

Bridge to somewhere: Eastern Arkansas town plots a path to prosperity

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Editor's Note: This is the first in a three-part series on community development efforts in Helena-West Helena, Ark., that may be instructive for Anniston.

HELENA-WEST HELENA, Ark. — Sporting an emerald polo shirt and a sable mustache, the bank executive reclines in his desk chair until it creaks. His right leg, bent at a 90-degree angle, rests on his left. His head is cocked back, supported by interlocked palms.

Joe Black is relaxing, and rightfully so. Over the past few years, he has pulled his town back from the abyss.

The population of Helena-West Helena — formerly two towns that consolidated in 2006 — is 15,000, down 40 percent since 1965 and 20 percent since 2000. With almost 40 percent of residents below the poverty line, Helena (pronounced *Helen-uh*, not *Hel-lee-nuh*, as locals will quickly point out) is one of the poorest towns in one of the poorest counties in Arkansas. Its public schools have twice been taken over by state authorities.

Yet, Helena is now on the verge of a renaissance, community leaders say. Locals have renewed hope in the town.

And Black thinks the story of its innovation could echo east and west of the nearby Mississippi River.

‘A symbiotic relationship with their community’

During the post-war boom, Helena bustled with the sounds of blues musicians and rowdy saloons. Older locals still remember walking sideways down Cherry Street, downtown’s main artery, to weave through the hordes of pedestrians. Today, you’d probably have the sidewalk mostly to yourself.

Helena’s downfall was precipitated by the usual suspects of small-town decay: manufacturing job loss and agricultural mechanization. Black blamed “lack of foresighted leadership” for Helena’s problems.

“Didn’t you know the mine was eventually going to go dry?” he thundered. “Didn’t you see people building tractors eventually? And once they started building them, making them larger and more efficient?”

Black is the president of Southern Bancorp Capital Partners, the nonprofit wing of Southern Bancorp Inc., the largest and most profitable rural development bank in the country. Unlike the average bank, Southern has goals like reducing the poverty and unemployment rates written into its mission statement.

“Southern Bancorp recognizes that banks have a symbiotic relationship with their community,” Black reasoned. “If the community grows and prospers, the bank grows and prospers. If the community dies or loses population, the bank usually goes down, too.”

Through the 1980s, Helena’s entire economy was structured to entice businesses with cheap labor, Black said. He said free-trade deals shipped those jobs overseas, leaving the town with an underdeveloped workforce and a devalued school system.

Mohawk Rubber Co., plagued with labor and production problems, shuttered in 1979. The area’s largest employer, Mohawk counted 675 workers in its prime.

Two decades of deterioration followed before the town finally hit bottom. The indictment of West Helena city councilmen for stealing public money represented a final indignity.

“No one could pretend anymore. All of our stores closed downtown. It was literally boarded up,” Black recalled.

First, the bank hoped that providing access to capital to county residents would lead to innovation and recovery. Loans alone, though, did nothing to rid Helena of its more systematic afflictions.

“We realized that lending by itself just won’t do it in rural markets. Too many things are out of place and need fixin’,” Black lamented.

300 residents, 500 meetings, 18 months

Backs against the wall, Black and his colleagues first commissioned a baseline study to evaluate past development efforts. The national consultant group found several instances of well-meaning reformers parachuting into the Delta region periodically, promising to “save you people” before packing up their tents after a short stay.

“You don’t fight endemic poverty with a two- to three-year program. You fight it with a long-term, sustainable, multi-generational program,” Black opined. “It took decades to get into this situation and, well, it might take a few decades to get out of this.”

Ultimately, Southern created the “Delta Bridge Project” in 2005 to serve as a private-public umbrella organization that coordinates redevelopment activity in the county. The Delta Bridge Project focuses on what it calls the six pillars of the community: economic development, tourism, health care, housing, education and leadership.

The Walton Family foundation — the family behind Wal-Mart and a ubiquitous benefactor for all things Arkansas — heavily funded the project. In return, the Delta Bridge Project became the foundation’s grant-making intermediary in the region.

