the community through the process of resource development. In this phase, local expertise is harnessed and leadership within the community is solidified.

Through identifying community members with unique and vocational skills, serving the dual purpose of solving immediate problems and of providing training for local youth, local expertise is often an essential component of

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The Short and Skinny of Rural Revitalization Success Stories

From the Land Down Under to the Land of Enchantment, rural revitalization is a beacon of light cutting through the profound challenges facing rural schools and communities. By augmenting social and fiscal capital, the rural revitalization movement is a reservoir of hope, pouring forth in times of need and fulfilling its promises in rural communities around the world. The diversity of these plans illustrates the depth of the human mind and the creativity therein, as it becomes clear that the New Mexico Rural Revitalization Initiative (NMRRI) is a program asking the right questions, providing the right atmosphere, and implementing the right plan at the right time. As the hearts and minds of citizens in rural communities align behind this movement in New Mexico, local politicians are realizing that rural revitalization is a smart issue worthy of support.

PHASE 1 DEVELOPMENT: NEW MEXICAN SCHOOLS

Cimarron Municipal Schools

Leapfrog: Long story short, Cimarron Superintendent Annette Johnson, deeply involved with the NMRRI, took friend and fellow community member Linda Pavalcheck along to Australia. Linda was so inspired by what she saw there that, upon her return, she ran for mayor. She won! Today, Cimarron is in the hands of two people with a vision and a plan, as these two women, Johnson and Pavalcheck, hold important and influential seats of power.

Jemez Mountain Public Schools

Little stars: From a biomass initiative to the silver screen, Jemez Mountain youth plan to produce a series of science videos on the value of renewable energy, teaching the importance of thinking environmentally in the global community of the 21st century.

Jemez Valley Public Schools

Earthly education: The development of the Valles Caldera Project, a plan to utilize nature as a classroom in the form of outdoor education, may someday be remembered as the cause of an environmentally conscious generation in this community, an asset sorely needed in the global community of the 21st century.

Loving Municipal Schools

Bookworms, young and old: Community-school partnerships have given life to a community library in Loving based out of the school media center, illustrating the value of the relationships created throughout this process. Other partnerships within Loving have fueled a community-improvement project, leaving citizens "loving" their community more than ever (pun intended).

Maxwell Municipal Schools

Civic bonding: Despite all the other successes coming out of this community, a 21st Century grant laid the groundwork for a school-sponsored teen center that is now fully operational. Furthermore, a wellness center, an entrepreneurial graphics art program, and a daycare center have provided valuable services to the community.

Tatum Municipal Schools

Beautification: Receiving a 400k grant to beautify the town and developing a long-term plan for the construction of homes around the community — one house per year — with the help of students and a generous teacher, this community is working its way out of a housing deficiency. By seeking funding to develop the Coyote Ranch Heritage Center — a Western-themed business center and (hopefully) a future tourist hot spot — the NMRRI is laying the groundwork for the success of this community.

PHASE 3 DEVELOPMENT: AUSTRALIA

Crede, Australia

Holy cow! 10,000 acres donated to the high school in Crede have acted as a breeding ground for success. Thanks to children learn-

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starting projects of economic renewal. The story of Tatum, New Mexico, is an excellent example of this principle. During a community conversation, an acute housing shortage was identified as one of the town's major problems. Sorely needed teachers and other professionals interested in moving into the town could not find suitable housing.

As the community pondered this problem, two inspired participants, an ex-construction foreman/shop teacher and a community member with the wherewithall to pay for housing materials, reached a brilliant and generous agreement. The well-off community member offered to donate housing materials if the shop teacher would agree to build a house with the help of his students.

As a result of this agreement, students are now completing construction on the first house to be built in Tatum in 15 years, as the town moves closer to solving its housing shortage. Simultaneously, students are learning the valuable vocational skills of construction and carpentry, which are becoming relevant and valuable parts of the local school curriculum. Proud students of both genders have learned to pour a concrete foundation and install Sheetrock, and community camaraderie flourishes. The proceeds from the sale of the first house will be rolled over and used to fund the next construction project, and in time the housing problem will be history.

Illustrating yet another example of the power of harnessing local expertise, Ott and Jay tell the story of a town in which bored and uninspired youth were dropping out of school because they didn't see the long-term relevance of core subjects such as geometry. The same old "when am I ever going to use this garbage in real life" mentality was stunting the potential of this rural community. In response to this problem, an inspired teacher and expert welder applied for a grant for the construction of a school welding shop.

