

NATIONAL RURAL FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE

**Building the Network:
Convergence of Efforts: Finding a Collective Voice**

**1st Annual Learning Network Event
Coolfont Resort
Berkeley Springs, West Virginia
June 26- 30, 2002**

*“This collaboration is not about **money**;
it’s about **life!**”*

-- Naeema Muhammad
*Community Organizer, Concerned Citizens of Tillery
Resourceful Communities Program, North Carolina*

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*Jim Richardson and Stacy Caldwell
National Rural Funders Collaborative
August 2002*

Introduction

After more than a year of planning, the National Rural Funders Collaborative was established in July 2001 for the purpose of expanding the resource base for rural communities and families facing persistent poverty. The ten-year goal of this collaborative of private foundations is to leverage \$100 million in new and/or untapped resources. These resources will expand the human, technical and financial resources needed to support measurable improvements in the quality of life for rural communities and the people who live there.

NRFC recognizes that private philanthropy alone cannot accomplish this goal. As a result, we intend to enlarge our collaborative efforts to include other public, private and corporate resource partners at the local, regional and national levels, thereby significantly expanding the nation's combined commitment to rural America.

NRFC has three key objectives: funding, learning, and policy. To achieve our mission, we intend to (1) encourage greater efficiency and effectiveness in funding rural areas, (2) focus on sharing and learning from best practices and (3) promote policies at every level to overcome historical barriers and to encourage community-based innovation and strategic change. Our strategy is focused on these three areas:

- Strategic funding of regional efforts to build and to strengthen the leadership, infrastructure and institutional base in rural areas.
- Ongoing and participatory learning about best practices that successfully achieve measurable and sustainable results.
- Constructive, forward-looking policy recommendations that will positively impact on the current conditions and future prospects of rural America.

Purpose of the Convening

The First Annual Convening was designed to bring together representatives of the 20 finalists in the first round of funding of NRFC grants to regional collaboratives. These finalists were selected from among 284 applicants nationwide. All 20 were invited to join NRFC's National Learning Network, which is viewed as a laboratory for strengthening rural programs impacting poverty in rural areas, for sharing best practices and for framing policy issues.

At this convening, more than 100 participants were invited to come together for a three-day gathering of sharing and celebration at Coolfont Resort in Berkeley Springs, WV. Learning sessions were designed to:

- Acquaint individual participants and their collaboratives with one another;
- Share best practices through participant-led breakout sessions;
- Hear reflections from funders, policy experts and practitioners on three key themes of Impact, Leverage and Policy;
- Provide an opportunity for networking on emerging areas of interest;
- Encourage each collaborative to reflect on its priorities back home; and

Provide NRFC with suggestions on issues, themes and strategies for creating and helping to sustain a national network of rural funders, leaders, practitioners and influencers.

Participants

Participants represented a diverse group of community development practitioners, policy experts, funders and local, regional and federal officials. Of the 107 people who joined in the convening, 41% were community development practitioners; 22% were funders; 8% were civil servants, and 11% were community leaders. A total of nearly 18% classified themselves as “other.”

These participants came from 82 organizations across 24 states, and nearly half had traveled more than 1000 miles to attend. Nearly 29% classified themselves as being from the South, 21% from the East, 20% from the West, 18% from the Midwest, and 13% from the North. Nearly 63% of participants either grew up in rural areas or remain rural residents now. Another 10% said they grew up in a city but now live in the countryside.

Overview of the Agenda

Opening ceremonies and a plenary at USDA offices in Washington, D.C., kicked off the event on the afternoon of June 26, 2002. Participants moved to Coolfont Resort in the West Virginia mountains where the convening continued on June 27. For the next 2½ days, participants engaged in a wide variety of networking and cross-learning activities in an informal and engaging atmosphere. Through noon on June 29, participants joined in a mix of plenary and breakout sessions and contributed to engaging conversations over meals and on walks.

Thanks to the generosity of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “e-polling” technology was made available throughout the convening as a means of receiving instantaneous feedback from participants on issues, opportunities, and their satisfaction with the agenda and its various component sessions. E-polling is a technology that permits each participant, through a wireless keypad, to respond to multiple-choice questions that are displayed on a projection screen. Once the question is displayed, participants get 10 seconds to make their choice. In another second or two, the computer calculates results and displays them on a bar chart.