The next step was to develop a comprehensive strategy to transform Helena into a

dynamic economic center. In doing so, Southern listened to ideas from the entire community. A detailed five-year plan was conceived after 300 residents participated in 500 meetings over 18 months. City officials endorsed the plan; residents, including potential investors, had reason to believe in Helena again.

In 2009, the Delta Bridge Project upgraded the plan to span 2010-2020.

In 2008 the project was one of 45 small-town improvement strategies profiled by a University of North Carolina study titled *Small Towns, Big Ideas*. The study's authors cited Delta Bridge's inclusive planning and implementation process as a reason for its success and a lesson for other communities.

"The value of a community or strategic plan or vision document depends entirely on the extent to which a truly representative sample of the community is involved in creating the plan," the study's authors wrote. "Plans that are created by a subset of any community are destined to affect only the subset involved in its creation."

Eliminating the 'us versus them' mindset

Tim Schuringa describes the two objectives of the Delta Bridge Project as "aligning existing resources and providing access to funding" for local initiatives.

Schuringa first arrived in Helena as a Teach For America corps member and stayed after his two-year commitment to aid in Helena's redevelopment efforts. Teach For America is a national nonprofit organization that recruits bright college graduates and places them in low-income school districts. He and his colleague, Julia Nordsieck, herself a former TFA educator in New York, are both now community development officers for Southern. They perform much of the organization's behind-the-scenes work, including researching and writing grants.

"It's not about creating something out of nothing. It's not about Tim or Julia or Joe or somebody from Southern magically making something happen," Schuringa said. "It's about serving as a catalyst for the ingredients that you already have."

The Delta Bridge Project has whipped up an entire menu of successes in seven short years.

Initially, the program focused on short-term, visible projects that could inspire hope and erode cynicism in the community. For one, it engineered a massive demolition of more than 300 dilapidated properties in the area.

The necessity of shared resources during the 2005 cleanup likely catalyzed the consolidation of Helena and West Helena the next year. While Helena boasts an historic downtown comparable to Anniston's Noble Street, West Helena could be characterized as a smaller Oxford, with an array of big-box retailers and fast food chains.

"The consolidation kept two hands from reaching for one piece of pie. It also helped us begin to eliminate an 'us versus them' mindset," Black said.

That same year, the Delta Area Health Education Center opened its doors with the

help of a \$1 million low-interest loan from the Delta Bridge Project. The organization has also offered low-interest loans to private investors willing to purchase one of Helena's many historic homes.

Delta AHEC features an exercise center and educates the community on issues like obesity, drug use and hypertension. Through a federal grant, it provides car seats to soon-to-be mothers. Using technology straight out of *The Jetsons*, patients can walk into the Delta AHEC in Helena and have a video consultation with doctors in Little Rock or Fayetteville.

In 2006, an old lumber store was converted into a Boys & Girls Club and the Delta Bridge Project pitched in \$240,000. In a typical example of leaders wearing multiple hats, several of those who spearheaded the project were also affiliated with Southern Bancorp and the Delta Bridge Project.

Nearly 200 children visit the club every day, where they can play basketball and tennis, participate in science projects and receive homework help.

The Delta Bridge Project's fingerprints are also on 20 high-quality units of low-income housing, a harvest of burgeoning tourist sites and a successful new charter school downtown.

"Without us being part of the process, I don't think this project would've been done yet," Schuringa said.

Schuringa was referencing the Delta Bridge Project's efforts on behalf of a new public library, but could have been referring to a plethora of other initiatives across the county, including the revival of a popular blues festival, the construction of charter school buildings and the creation of a biodiesel plant.

'Our numbers are growing'

In a town full of innovation, Terrance Clark and Will Staley pilot perhaps Helena's most pioneering venture. Clark and Staley run Thrive, a creative consulting firm that conducts marketing campaigns for local businesses at below-market rates.

Clark and Staley met at art school. It shows. The walls of their downtown office are plastered with canvases. They then attended graduate school together at New York's prestigious Pratt Institute. One night, while talking on the phone in Brooklyn, they hatched a plan to take their skills to Helena after graduation. Staley grew up in Little Rock and was familiar with the town.

