

# Entrepreneurial Community of the Month

## New Harmony, Indiana

**Location:** southwest corner of Indiana; 200 miles southwest of Indianapolis  
**Population:** less than 1,000  
**Featured Organization:** Ribeyre Gymnasium Restoration Group  
**Website:** [www.harmoniehundred.net/rgrghome.html](http://www.harmoniehundred.net/rgrghome.html)

## Young Entrepreneurs Rejuvenate Gym to Restore New Harmony

In the fall of 2002, a group of high school students got together to brainstorm ideas for community projects. Young people talked of planting gardens, cleaning up roads and highways and battling water pollution – all worthy causes.

But the students of New Harmony Local School District in New Harmony, Indiana, had grander visions, much like the founders of their small town. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, two attempts at a Utopian society were mounted in this tiny town on the Wabash River in the southwest corner of the state.

So, why couldn't 30 high school students try to build community by rebuilding a community center?

“The students in this group sat around and said, ‘we need to re-do that old gym in town,’” said Rick Johnson, high school teacher and advisor for the Ribeyre Gymnasium Restoration Group (RGRG). “We knew it was a big project to undertake, but they told us, ‘We’re serious. We can do this.’”

The students were serious. And four years later they have raised more than \$500,000 in their efforts to turn the gym into a community center.

The project will have a big pay-off for New Harmony, but maybe even more so for the town's young people.

Rebecca Rodriguez, New Harmony High School senior and current student president of the Ribeyre Gymnasium Restoration Group, said, “I cannot put into words how much this community has given me. It gives me a great pleasure to give back to the community something that has potential to affect it in such a positive way.”

### Utopian Dreams

Stand under New Harmony's only traffic light at the intersection of Main and Church streets, and you can see the entire town, which has just under 1,000 residents.

The site and the population may be small, but this town boasts a rich history.

It's the site of two of America's great utopian communities consisting of residents who attempted to live communal lives for the betterment of themselves and their town.

From 1814 to 1824, a group of separatists from the German Lutheran Church was led to southern Indiana by Johann Georg Rapp. The Harmony Society, as they called themselves, lived in New Harmony for a decade, combining work and prayer to achieve “unheard of economic

achievement that was recognized as the ‘wonder of the west,’” according to Historic New Harmony, Inc.

After 10 years of prosperity, the Harmony Society sold their land to Welsh-born industrialist and social philosopher Robert Owen. Owen’s ambition was to create a more perfect society through free education and the abolition of social classes and personal wealth. World-renowned scientists and educators settled in New Harmony. With the help of William Maclure, a Scottish geologist and businessman, they introduced vocational education, kindergarten and other educational reforms.

Owen’s utopia did not last, and his experiment failed three years later. But the citizens of New Harmony have inherited the legacy of these visionary men and their quest to build the perfect community.

### **New Life for a Historical Building**

In 1924, Alfred Ribeyre, a school trustee, donated three buildings to the New Harmony school. Ribeyre wanted the buildings to be used for a gymnasium that would, he hoped, bring great fame to New Harmony athletics. The gym was referred to as “the greatest Christmas present our children ever received” by the local newspapers of the day.

Since it’s opening in April of 1924, the Ribeyre Gym has hosted countless basketball games and other athletic events, school dances, class reunions and a variety of community functions. In 1925, the building was called into service as a hospital for those injured in a historic tri-state tornado. The addition of an annex to the gym in the early 1950s provided space for both school and community activities.

In 1987, the district built a new building for the school and the gym was abandoned, occasionally used as a meeting place or second gym. Although, in 1992, a portion of the movie *A League of Our Own* prominently featured the interior of the gym.

As the gym continued to deteriorate, New Harmony students stepped in to save the historical structure in 2002, giving it a new life as a community center.

“There is so much history within the walls of the gym,” Rodriguez said. “And together with the help of our community, we will preserve it.”

