

SWAMP GRAVY ARTIFACTS

2004

MISSION: TO INVOLVE AS MANY PEOPLE IN A THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE THAT EMPOWERS INDIVIDUALS AND BONDS THE COMMUNITY WHILE STRENGTHENING THE ECONOMY.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Swamp Gravy began in 1991 when the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council voted to sponsor the project. Since that time, over 1000 citizens (16% of our county population) have been involved in some capacity. This involvement includes:

STORYTELLER - STORY GATHERER - ACTOR - SINGER - SEAMSTRESS - PAINTER - CARPENTER - TICKET SALES - GREETER - CONCESSION SALESPERSON - SOUVENIR SALESPERSON - EXHIBITOR - PROMOTER - SWAMP GRAVY INSTITUTE CONSULTANT - ETC - ETC - ETC - ETC.

INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT

All *Swamp Gravy* actors testify to the development of self-confidence in their lives. Children and adults, who previously had no confidence in public speaking, now perform seven minute monologues with finesse. Youth cast members carry their stage presence over into the realm of classroom reporting. Two African-American cast members, Gayle Grimsley and Veronica Haire, took it upon themselves to create a neighborhood after school tutoring program for at-risk children. Their Program *Bounce* has operated consistently since 1996, enabling over 500 children in academic advancement. Charlotte Phillips has developed and applied her creativity and initiative to help establish a Museum of Southern Culture and its outreach program of training school teachers and students in storytelling techniques. Twenty five cast members have been trained as *Swamp Gravy* Institute consultants and have shared their experience of arts-based community revitalization in El Paso, Texas; Belle Glade, Florida; Columbia, Louisiana; Wapakoneta, Ohio; Yampa Valley and Denver, Colorado; Walton Co., Florida; Tarboro, N. Carolina; Union, S. Carolina; Winona, Mississippi; Adelanto, California; several Georgia counties and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Also, individuals have gained a new level of sophistication in their ability to interface with private foundation executives and corporate business leaders for the promotion and funding of *Swamp Gravy*.

BONDING THE COMMUNITY

Swamp Gravy has united Miller County across the boundaries of age, race, class and gender. The ages of cast members range from 8 months to 87 years, with as many as 50% of the cast under the age of 18. Biracial participation has characterized the cast since the beginning of the project, and an increasingly diverse audience mix has been observed. Twenty-five percent of the stories have been collected from the black community, and as high as 14% of the cast has been African-American. All socio-economic boundaries have been crossed, and one third of the actors are male. Because many of the cast encounter one another daily, the *Swamp Gravy* esprit de corps carries over into all facets of life and work in the community. *Swamp Gravy* is a way in which the arts create common ground on which diverse people can work and play together.

STRENGTHENING THE ECONOMY

Over the ten years 1994-2003, *Swamp Gravy* has sold approximately 72,000 tickets. Seventy-five percent have been out-of-town guests, which means new dollars coming into our community.

Estimating \$53 in purchases per guest (\$18 ticket, \$15 meal, \$10 gasoline, \$10 souvenirs) means over \$4,000,000 has been generated in our small community during this period, an average of \$400,000 per year. During this period, an additional \$200,000 in income has been produced by Colquitt's Tarrer Inn from full houses resulting from the performance weekends.

Swamp Gravy and its dozen spin-off programs have also created 14 full time Arts Council jobs over the past ten years, in addition to the 28 jobs at the Tarrer Inn. Karen Kimbrel has served as the Executive Director and Play Coordinator since 1993. Since then, two bookkeepers and local sales, stage and production managers were added to the staff. In 1998 a position was filled to manage the new Inter A.C.T. Children's Theater and the Museum program. The New Life Learning Center, comprised of an arts and crafts and hospitality training program and incubator, added 20 part time employees in 2004, funded by a \$900,000 Dept. of Education Century 21 grant. In addition, reception and secretarial assistance has been provided by Miller County's welfare-to-work program and the state's job training programs. Market-on-the Square, Colquitt's high quality gift shop that opened in 2001, is operated by three employees. The after-school Program *Bounce* has a full time director and has employed 15 part time staff and instructors paid for by over \$200,000 in federal and private funding. A Community Development Corporation, catalyzed by the Arts Council, hired its first director in 2004. Although all *Swamp Gravy* actors are volunteers for their performances and tours, they have the opportunity to earn supplemental income when functioning as *Swamp Gravy* Institute consultants to other communities.

The renovation projects of The Colquitt/Miller Arts Council and *Swamp Gravy* have restored several downtown structures and had a tremendous impact on the local economy. Over \$700,000 has been spent on renovation of Cotton Hall, a 60 year-old cotton warehouse and home of *Swamp Gravy* and the Museum of Southern Culture. Reconstruction of the Arts and Education Center, which houses the Arts Council and several public education programs, cost \$489,000. An additional \$200,000 enabled the conversion of another dilapidated building into the Children's Theater. Another million dollars in renovations provided facilities for the Incubator and Market. The Tarrer Inn was renovated in 1994 at a cost of \$2 million and donated to the Arts Council. The majority of the construction money remains in the community as local contractors use all local carpenters and local vendors as much as possible.

Largely because of the drawing power of *Swamp Gravy*, a four-county Cultural Tourism Initiative was launched through a Grassroots Arts Program grant in the spring of 1997. With a focus on local arts, heritage and ecology, this initiative successfully sponsored the first familiarization tour in our corner of the state of Georgia in March 1998. Because Colquitt has become one of the highest tourist destinations in Georgia, the State has built a tourist information center in our region which opened in 2003.

In recent years, the staying power of Colquitt's amazing arts industry has attracted three new restaurants on the Square, a dance studio, a film industry, an antique mall, and a day spa offering massages and yoga classes. In addition, a rare "artifact" in Colquitt is a set of corn silos converted into living apartments!

To mark our entry into the new millennium, the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council was awarded one of the 50 nation wide community mural projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts through the Mid-Atlantic Arts Federation. A *Peace Wall* at the Middle-High School plus eight other murals representing local stories have already been painted. The people of Miller County now act, sing, dance and paint their way into the future.

CONCLUSION

As *Swamp Gravy* and the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council strive to make our town, county and region a better place to live, our mission is always evolving. Each time the play is rehearsed and performed and the stories gathered and recorded the community involvement grows; the community is bonded on a deeper and more profound level; and our local economy is strengthened.