"In New York City, I was a pebble in a Japanese water foundation," Clark said. "Here, I can call the mayor up and say I want to sit down and talk to you today. The closest I ever got to the mayor in New York was selling fruit to him at a farmer's market. There is an opportunity to do more here."

Using profit generated from their ad campaigns, Thrive operates two nonprofit initiatives in partnerships with organizations like the local community college, the Chamber of Commerce and Southern Bancorp. It received a \$186,000 grant from the Delta Bridge Project.

The Helena Entrepreneurial Center, an idea dreamt up in the original Delta Bridge master plan, is a one-year program for budding entrepreneurs that helps them get their business off the ground. It includes 12 weeks of business classes, marketing materials and help on creating a business plan. At the end of the curriculum, the aspiring capitalists present their ideas to the community.

Secondly, Clark and Staley shepherd Helena Second Saturdays, a downtown revitalization effort featuring art and music displays on the second Saturday of every month. The inaugural event in June attracted 15 local artists and craftsmen and 300 residents.

“We’re declaring this, on our own, an arts and entertainment district,” Clark said.

Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, chronicled his short stay in Helena in *Life on the Mississippi*. After describing the deteriorated state of the town following a flood, the classic American author wrote that residents were “upholstered in bright new clothes of swell and elaborate style and cut — a glaring and hilarious contrast to the mournful mud and the pensive puddles.”

Twain’s observation could apply to modern-day luminaries like Staley and Clark, whose eloquent enunciation and pressed slacks contrast with the derelict buildings and neglected lots right outside their door.

“Our numbers are growing. Will and I have always said that if two of us exist, there has got to be 2,000 more people like us out there,” Clark said. “We’ve always had this mantra: Move to Helena.”

Leadership is ‘make-or-break thing’

Both Anniston and Helena-West Helena have histories of racial divisions, active downtown districts and dysfunctional city governments. Earlier this summer, Helena was several months overdue on its budget after the mayor vetoed several versions.

Still, Helena-West Helena and Anniston are far from twins. For one, Helena is significantly poorer, with a median family income of \$23,274, compared to Anniston’s \$36,067. Helena is also less populated and more isolated, lacking nearby access to a major interstate.

And the Delta Bridge Project hasn’t solved all the city’s problems. Unemployment in Phillips County stood at 11.5 percent in June, well above the state rate of 8.1 percent and up from 9 percent a year ago, according to the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services. Even at the height of the pre-recession economy, the lowest annual unemployment rate for Phillips County was 6.9 percent, though that came after four straight years of increasing employment.

Nevertheless, the town’s revitalization may prove instructive for the Model City. In many ways, it seems to be doing more with less.

Perhaps no one is more responsible for Helena’s success than Doug Friedlander.

Friedlander, like Schuringa, first arrived in Helena as part of Teach for America. Within two years, he had helped lead the effort to create the Boys and Girls Club. He now serves as executive director of the county's Chamber of Commerce.

“The make-or-break thing for the whole plan was leadership. You need good leadership to design the plan, but also to execute it,” Friedlander said, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses. “Health care is going to go nowhere, education is going to go nowhere, economic development is going to go nowhere without the right leadership.”

With optimism and vigor, Friedlander commands a presence in the room. In between trumpeting the value of leadership, he managed to both praise the waitress for a good first day on the job and crack a few jokes about the soap opera projecting from a nearby television.

The tale of Helena's renaissance involves people with competence, integrity and vision getting off the sidelines and taking their responsibility as residents seriously, he said.

Black acknowledged that Helena still has a long road ahead.

“This is still a poor community,” he said. “The poverty rate is still 37 percent. We've reversed historical trends in certain program areas, but there's still business as usual in others.”

Friedlander noted that while the first step toward recovery may be the most difficult, it is never too late to turn a town's fortunes around.

“You can keep mourning or start doing some CPR,” he said. “It's not dead yet.”