

Five Ways Community Heart & Soul Transforms Towns

1. New leaders and volunteers emerge. Outreach and engagement reconnect residents. Participation increases.

In Gardiner, Maine, (pop. 5,700) city council meetings were characterized by a few angry residents showing up to yell and complain. When three seats opened on the city council, only two people ran.

Community Heart & Soul got residents reconnected to their local government. Eight people ran for three seats on the city council. Interest in serving on committees grew. More people attended council meetings, and the tenor of meetings changed as discourse became more civil. The mayor reported a hundredfold increase in active volunteers.

2. Trust is built. Finding common ground through Heart & Soul builds bridges.

In Cortez, Colorado, (pop. 9,000) city planners wanted to get more residents involved, especially those missing voices rarely heard. City officials began to think beyond city hall as the only place for public meetings. Using our Community Network Analysis, volunteers and planners went to people in their neighborhoods and sponsored block parties and potluck dinners. As plans for the future took shape, they went back to residents to check their work.

Community engagement helped planners do their jobs but also strengthened the bonds among neighbors based on a shared love of place and the desire to make it better.

3. Downtowns are reenergized. A thriving Main Street is a goal for nearly every community. Heart & Soul helps communities uncover possibilities that translate to transformation.

Biddeford, Maine, (pop. 21,000) was known as “Trash Town” because of the industrial garbage incinerator right downtown. But the facility provided 80 jobs and was the largest taxpayer in a town without a lot of options. Engagement activities during Biddeford’s Community Heart & Soul project made it clear that residents wanted the incinerator gone. That gave officials the backing they needed to buy the facility and close it. The move triggered major reinvestment with more than 90 new businesses and \$90 million invested in the first seven years after Heart & Soul, including a \$50 million boutique hotel and \$15 million in affordable housing.



Through Community Heart & Soul city officials in Biddeford, Maine, learned there was wide support for removing the incinerator that was downtown. After it was gone, the downtown saw major revitalization.



A potluck in Cortez, Colorado, hosted in and by the neighborhood, helped bridge divides between residents and city officials.



In McComb, Ohio, Community Heart & Soul helped restore a sense of pride.



Residents of Thomaston, Georgia, engage with Thomaston-Upson Community Heart & Soul at the annual Emancipation Day Celebration event. Community events provide a great venue for reaching and engaging residents. Image: King C. Davis

Five Ways Community Heart & Soul Transforms Towns (continued)

4. Pride is restored. One of the things residents notice, even early on, is how Community Heart & Soul restores a sense of pride among townspeople.

The Heart & Soul Team in McComb, Ohio, (pop. 1,600) started things off with a bang over the Fourth of July weekend. From the start, the team was on the move, reaching out to as many residents as possible, marching in the town's celebrated Cookie Festival parade, connecting with locals at the fire department chicken BBQ, and meeting fans at high school football games, among other events.

One resident observed a positive impact right away: "You know what I love about Heart & Soul? People feel they can be proud of McComb. I've already seen so much good. And it's just the start."

By asking people what they love about McComb, Heart & Soul got people thinking in terms of their town's assets and possibilities. This rekindled a sense of pride.

5. History and culture are honored. Community Heart & Soul helps towns rediscover the importance of history and culture in creating a town's unique character.

When residents tell their stories, the rich history of a place can be rediscovered or uncovered. That was the case in

Pennsylvania where the Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul Team heard from a resident about a long abandoned African-American church built by her grandfather circa 1870. The story rallied the community to protect and preserve the church along with the nearby cemetery, where her grandfather's gravesite is located along with several Civil War veterans. Now, the site is on the county's list of historic places and a door has been opened to dialog about the African-American history in the community.



One woman's story, gathered as part of Community Heart & Soul, helped this Pennsylvania community discover an important piece of its past—an abandoned African-American church built by a former slave and Civil War veteran.