The Value of Collaboration

NRFC is committed to building and fostering collaborative relationships between the private and public sectors and among funders and practitioners. The evidence of this was two-fold: the emerging collaboration with USDA and with other agencies, and NRFC's involvement of funders and practitioners together at its learning event. Consequently, collaboration and partnering emerged as major themes both in issue/opportunity discussions and in sharing sessions.

NRFC's **funding partners** provided insight into their individual and collective reasons, hopes and expectations in forming a National Rural Funders Collaborative. On the opening day, a Funders Roundtable gave foundation representatives a forum for sharing their reasons for helping to form the Collaborative and their expectations in creating a learning network of funders and practitioners. Although not all of NRFC funders were present, a majority were and shared their reasons and expectations:

- *Annie E. Casey Foundation* has an emerging interest in rural. With the rate of child poverty increasing more in rural than in urban areas, Casey Foundation seeks to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children and look to find ways to connect rural and urban. This can be accomplished through supporting families and through joining efforts with others (funders, practitioners, community leaders) who know more in the field. "Rural" is getting to be an easier case to make within the Casey Foundation as its work with NRFC and other partners progresses. (Miriam Shark)
- *F.B. Heron Foundation* F.B. Heron Foundation, a national foundation, prefers to fund local efforts to create wealth for low-income people and communities. The Foundation is committed to using its full endowment in support of this mission - grants; program-related investments; insured deposits in community development credit unions and community development banks; and mission-related investments that return market-rate financial returns and social returns. Heron seeks to work better with its colleagues within the grantmaking and nonprofit sectors to learn what works and what doesn't work in rural economic development. Through participation in NRFC, Heron has recognized that collaborations are difficult to organize, but increasingly important for comprehensive and sustainable outcomes. Collaboration requires developing trust and working together as partners and colleagues. (Sharon King)
- *Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation* is a regional funder with parochial interests in the South, especially for advancing social and economic justice. Babcock Foundation sees NRFC, in part, as an opportunity to attract the attention of national funders to the region. Most important to Babcock Foundation is working hard to make connections and to create a learning network among funders and practitioners concerned with issues of race and poverty. The NRFC learning

event is an important “marker” for beginning to make those connections and capture those learnings. (Gayle Williams)

- W.K. Kellogg Foundation has focused half of its portfolio on rural issues, especially food systems and economic development. NRFC represents a “grand experiment” for funders, a significant effort in a “resource-short” environment and an opportunity to fund “something bigger than ourselves.” Rural communities represent 20-23% of population and deserve to have a policy around their issues. (Rick Foster)
- William and Flora Hewlett Foundation entered the Collaborative as an experiment. Historically Hewlett Foundation has supported families and community development, locally and regionally. As a next iteration of this work, Hewlett Foundation wants to uncover the face of rural poverty and learn from best practices. NRFC can help to highlight consequential activities that may lead the Hewlett Foundation to make a foundation-wide commitment to supporting and strengthening rural communities and families. (Bettie Hodges)
- William Randolph Hearst Foundation sees NRFC as an opportunity to leverage its resources and commitments by partnering with other funders to add value, not just dollars, to the people, projects and places embraced by Hearst Foundation and its philosophy. Beyond that, NRFC can help to establish stronger linkages between national funding and on-the-ground work, and among communities and projects across the nation, that will raise the level of progress for “rural” as a whole. (Teri Yeager)
- Calvert Social Investment Foundation shares with NRFC and its member funders a commitment to identify and provide access to new and effective grantmaking and investment instruments that can help to sustain rural, as well as urban communities. (Jim Brooksbank)

Other NRFC funders not represented at the learning event include *Otto Bremer Foundation*, *Fannie Mae Foundation* and *Ford Foundation*. While their distinctive perspectives and values were not expressed at the event, they share with those who were present an ongoing commitment to NFRC’s goal of expanding resources for rural communities and families and to its strategic objectives of measurable impact, sustainable leverage and more adequate and just rural policy.

Public sector partners, especially USDA and CDFI Fund, shared their commitment to and perspectives on collaboration, among mission areas within their institutions and between their institutions and the private sector.

