

THE ROLE OF SWAMP GRAVY IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Bill Grow, September 2006

In July 1998, a woman was having her car repaired in Colquitt. The mechanic learned her daughter had directed a children's theater workshop in the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council which the mechanic's son had attended. When she went to pay for the repairs, she was told there was no charge for the labor. She listened with amazement to the reason: "My son has done all kinds of extra-curricular things like sports and church activities but has never been excited about anything until this. He talks about it all the time with his eyes lit up. If your daughter and her friends can do that for my son, the least I can do is fix your car for free."

Where human values trump money, as in this story, you have entered the realm of Civil Society. When political representatives fail to deliver on their promises or economic structures betray the public trust, sooner or later Civil Society swings into action. Before the advent of the arts council and its *Swamp Gravy* venture, a small clique of local residents held the decision-making process captive to property interests, such as preventing a new state college from being located in town. Since *Swamp Gravy* began, over 20% of the county population has volunteered in arts council activities. That degree of participation in a cultural structure is reshaping the polity of Miller County with cultural values born out of a new-found public self-confidence and hope in the future.

This shift in community mindset has fueled an astounding arts and culture industry that has not only generated new jobs, attracted new business and catalyzed a cultural tourism boom, but has also caused a ripple effect in every civil sector. Traditional social patterns are being split up and replaced by a new collaborative spirit among government, social agencies, business leaders and churches. Examples include the Miller County Family Connections Collaborative and the New Vision Coalition. The impetus given by *Swamp Gravy* to the cultural renaissance of southwest Georgia attracted the interest of politicians seeking re-election. Federal, State and local officials can be found in performance audiences at election time and are more supportive of the arts in their public statements and voting records. This welcomed alliance of political and cultural life demonstrates the hope that our society can function in a healthier balance.

When a civil society organization like the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council discovers it has a transformational gift like *Swamp Gravy*, it is compelled to share it with others, similar to *Doctors without Borders*. Since its inception, *Swamp Gravy* has been replicated within Georgia and in seven states and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, mainly in partnership with Chicago-based *Community Performance, Inc.*

These contributions of *Swamp Gravy* to civil society building are based on characteristics shared with most civil society enterprises: a premium on participation and consensus, dependence on voluntary association and open recruitment, constituted with organizational autonomy and not-for-profit status, and flexibility for networking and partnerships. In addition, *Swamp Gravy* shares something special with other arts-based organizations: symbol is the key to change in any society.