### **Young Visionaries Revive their Town**

Rick Johnson, New Harmony teacher for 29 years, coached the last basketball game played in the Ribeyre gym. So you might say he does have an emotional attachment to the building. But he never imagined it playing such a big role in community development.

When asked to advise the students on the Ribeyre Gymnasium Restoration Group, he couldn’t say no.

“The students really care about restoring this gym,” Johnson said, “They won’t let this project die, so the adults in the community have got to help.”

The RGRG came together after a group of New Harmony students volunteered to join a program with the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration (CILC), which challenged the students with a community service project of their own choice. In October 2001, New Harmony students chose to refurbish their old gym.

“During my eighth grade year, I was invited to attend a 7 a.m. meeting of the restoration group,” said Rebecca Rodriguez, current student president of RGRG. “At this point in time, the project had just begun, and restoration was just a dream. This group’s fearless undertaking of such a huge project intrigued me, and the ambition of each and every member had me in awe and at the edge of my seat. By the end of the meeting, I was hooked.”

As the students progressed in their plans, many more members of this small community joined them to create an intergenerational effort. The group formed by-laws and articles of incorporation and conducted a feasibility study.

“The kids themselves surveyed about 800 people to ask them what plans they’d like to see for the new gym,” Johnson said. “Most people responded that they just wanted a place to drink coffee, walk, and do aerobics ... a true community center in the old sense of the word.”

As interest grew for the project, so did the workload. With the help of Johnson, the students went through the long process of establishing a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

To this day, the students run all monthly meetings of the RGRG Board, on which Johnson serves as director.

“It’s really impressive,” Johnson said. “These kids get up at 7 a.m. two times a month to conduct the Board meetings. They are professional and really involved.”

Even with turnover as students graduate, the project has longevity contributed to community support and some major funding advances. Considering that New Harmony is the smallest public school in the state, graduating 13 students in 2007, this is a big accomplishment.

“For the first two or three years,” Johnson said, “we didn’t see a lot of results. Then we added an office building on the back of the gym and raised some money to do some repairs and updates. And then, we got the big grant.”

The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs took notice of the Ribeyre efforts and awarded the group \$500,000 from their Community Focus Fund (CCF).

CCF Grants are funded with Federal Community Development Block Grant dollars from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The goal of the CFF program is to encourage communities with eligible populations to focus on long-term community development.

The RGRG used this money to get a new roof for the gym, tuck-point 75 percent of the building, replace all the doors and windows and add a wheelchair ramp.

Johnson said the group still needs another half million to refurbish the inside of the building. The students are working with an architect on interior plans, which will include a community stage, basketball and volleyball courts, fitness equipment, offices for a study and research center and a walking track, among other updates.

But even unfinished, the building is already used for antique shows, flea markets, basketball practices and other local events and activities.

Rodriguez sees the gym contributing not only to community development, but also to community health.

“The restoration of the gym will promote wellness and healthy lifestyles in the community,” she said. “A community center in the town will encourage both young and elderly to engage in activities that are characteristic of a healthy lifestyle.”

Involved with the RGRG from its inception, Johnson said he’s amazed at how much students have learned from this project. He reflects on the success of students who have gone on from being on the RGRG Board to successful careers at colleges and universities.

“It’s unbelievable how this experience has shaped our students and this community,” Johnson said. “Being involved in restoring the gym has made them well-rounded and confident in their abilities. And, it’s the future of New Harmony.”

Rodriguez added, “Working with this group has been one of the most educational of my high school career. However, I think the most important thing this group has taught me is the importance of community involvement and how far a little bit of initiative can go.”

*-By Lisa Bauer, February 2007*

**For more information on...**

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to [www.energizingentrepreneurs.org](http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org)

... the Ribeyre Gymnasium Restoration Group, go to [www.harmoniehundred.net/rgrghome.html](http://www.harmoniehundred.net/rgrghome.html)

... the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs, go to  
[www.in.gov/ocra/community\\_ocrahelp.shtml](http://www.in.gov/ocra/community_ocrahelp.shtml)