USDA’s aim in collaboration is twofold: 1) to better coordinate and “broker” resources among the agencies within USDA for greater efficiency, impact and leverage, and 2) to expand the context of opportunity in rural areas through strategic use of public-private partnerships. Network partners challenged USDA representatives to think more

creatively and act more flexibly in partnering with communities and organizations. Network participants also emphasized the importance of not only joining together with partners like USDA, but also staying and working together and reinforcing learning and best practices among the partners.

CDFI Fund has provided \$62 million in investment capital since 1996 to community development financial institutions (CDFIs) nationwide, serving rural and urban areas. CDFI Fund sees as its ongoing goal to provide greater access to private capital through entrepreneurial initiative and utilization of public-sector resources to provide market-driven incentives for investment, such as those in the New Markets Tax Credit program.

Collaboration among **network partners** is evident in the 20 collaborations from across rural America, each with its distinctive objectives and strategies. Even so, these 20 learning network initiatives share a common commitment to collaboration among practitioners, community leaders, funders and policymakers. Common to all is a practiced belief that working together in these extraordinary and extraordinarily challenging, yet productive partnerships affords the high potential for harnessing the diverse organizational strengths and experiences of various partners in order to better support the work on the ground while improving the quality of outcomes and successes.

Throughout the plenary discussions and smaller breakouts at Coolfont, “collaboration” was described both in terms of local or regional partnerships and also in terms of multi-regional or national partnerships. Whatever the level, there was a clear recognition that a variety of public, private and philanthropic partners are needed. Here are some ways this theme was articulated, mainly as an opportunity:

- Being part of a “unique and productive” national network is seen to be a major opportunity, as is learning from other models.
- Leveraging existing relationships is just as important as increasing the number of partners or creating new partnerships.
- Finding common ground is a critical factor in any partnership.

Several breakout groups focused on some aspect of partnership as important for moving beyond current opportunities toward new ones. For example, a breakout on matching organizational strengths for regional investments talked about levels of collaboration, realignment of resources, and balancing grassroots decision-making with resource allocation. This group identified these traits of successful collaboratives:

- Trust among members;
- Sharing of credit;
- Clearly defined roles;
- Operating agreements; and
- Respect for the work of members and other community providers.

Another breakout group on leveraging private sector and market forces stressed the importance of encouraging one another in the partnership and “actively sharing our struggles.” The group said they believed that “this collaborative is a partnership for life and survival, for health, and for a safe environment.”

Within this overall context of the value of collaboration, several themes and issues were identified to describe the work and outline ways in which network partners can work together to provide greater access to resources, greater attention to impact and leverage, and greater advocacy for policy change.

Major Issues and Opportunities

Common Issues and Opportunities: *Identifying the Affinity Groups*

This first set of themes address the interests among network partners for participating in sustained learning opportunities through network-defined “affinity groups.” Each of the ***bold, italicized themes*** listed below designates a concept, practice and/or body of work around which an affinity group, or working group, of network partners was formed, with key notes and recommendations from various breakout sessions following.

Economic Development/Entrepreneurship

Economic development and “entrepreneurship” were often described as complementary and mutually implicative (though clearly not synonymous) concepts and practices. At the same time, distinctive and more or less comprehensive community strategies were identified as more specific examples of *community-based* economic development, many of which were seen to be entrepreneurial in approach. Economic development issues ranged from the quite specific, e.g., loss of tobacco, to the very broad and more “traditional” approaches, e.g., affordable housing, job creation, business development. Several especially challenging issues for community economic development were identified:

- Development of *community-based* strategies that are both inclusive in terms of decision-making and leadership, but also represent economically “viable” on a sustainable basis.
- Implementation of viable strategies for economic development, which at the same time avoid the paternalism and racism of traditional approaches.
- Strategies which are effective in achieving tangible economic outcomes, but which also address systemic issues such as poverty, high unemployment and substandard housing.
- Economically viable strategies that don’t entail degradation of the human and natural resource base.

Among opportunities related to economic development were these ideas:

- Combining traditional and nontraditional economic development with family support.
- Hometown strategic investment and opportunities for community ownership.
- Mobilizing private sector markets in sustainable practices.
- Untapped entrepreneurial potential.