After garnering the necessary funds, the shop became both a means for creating income and an opportunity whereby the instructor could explain the relevancy of standard school subjects. After teaching students how to first create a gas tank and piquing their interest on the subject, he posed the question, "How much gas will this tank hold?" Measuring the cylinder's dimensions, the teacher taught the students how to calculate the volume, proving the accuracy of this calculation by filling the tank. The students began to grasp the relevancy of geometry, and in time grades and attendance drastically improved.

Having learned to weld furniture, stoves and everything in-between, as well as having received instruction in resume writing and interviewing skills, several of the students are on their way to becoming successful profes-

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ing valuable vocational skills through processes of agriculture and the practices of testing soil and water, this community is booming today. Local youth from the school, having gone to an agricultural trade show, were able to convince John Deere to donate a computerized tractor that automatically plows, plants and fertilizes fields — a tractor worth hundreds of thousands of dollars! Creativity yielded generosity, as a win-win situation emerged as the source of revitalization in this Australian community.

Willunga High School, Australia

Wine and dine: Between a vineyard producing a brand of wine unique to this school and community, and a hospitality program developed by Willunga high school students — offering tea and bakery goods, and utilizing the vocational skill of cooking — substantial funds were generated for this community.

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sionals in the field, infusing the community with much-needed inspiration and money. Another vision realized.

"In this type of process," reveals Ott, "the inspired people rise to the surface and become very important because they see the value in it and decide that they really want to participate. It leapfrogs from one place to another, and you get this synergy happening and things really start to click."

The third and final phase of this three-stage facilitated process is the "partnership phase," in which local buy-in, ownership and commitment is finalized. In this stage of development, in-state networking is created as strong relationships are solidified, ensuring the future success and maintenance of the programs established by the NMRRI. Before you know it, another culturally rich, but struggling rural town is standing proudly on its own two feet.

Due to the lack of sufficient funding, however, no community in New Mexico has yet reached phase two of development. Nevertheless, even in the early phases of development, the 13 pilot districts have shown astounding levels of creativity, potential and resourcefulness that should warrant legislative attention.

Examples of these achievements come in a diverse array of ideas, illustrating the versatility of this movement and the uniqueness of the communities involved. For example, as the NMRRI reveals in *Highlights in School-led Community Partnerships for Revitalization*, a progress report put out by PED Rural Ed, several communities have experienced incredible successes.

In the Cimarron municipal school district, a successful effort for a bond of \$5 million for capital improvements has been realized, along with the development of a laser engraving souvenir business started in the industrial arts class. In Eagle Nest, students are creating a fish hatchery, and donated livestock provide further opportunities for relationships with animals and the responsibilities related to their care. At-risk students in this community receive invaluable experiences, which broaden the academic curriculum to include what the principal has astutely labeled "Char-

Identifying community members with unique and vocational skills, serving the dual purpose of solving immediate problems and of providing training for local youth, local expertise is often an essential component to starting projects of economic renewal.

acter Ed." Additionally, business partnerships have been created in Maxwell between Baca Valley, Sierra Communications, Zia Natural Gas, the Wildlife Refuge, the Maxwell Village Council and local residences. The community has also created the Maxwell Wellness Center and a community park.

As one can see, with only phase one of development completed, the NMRRI has proven to be a movement of unequalled promise, hope and regeneration, boasting matchless success on a problem that until now has baffled not just New Mexico, but all of America. In a state beloved for and fond of its traditional, non-industrial way of life, rural revitalization is sorely needed. The only things missing are awareness and the proper funding — despite past financial support from the state and other

private organizations, funding has proven to be a major stumbling block for the NMRRI. With pending legislation scheduled for January 2007, the future of rural communities in the Land of Enchantment, whether these communities themselves know it or not, is bound to the allocation of these funds.

Given the seriousness of this problem, and considering the possibility, if fully implemented, that this plan will bolster the state economy, Ott and Jay remain optimistic that the pending legislation will yield the required funding. "The fact that we are addressing one of the major problems in this country, rural degeneration, gives us hope for success," says Ott confidently. "There's a sense that the timing is right. There's a need for a solution. And there's a workable plan already in place."

In a state leading the way in so many fields of regeneration — from alternative resources to solutions for global warming — the support for the successful execution of a plan for solving issues of rural degeneration is a glaring missing piece in New Mexico's economic puzzle. In essence, the NMRRI achieves the impossible by rewinding the clock for rural communities that appear to be out of time. Whether a community is in complete abandonment and despair or in the early phases of rural degeneration, this plan can truly help. In a changing global habitat marked by the simultaneous collapse of old economic niches and the imperative creation of new ones, adaptation is the natural path for the survival of rural communities. Through harnessing the inherent powers of these communities, the NMRRI activates the expertise, skills, uniqueness and intelligence of the small rural communities of New Mexico, ensuring a school-led, sustainable future for them — one town at a time. ●



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