

COLQUITT, GEORGIA COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION DEMONSTRATION A RECAP OF THE ICA'S CATALYTIC ROLE 1978 – 2004

In April, 1978 an ICA sponsored Town Meeting was conducted in Colquitt, Miller County in the southwest corner of Georgia. Two months later, a prominent local participant, Joy Jinks, attended the ICA's Bananeiras Human Development Project launch in Brazil. Her subsequent engagement in ICA projects in North America, India and Belgium gave her vision and methods to apply to her own community culminating in the *Swamp Gravy* community performance venture that became the centerpiece of Colquitt's transformation.

In January of 1994, ICA staff members, Nancy and Bill Grow, took up residence in Colquitt in part to continue our appreciative and facilitative roles in supporting local efforts to overcome the negative self-image of the community and to address the racial divide in the region. The following list chronicles the highlights of this work and the corresponding sustained results of our partnership with the people of Colquitt/Miller County and the surrounding region. To achieve our objectives, we were obliged to downplay our agency with ICA and allow success to be credited to other people.

We were invited on numerous occasions to facilitate visioning and planning sessions in the Colquitt/Miller County Arts Council and to exercise mediation and problem solving to thwart divisive currents. Today, *Swamp Gravy*, originally intended to last for one season, is in its 12th year of continuous production with full houses and is rated as one of the top tourist destinations in the state.

We made contacts through the ICA network in the East that eventuated in an invitation by the National Association of Professional Educators (NAPE) for *Swamp Gravy* to be performed in the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1996. Today, the pride factor resulting from that experience continues to reverberate in Colquitt, once regarded as an epicenter of under-achievement in rural Georgia.

We introduced a participatory reflective dynamic in the midst of a spontaneous and verbally-driven culture. Through a seven-county library system, we facilitated book studies (Eugenia Price novels and southern history), film viewing and reflection (Bill Moyer's series *On Death and Dying*) and photographic poster displays with conversations (the Holocaust and our society's vulnerability to it). Through the Arts Council, we implemented several academy programs that trained participants in social, intellectual and spirit methods developed in the ICA. Today we are pleasantly surprised at the deeper level of reflection among Arts Council board members and at the general public's acceptance of the recent influx of diverse ethnic groups (Chinese, Indian, Hispanic) operating local businesses and serving on the hospital staff. In our opinion, developing the ability and willingness of local residents to pause and reflect remains one of the most important tasks for sustaining this community demonstration.

We listened and responded to the hopes and concerns of black residents of the area, encouraging and enabling them to take the lead in creating solutions to their needs. For example, this support took the forms of being an initiating fiscal agent and advisor for the Miller County New Vision Coalition, which has served over 500 at risk minority children in an after-school tutorial and prevention program since its inception in 1996. Today, New Vision is considered a showcase by the Regional Board of Mental Health as one of the few minority-led after-school programs in southwest Georgia.

We administered the Georgia Grassroots Arts Program (GAP) in nine counties of southwest Georgia and trained GAP leadership in eight other counties. This work included the re-granting of public tax allocations under creative state guidelines that ensured the funding of arts events would include

participation of under-served populations. GAP gave us the monetary leverage needed in a racially fractured society to do bi-racial programming as well as to empower minority organizations in their creation and development. Today, three minority outreach programs in the Colquitt region continue to develop as beneficiaries of GAP, a strong bi-racial GAP Advisory Committee is in place in this region, and black residents have gone from having no voice to being active leaders in civic affairs.

We helped launch and facilitate a southwest Georgia cultural tourism initiative that brought together representatives from five counties in monthly meetings for three years to plan and implement the first Familiarization Tour in the region and to design brochures and events promoting its arts, culture and environment. Today, because of the reputation of *Swamp Gravy*, the cooperation of the participating counties and the influence of the networks tapped by this initiative, an official state visitor's welcome center stands at the intersection of U.S. Highways 27 and 84 in Bainbridge, 18 miles south of Colquitt. This remote and neglected region of the state has finally been recognized by Georgia as having value.

We created and administered the *Swamp Gravy* Institute (SGI) as the consulting and training arm of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council. The purpose of SGI is to supplement the incomes of *Swamp Gravy* cast volunteers, to provide an additional source of revenue for the Arts Council and, primarily, to propagate the image, "Colquitt has a gift to share with the world." Created in 1997 as the instrument for national and global replication of Colquitt's transformative experience, SGI has conducted over 40 consults in rural and urban locations of 12 states and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the process, 23 cast members were trained to facilitate in these consults. Currently, repeat community performances beyond Georgia are taking place in Florida, S. Carolina, Mississippi, Virginia and Illinois, and new projects have begun in Kentucky and Pennsylvania. In three of these locations, including Georgia, their community performances have been designated official state folk life plays by their respective state legislatures. In our opinion, the strongest challenge facing the Colquitt Demonstration is to make this external mission an integral part of its operations. Otherwise, Colquitt's precious gift of hope to the world could become lost.

CONCLUDING APPRECIATIONS

For their financial as well as their moral support of the Colquitt Demonstration, special recognition is given to Joy and Clyde Jinks, Elizabeth Dyson, Ruth Reames, John Webster and Phyllis Allard and Abe and Janice Ulanga. An additional number of individual donors from across the United States helped make possible the *Swamp Gravy* Academy in 1998 and continue to support the outreach work in Brazil.

For their collegiality, wisdom and advocacy, we are especially grateful for the Community Revitalization Team of the ICA and the partnerships of Richard Geer, founding director of *Swamp Gravy*, and Ann Rivers Davis, former Community Arts Manager of the Georgia Council for the Arts.

Many of the activities reported above were documented in the 18 issues of the ICA Colquitt *Trace* published between 1995 and 2003. In addition, articles on *Swamp Gravy* were featured in ICA *Initiatives* in the spring edition of 1996 and winter edition of 1999. Copies of these materials and a popular article on the work in Brazil are available upon request.

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