One breakout group focused on models for leveraging debt and equity, stressing the importance of bringing together “leverage partners,” who can help to provide or provide access to “patient, flexible capital.” This group focused part of its discussion on innovative models, including:

- Venture philanthropy, sharing not only money but also time.
- Grants with set-asides that can be used as leveraging tools.
- State pools that use tax credits as leverage for state and federal dollars.

Another breakout group talked about the importance of:

- Making entrepreneurship real.
- Establishing an entrepreneurial culture within communities.
- Identifying accurate impact measures.
- Keeping leaders (including staff) energized and focused.

This group suggested:

- Building supportive communities.
- Enhancing public support for entrepreneurship.
- Directing economic development toward sustainable strategies.
- Sharing best practices.
- Tying into national strategies while maintaining local benefits.

Ways to make it happen:

- Peer-to-peer site visits and continued personal connections.
- Post events/activities on the web.
- Post a listing of other rural collaborative and rural funders.

Land Loss in Rural Communities

The group discussed the dual loss of rural land and rural heritage, both or which are long-term problems, especially in the Southeast and in African-American communities. Some of the causes of rural land loss include:

- Thievery.
- Tax sales (properties being sold due to default on payment of property taxes).
- Hog farms.
- Predatory lending.
- Predatory government practices.
- People going to courthouses and changing other people's deeds (especially when landowners left region, local officials are a part of it).
- USDA—discriminatory lending/payment practices toward Black farmers.
- Eminent domain.
- Heir property.

The group agreed that education is critical to helping individuals and families own and retain land. Organizations such the Land Loss Prevention Project provide educational workshops on the importance of estate planning and preparing wills, and connecting landowners to attorneys who can provide legal assistance to address heir property issues. The concept of heir property was originally intended to be helpful to landowners, but then the laws were changed. There is a critical need to develop tools, techniques and mechanisms to help save land ownerships.

Other best practices that were discussed included:

- Building community assets through community-retained ownership of the land while getting a developer to do the building.
- Forestry offers opportunities for community ownership in the Southeast and other forested areas. Due to global economic trends in the timber industry, it is estimated that over 30 million acres of land will change ownership over the next ten to twenty years.
- Community land specialist courses through the University of Wisconsin Land Tenure Center, which also offers staff assistance, interns, and legal assistance.
- Tax sales laws that can help owners get their land back.
- Community land trusts that offer a means for families to become homeowners.

Possible Next Steps:

- Need to continue engagement.
- Education is critical.
- Learn from land trust disciplines.
- Learn from housing disciplines.
- NRFC can help identify housing folks.
- Series of workshops to explore opportunities.
- Explore housing and related tools: credit counseling, IDAs, education on predatory lending, etc.

Leadership Development

Capacity building, defined broadly as including individual, organizational and community capacity, was also defined as including attitude, awareness and recognition. Here are some ways that these themes were articulated:

- Entrenched, unenlightened leadership was identified as a challenge, as was “disempowered mindset” of rural residents.
- Rural “dependency” erodes community leadership and capacity.
- Aging rural populations along with the challenge of getting “nonparents” engaged in community activities were also identified as challenges.
- Identifying local residents’ interests and broader regional development agendas were also perceived as important.

Among opportunities identified were these:

- Energetic new leaders as well as a “senior” knowledge base.
- Building a shared vision and developing a focused learning agenda.
- Existing leadership development/capacity programs that we can “move out of the box.”
- Integrating entrepreneurship and leadership development.

A breakout group on “grassroots leadership development” held a lively discussion on leadership and capacity building. Participants concluded that “leaders should create leaders” and that leadership is a combination of “skills, opportunities and timing.” This group shared tips from best practices, including:

- Leadership development is ongoing.
- You have to create opportunities for skill-building.
- It helps to sponsor cross-cultural networking to help develop emerging leaders.
- Community organizing *is* leadership development.

Strategies for Regional Philanthropy

Focus of group’s interests:

- Capturing transfer of wealth/out-migration for rural communities..
- Generating local philanthropy as an inclusive community development effort.
- Having access, structures and strategies to reach individual donors to support more rural community economic development.
- Identification of ways to bridge the gap between central city and rural community issues.

Learning questions included:

- What does the potential rural donor look like?
- Raising resources to develop local capacity to capture transfer of wealth and local assets.
- Figuring out how to support community foundations and others to offer strategic options to investors regarding rural community development.
- How to attract resources to pilot this work at the local level.
- How to find resources to meet face to face, to support demonstration work around capturing transfer of assets, generating local assets.
- Support for research on the rural donor base.

