

Entrepreneur of the Month

Brenda Emery, Coordinator, P.A.C.T., Inc.

Home: Manchester, Ohio

Education: Associates degree in business management

Organization: Planning Adams County's Tomorrow (P.A.C.T., Inc.)

Position: Coordinator

Vision Statement: In the year 2020, Adams County is recognized for its abundant natural resources, innovative and compatible economic opportunities, proud Appalachian heritage, preserved rural landscape and well-educated, healthy, employed residents.

Strategies: Public meetings determined the following strategies for P.A.C.T., Inc.:

1. Retain Community Character
2. Add Value to Farm and Forest Products
3. Redevelop the Ohio River Waterfront
4. Increase Compatible Tourism and Recreation Opportunities
5. Eliminate Litter and Keep Adams County Clean
6. Expand Workforce Development

Annual Budget: \$60,000-75,000

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Economic Development at the Edge of Appalachia

By Lisa Bauer

For some in Adams County, Ohio, the first obstacle to getting a job is the job interview.

Residents lack proper clothes, haircuts, transportation.

Even before her work as Coordinator of Planning Adams County's Tomorrow (P.A.C.T., Inc.), Brenda Emery has helped job candidates get what they need to succeed. For one woman, Emery found a pair of glasses that made the difference between a paycheck and unemployment.

"It's really the smallest things that matter most," Emery said.

Emery's "small things" have added up to big economic gains in this southern Ohio county of 27,000 residents. With its high poverty rate and low level of education, Adams County can still boast of rich cultural and natural histories. The challenge for Emery and others supporting economic develop is to use its natural resources to benefit entrepreneurs and businesses and to uplift communities.

A P.A.C.T. for Adams County

P.A.C.T., Inc. started in March 1998 with a 10-member steering committee and six local sponsors, including a hospital, chamber of commerce, state university

and nonprofit groups. They partnered to help Adams County strengthen its economy, protect the environment and meet community needs.

One of P.A.C.T.'s main funders, The Nature Conservancy stepped in to protect environmental treasures found in southern Ohio.

Bordering the Ohio River on the south and the Appalachian Mountains to the east, Adams County offers rolling pasturelands and large swaths of mature forests. But the county is also the second poorest in the state of Ohio with the largest percentage of its population receiving welfare and social services. The county poverty rate is twice the state average.

"Residents are proud of their rural heritage," reports the P.A.C.T., Inc. strategic plan, "but fear both continuing bleak economic conditions and the residential growth slowly creeping eastward from Cincinnati's suburbs."

In the late-1990s, more than 250 Adams County residents began more than two years of meetings to discuss their future. They formed P.A.C.T. and led action planning groups that identified six priorities associated with future actions:

1. Retain community character through land-use planning and business development.
2. Add value to farm and forest products through non-traditional crops, such as prairie plant seeds and specialty vegetable crops and wood products.
3. Redevelop the Ohio River waterfront with a marina and trails through a council of riverfront towns.
4. Increase compatible tourism opportunities with a marketplace for local arts, crafts and food.
5. Eliminate litter through laws, legal remedies and coordinated planning.
6. Develop the workforce by utilizing and supporting schools and adult programs.

With these strategies in hand, as well as a grant from the Center for Compatible Economic Development, the steering committee hired Brenda Emery in 2001 as coordinator.

"I didn't have a bachelor's degree, which is what they were looking for," Emery said. "But I knew that I could do this job."

Emery is dedicated to her home county. She followed the lead of her highly involved father to begin local volunteer work at an early age. At 27, Emery was the first woman elected as a county trustee.

"All bets were against me, but I was determined to win," she said. She campaigned for the trustee position throughout the county at the homes of the poorest residents as well as business and community leaders.

Emery's desire to foster change stems from her concerns that Cincinnati's suburbs – and associated environmental and social problems – are creeping into Adams County.

Her enthusiasm found a perfect place to spread at P.A.C.T. By hiring a local, P.A.C.T. founders not only gained historical perspective, but also a long-time

resident locals feel they can trust. Backed by the citizenry, Emery's first goal at her organization is to develop tourism, and, in turn, and boost businesses.

Tourism: Something to Offer, Something to Gain

A visitor to Adams County can experience a green and rolling landscape, the gentle flow of the Ohio River, a peek at rare plant and animal species and even a history lesson on Native Americans and the settlement of the West.

In the early years of America, Ohio represented "the West" after the East was settled. The Ohio River offered a thoroughfare for western travelers. Adams County is a product of that movement, and, consequently, packs a history lesson in its natural environment.

