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Creative Solutions

North Carolina's HandMade in America

BY CHRISTY CRYTZER PIERCE

Potter William Baker shapes a new piece on the wheel in his studio; Baker is one of the local artists that North Carolina's HandMade in America has brought visibility to with its guidebooks and online resources. Photo courtesy of EnergyXchange

In an era of mass-manufactured products and outside corporate development, the Western North Carolina region, located in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, has taken economic direction from a refreshingly unlikely source: its local craft artists. How much impact can pottery, jewelry, woven baskets, and the like make on the local economy? Try more than $206 million each year, making the craft-arts industry a major economic player in the 25-county region, with a place at the table beside healthcare, hospitality, tobacco, and other major industries.

"Normally, discussions of economic development focus on things like housing, infrastructure, and manufacturing, so for many it is difficult to wrap their heads

around arts and culture as an economic necessity. Then they see the numbers," said Gwynne Rukenbrod, executive director of HandMade in America, an organization instrumental in bringing a new approach to stimulating the local economy.

Established in 1993, HandMade in America was the vision of founding Executive Director Becky Anderson, who sought to find creative solutions to the region's economic problems. Focusing on the small, rural towns affected most by the loss of manufacturing, Anderson began analyzing cultural assets in the region and discovered a significant concentration of craft artists working anonymously in studios, classrooms, and galleries. With a grant from the Pew Partnership for Civic Change and input from more than 400 citizens, HandMade was soon established as a guiding force to promote these craft, cultural, and community assets with the purpose of stimulating economic growth.

"[Anderson] wanted to bring visibility to these invisible craft artists and cultural assets," said Rukenbrod. "That remains our mantra today."

HandMade is proud to "bring visibility" to the more than 4,000 individual craft artists in Western North Carolina. *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina*, now in its third edition from HandMade, was the first guidebook to map potters, glassblowers, metal sculptors, wood workers, and other artisans in the region, giving rise to tourism in the area's small towns. Online resources -- including a craft registry and trip planner -- now augment the guidebook by making artists, studios, and galleries even easier to locate.

Quilter Bernie Rowell is another North Carolina artist included in HandMade in America's guidebooks and online resources; her work *Poppies and Dragonflies*, 2011, is shown. Photo by Tim Barnwell

In tandem with these visibility efforts, HandMade also offers career development opportunities for individual artists. Monthly craft labs, for example, are offered for free and tackle practical topics such as "how to market yourself as an artist" or "how to engage a visitor in your studio."

"HandMade in America has made a tremendous impact for many traditional and emerging craft artists in our area," confirmed Carla Filippelli, HandMade board member and local fiber artist, basket maker, and sculptor.

In addition to supporting individual artists, HandMade also aids the rural Western North Carolina towns where many of these artists live. The Small Town Revitalization Program, its flagship initiative, currently works with 13 small towns, each with fewer than 2,000 residents, in ten counties. The program helps to rejuvenate infrastructure through an asset-based planning approach, which has become a replicated model across the country. Cornerstones of the project include a commitment from town leaders and volunteers, community assessment, partnerships, and mentoring. Since the program's 1996 launch, $53 million has been invested into these towns, creating more than 600 jobs and restoring more than 200 buildings.

Hayesville in Clay County is one of these small towns. Working closely with the Clay County Communities Revitalization Association (CCCRA), HandMade identified revitalization opportunities based on many existing assets, including Clay County's historic 1888 courthouse, which was in desperate need of repair. With HandMade's guidance, CCCRA gathered volunteers, secured funding, and made key partnerships, resulting in a renewed downtown square and greenway with a beautiful, restored church as its focal point.

This renewal has encouraged an increased use of the space for festivals and concerts, said Rob Tiger, local business owner and president of CCCRA. "There is hardly a weekend that the square isn't being used, and the events keep getting better and better. These renovation and cultural projects are crucial to the economic health of our county."

The historic Clay County courthouse, built in Hayesville in 1888, was renovated through HandMade in America's partnership with the Clay County Communities Revitalization Association. Photo by Michael Gora

The courthouse renovation was an early success for CCCRA, which allowed it to build momentum for other projects, including the 14.5 mile Jack Rabbit Biking and Hiking Trail outside of Hayesville. Partnering with the Southern Appalachian Bicycle Association, the trail opened in April and is already estimated to have more than 40,000 riders this year.

"HandMade really held our hands through the crucial beginning stages," said Tiger. "If it wasn't for their guidance and expertise, we wouldn't have been able to get off the ground with these projects…. [O]ur work with them is the single best thing that could have happened to a group of overachievers looking to make a difference in their community."

Networking and mentoring are key components to HandMade's philosophy; Small Town participants are encouraged to connect with other area towns for the exchange of ideas and stories. Similarly, HandMade's Appalachian Women Entrepreneurs program is a network of business women in rural North Carolina, designed to mentor and foster the growth of women-led businesses in the area.

HandMade is taking its own regional strategies and stories outside of Western North Carolina as well. Representatives consult on everything from the regional small town revitalization philosophy and cultural tourism to craft development and marketing.

For Florida's Eden, a not-for-profit uniting 30 North Florida counties for the purpose of economic growth and natural resource conservation, this guidance was critical to its success. "I had identified a huge concentration of creative talent in the North Florida region and unspoiled natural resources to go along with it, but I didn't know how to begin unifying the region using these assets," said Annie Pais, executive director of Florida's Eden. "[Anderson's] guidance and HandMade's principles enabled us to navigate devastating pitfalls at the beginning, which really saved us long-term."

A bowl by artist Buzz Coren, a North Carolina artist promoted by HandMade in America. Photo by Tim Barnwell

Stewart Thomas, creative director of Florida's Eden, agreed and added, "HandMade's region is similar to ours in that there is one urban area [Asheville/ Gainesville] with surrounding impoverished communities housing tremendous talent and resources. Even with these similarities, HandMade was flexible and could see that their model was not exactly ours, because the assets were different. We identified that our greatest strength was our waterways and fresh water springs, and they concurred."

Despite HandMade's continued success in Western North Carolina and beyond, the organization still faces daunting challenges, most notably the economy. "Some of our small towns are suffering from lost jobs, funding difficulties, the flight of young artists to cities and volunteer shortages," acknowledged Rukenbrod. "Right now 94 percent of our budget comes from grants, and with the instability of funding at the moment, we're trying to diversify the revenue stream."

Rukenbrod, however, still seems optimistic. "HandMade in America has always been an incubator of ideas and at the forefront of finding creative solutions through existing assets and partnerships… besides, I have never experienced a region with more community spirit and pride and an unwavering drive to succeed than here in the Blue Ridge Mountains."

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