Rural Policy

Given the fact that the convening began with a briefing at USDA before the group moved on to the Coolfont location and for other reasons, impacting public policy—especially federal policy—became a theme for formal and informal discussion during the entire event. But state policy was also a strong theme, and local policy was recognized as an important factor, as were these topics:

- “Rural” is often left out of policy options, an increasing concern that may intensify as legislative power, along with population, continues its century-long migration from rural to metropolitan and suburban places.
- Fragmented development strategies often get in the way of more comprehensive solutions and/or systemic changes.
- “Policy” and “bureaucracy” were recognized as a pinpoint issues that are often stumbling blocks in Indian country.
- The pending 2002 elections were perceived as both a challenge and an opportunity with respect to rural policy.

This group discussed how to establish a joint policy agenda related to rural development. Possible first steps:

- Collect mutual experiences and contacts of participants, which include—
 - Congressional relationships
 - Trade organizations and coalitions
 - Types of state and federal issues that participants have experience working on

Ways to make it happen:

- Use the NRFC web site as a tool to collect information on—
 - Most important policy issues facing rural communities
 - Identify skills that participants need to effectively influence policies
 - How to identify policies that are worth our attention.

Additional Issues and Opportunities

In addition to the learning themes that will be sustained through the above Affinity Groups, several other common themes arose as Issues and Opportunities.

Attracting Capital/Sustaining Funding

Funding strategies of all types were major items for discussion, networking and sharing activities throughout the convening. Participants felt that having so many funders present throughout the event was a significant opportunity for them and a significant investment of personal time and energy on the part of funder representatives. Among major themes were these, representing both issues and opportunities:

- Diversifying funding sources and sustaining funding support over time, including overcoming foundation “myopia” and short-term funding.
- The relative lack of funding available for rural vs. metropolitan communities, and the relative high cost to serve rural places due to distance and geography.
- Relative lack of risk capital in rural areas, as well as a paucity of flexible capital to do what needs to be done to transform rural economies and build rural communities.
- Loss of historic wealth from rural communities was identified as an issue, as was a generalized scarcity of resources for community building.
- The intergenerational transfer of wealth was perceived as an opportunity with some urgency given the aging of rural America.

A breakout session on *leveraging community assets* revisited a recurring theme regarding how funders and community organizations can work together to achieve success for both. Other highlights of this discussion included:

- The “I need because I don’t have” attitude does NOT work.
- Translate the “non-dollar” into its a”real investment” value.

Working with Diverse Populations

This theme also found its way into discussions about both issues and opportunities, as participants challenged themselves to think more creatively about the changing face of rural America. Discussion included focus on the richness of diverse cultures and approaches as well as some of the challenges, such as racism and other “isms.”

Here are some of the challenges:

- Fears among some recent immigrants over their legal status, as well as issues of assimilation, discrimination, and negative media.
- Stimulating dialog among diverse groups was recognized as a significant challenge, with both language and cultural issues mixed in.
- Native organizations, especially, are often left out in competition for private sector funding.

Opportunities were also identified, however, and they tended to point toward the new perspectives and new assets represented by people of diverse cultures. Among the ideas and themes:

- Ability to capitalize on indigenous, cultural and natural resources.
- The organizing/political potential among immigrant communities.
- Diversity among community perspectives.

Other Topics

Topics such as dealing with expansive geographies and working on a more comprehensive approach represent particularly difficult challenges. Distance alone and communication over long distances represent major obstacles for many rural areas. With respect to comprehensive approaches, “balancing agendas of diverse partners” emerged as a key issue, along with its counterpart of “finding common objectives” around which to collaborate.

A breakout group on *expansive strategies for getting to scale* touched on several related themes. This group concluded that scale was “not just more of the same or an increase in quantity but a catalytic effect that leads to fundamental change.” Ideas concerning “getting to scale” included:

- Combining visioning with a can-do attitude.
- Trade off of breadth and depth.
- Tapping into conservative wealth and realigning constituencies to achieve scale.