Also, the one quarter-mile-long and nearly 1,000-year-old Serpent Mound, a monument to Native American presence, snakes through the county, waiting to be explored by visitors.

The 13,000-acre Edge of Appalachia Preserve in Adams County is the The Nature Conservancy's Ohio Chapter's largest preserve and protects unique ecosystems. Adams County ranks second highest of 88 counties for rare species. Unique plants and animals thrive here, including the globally rare ear-leaf foxglove and juniper sedge. The Edge of Appalachia Preserve also has many dolomite/limestone rock exposures that provide habitat for state endangered animals such as the Allegheny woodrat and green salamander.

With pride in what her county has to offer and a bevy of suggestions from consultants in hand, Emery forges ahead to create a prime spot for nature tourism.

In February 2002, a consulting group called Fermata, Inc. was hired to build a strategic plan for the county to consider "experiential tourism" for economic development. Experiential tourism gives visitors the opportunity to experience natural areas in a responsible way that sustains nature and local communities.

The Fermata report states, "Entrepreneurial activity will be the key to realizing economic gains from tourism development. Entrepreneurial development initiatives, focused on the nature and heritages tourism sector, will be necessary."

Fermata also points out that nature travel has been increasing worldwide at an annual rate between 10 and 30 percent; and Ohio travelers spent \$27.1 billion on nature travel in 1999, making it the third largest industry in the state.

Fermata recommends the following strategies to increase tourism in Adams County: expanded regional tourism initiatives, marketable trails and itineraries, regional on-the-water interpretive center, improved tourism services, market-specific promotion, and collaboration with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to leverage facilities and services.

Emery and her colleagues are putting the wheels in motion to capitalize on this potential. In less than one year since Fermata issued its proposal for Adams

County, Emery's energy has ignited a spark for nearly every strategy.

"My biggest project has been the Appalachian Discovery Birding and Heritage trail," she said, adding that the trail, primarily marketed for birding, will run 600 miles and links three counties. In Emery's typical "can do" style, her response to the fact that not all three counties were included in the funding was: "I won't stop working with them. I will make this happen."

Set to open in March 2003, the trail, along with plans for a riverfront interpretive center and other tourism initiatives, has potential to draw plenty of visitors to Adams County. The challenges and the rewards lie in supporting entrepreneurs to meet tourists' needs.

The Business Side of Tourism

"I ended up falling into entrepreneur initiatives," Emery said. "When people heard about all of the tourist attractions planned for the future, I started getting phone calls and thought, 'Oh my gosh, these people need help with business plans.'"

Emery became frustrated with the lack of information for entrepreneurs being funneled to rural southern Ohio.

"I didn't know where to send people for help. We do have a local economic development person, but she is very overwhelmed," she said. "And there is no flow of information from cities to outlying areas. We didn't apply for business grants and loans because we simply did not know they existed."

Among other help that she finally procured, Emery received a \$20,000 grant from the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio to meet with local artisans and business people and support them in building businesses for the tourism industry. So far, Emery helped create a riverside camping village with clean and cozy cabins, a riverboat restaurant featuring local favorites, a small marina in Manchester, Farm Fresh Growers fruit and vegetable cooperative and the River Haven Bed and Breakfast.

"We have a lot of gifted and talented people out here, and they want to start new businesses," Emery said. "But they just need a little help."

According to research done for P.A.C.T.'s strategic plan, 59 percent of residents in Adams County graduated from high school, 5 percent from college.

Emery added that most entrepreneurs need very basic assistance, such as writing business plans. But they also need help marketing their products.

She has worked with microenterprise lending classes, but the learning curve can be slow with the county's low education levels. Classes need to be hands-on and participatory, allowing students to leave with a completed plan.

Emery also helped kick start the Manchester Emporium, a consignment showcase for local and regional artists that opened in the fall of 2002. The Emporium features antiques, woodcrafting, handmade jewelry and other handy work as well as educational exhibits on Adams County quilts and the Ohio River.

Beyond tourism, Emery's push for entrepreneurs resulted in a grant from the Appalachian Ohio Regional Investment Coalition. This group of Appalachian support organizations received a large grant from the National Rural Funders Collaborative and contracted with P.A.C.T. to be an Enterprise Facilitator. Emery will help Adams and neighboring counties create a more supportive system of entrepreneurs.

On any given day, Emery can be found in her P.A.C.T. office making phone calls or writing reports, traveling to conferences, conducting workshops or board meetings and – in her “free time” – talking about P.A.C.T. to residents at restaurants or local stores.

“Even if I am shopping at Wal-Mart,” