

The Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center (SVCAC) in Robbinsville, North Carolina, is a shining example of how public space can improve the health and wellbeing of its community. The story of how it became a community gem is one of relevance to public health and planning professionals as they begin to navigate community planning in a more collaborative manner.

Today, the Center offers 20 arts programs, meeting and banquet facilities, and a commercial kitchen to approximately 10,000 people annually. The property itself is beautiful and has a paved, handicap-accessible garden trail, family picnic and children's play area. It wasn't always this way.

A Place Worth Preserving

Looking at the SVCAC now, it's hard to imagine its former life as an abandoned school building. Twenty years ago, in 1994, the Stecoah Union School was forced to close its doors due to educational consolidation. With just 620 residents at the last census count, this small community fought and lost to keep the 68-year-old school open.

Community members were determined not to lose what they saw as the cultural heart of their heritage. Preserving the space took stamina, influence, and a lot of elbow grease.

Going beyond the notion of perseverance, however, questions about the process remain.

How did the community pull this off?

What does it take to make a 20-year project successful?

Step #1: Solidify Leadership: Create a nonprofit and hire the right leader.

Once the community lost their lawsuit against the school board, they regrouped, looking at what it would take to save the school:

- **The right leader.** When it's someone's full-time job to keep an initiative alive, the project has a better chance of survival.
- **Funding.** The building and grounds needed renovating and ongoing upkeep. While many volunteers were eager to work on the project, manpower alone was not enough to revitalize the property. Also, an effective full-time leader would require compensation.

Three years later, the Board of Directors formed a nonprofit to both lead and secure funding for this community renewal project. They hired an executive director to apply for grant funding, look for sponsors, and organize volunteers.

The Board couldn't have asked for a better hire than Lynn Shields. Shields brought to the project considerable experience in accounting and architecture, two skills which, over time, boosted renovation efforts and cash flow. Equally important was her community status and her relationship orientation. Shields was a recognized member of the community who understood the importance of keeping the community engaged.

Step #2: Nurture the Right Relationships and Apply Influence

Relationships are just as critical in the nonprofit sector as they are in the for-profit sector. In the nonprofit world, successful relationships connect people to the work in a lasting, emotional way.

Stecoah Union School alumni already had a vested interest and known relationship to the project. As such, alumni helped to leverage immediate funding and support without the time involved to build new relationships.

An initiative like SVCAC can never, however, have too many relationships. As new people came into the community, Shields and other project supporters brought them into the fold.

Shields was able to use her relationships and influence to:

- **Secure funding.** Relationships are important for all donors, but especially for major donors - those who contribute upwards of a thousand dollars or more. Donors need to feel an emotional connection to the work, and relationships are critical to making a donor feel that their support is necessary and valued. SVCAC receives significant ongoing support, as you can see from their [Grantors & Supporters page](#).
- **Mobilize volunteers.** Donors give money, but volunteers give their time. Both are of value. Volunteers also need to feel valued so they keep coming back.
- **Create customers.** Yes, even a nonprofit organization can have customers. The people who visit SVCAC and use its services are customers. While SVCAC customers are giving money in exchange for a piece of art, or a ticket to a folk music concert, customer satisfaction is what keeps them coming back for more.
- **Prove value.** The sum of the satisfaction felt by donors, volunteers, and customers proved the value of SVCAC to perhaps the toughest audience of all: the local government. Graham county initially leased the property to SVCAC for \$1 per year, and it continues to do so. But Graham county would not continue their ongoing annual support if they did not see the value of the project to the community.

Each of these types of relationships requires continual nurturing.

Step #3: Have Realistic Expectations: Understand that it doesn't happen overnight.

SVCAC began twenty years ago when the Stecoah Union School closed its doors. It's taken twenty years for SVCAC to get to the point where it has a steady flow of donor funds, volunteers, and customers, and can offer arts programs such as the JAM (Junior Appalachian Musicians) program, and other cultural and health enrichment opportunities.

Bottom line, the Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center didn't happen overnight. And no successful community collaboration does either. Twenty years of work and support can only happen when engaged, passionate people commit for a lifetime.

Building restoration, grounds keeping, and oversight work continues. The SVCAC community describes their center as the heart of their community, and a heart is always beating.

Lesson learned: A successful process is a responsive process.

The most important SVCAC lesson is best summed up by Rick Davis, Executive Director of the Graham Revitalization Economic Action Team (GREAT):

“The transformation is not finished and probably will never be as the Center evolves to meet the needs of the community.

That's what keeps it going: the center is responsive to community. It's tied into the community and not an island unto itself.”

The steps aren't linear, and they are never finished. The activities of:

- having the right leader
- cultivating the right relationships
- proving value to the community

are ongoing. *Stamina is key.* Keeping core groups engaged for 20 months, let alone 20 years, is not for the faint of heart.

“[This]...is what I call real investment and the return on that investment is future generations caring about this place and this community.

Speaks to the emotional and community connection and one of the major reasons the Center is successful.”

Lesson learned: Without shared, agreed-upon goals, perseverance alone won't make a project successful.

A shared, agreed-upon goal, such as preserving a community treasure, is essential to maintain focus. Stakeholders such as alumni, volunteers, donors, newcomers, and local government can rally around the goal, and a strong leader can hold everyone together.

The flourishing Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center is a story worth sharing, from a people worth preserving. The community members learned from each other and others, and preserved the beating heart of their community.