Next Steps: Moving Forward

Partnership Take Aways and Next Steps

Each of the 20 collaboratives reflected on major themes and considered their next steps once they returned home. Reports of these discussions revealed, once again, major and common themes across many of the collaboratives. Among them were these:

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

Collaborative representatives reminded themselves in a variety of ways that they had both an obligation and an opportunity to communicate with their partners back home and with new contacts made at the convening. Here are some examples:

- Forward more specific detail of our project to resource people for ideas and assistance.
- Follow-up on getting and sharing information from/with contacts made.
- Brief colleagues/partners who did not attend.
- Frequent visits to the NRFC web site and check out other Learning Partners' web sites.
- Stay in touch.
- E-mail our congressional delegation.
- Be more seen and felt in the community.

Leveraging and Funding

Participants left with lots of ideas about leveraging new resources and following up on funding opportunities. Here's how some of those ideas were expressed:

- Work on a Council on Foundations session proposal.
- Follow up on tax policy and mobilize support.
- Follow up on funder contacts, resource contacts.
- Develop a plan for leveraging regional/local funding.
- Develop an enhanced funding strategy.
- Finalize plans for a philanthropy forum.
- Set up a permanent matching fund for specific opportunities.
- Conduct an analysis of current state policies that affect funding to grassroots groups and discuss with legislators.

Organizational Development

Organizational development/improvement emerged as another major theme in what people were taking away and wanted to focus on. A sampling of how that theme emerged follows:

- Motivate staff and plan integration of information into our work.
- Deepen our collaborative activities and work through potential conflicts.
- Test plans against principles.

- Develop an MOU among the partners in our collaborative.
- Expand proactive leadership development and engagement.
- Review project measurement criteria.
- Enhance collective ability to do more strategic work through building and budgeting.
- Clarify roles and broadly share them.

A final area of consideration was woven into and through the entire agenda at Coolfont, and that was how to build from this beginning into a viable and dynamic learning community that can maintain its vitality between annual NRFC network convenings. Clearly, many participants departed for home with a sense of belonging to a unique national network. Yet many recognized how easy it might be to slip back into usual behaviors and common practices, letting this potential wane.

Learning Network Commitment and Next Steps

Participants had common ideas on how to stay connected, a practical first step to maintaining and growing the network—using the NRFC web site, staying in touch by e-mail, telephone conference calls, and hoped-for opportunities for some additional face to face gatherings. Here are some ways they thought these things might happen:

- Perhaps NRFC could fund/organize meetings, conference calls, Internet forums, monthly e-newsletters and e-conferences.
- Provide a vehicle for communications and information.
- Use the web site as a tool to collect information on key issues, skills and expertise among collaborative members, policy questions.
- Post a calendar of events important to rural development.
- Post listings of other related collaboratives and rural funding opportunities.
- A general desire for “sharing of information and models.”

Policy and Funding Impacts

Many participants reflected a collective expectation and expressed excitement around opportunities for policy impacts that might result from the Network’s activities. Here are some ideas for how that might happen:

- Policy issues that bubble up in NRFC should be connected to larger efforts to affect those policies.
- NRFC allows us to have a collective voice for change in rural policy.
- Potential to shift national policy and funding to rural communities is tremendous through NRFC and its members/partners. A national network of practitioners with funders is a powerful tool.
- NRFC can go where more funding is needed or there is presently fragmented funding.

NRFC Next Steps

A number of suggestions were made regarding the role and mission of NRFC, suggestions that amounted to a possible beginning list of organizational development priorities. Here is a sampling of those ideas:

- We need a mission statement for the NRFC learning network and priorities as a group.
- NRFC should keep its mission narrowly focused in the areas of facilitating, leveraging new funding for rural development, and community building issues, while gathering information/data/stories regarding core policy issues of collaborators and partners to review and pass on to other groups already involved in policy/advocacy arenas.
- Develop a sense of partnership among funders, nonprofits, and service providers.
- Help us turn reporting to foundations into a learning tool not just a reporting tool.
- Help us ask “who we are” questions and “what brings us together” questions.
- Learning around indicators and measurement, participatory evaluation.
- Common issues, interests, collective power through NRFC.
- Expand the steering committee to include collaborative representatives.
- Broaden the circle of participants.
- Clarify roles.

A Closing Quote

“When we get back home, we need to make our meetings more like this—more time, more fun, better places, more creativity, humor.”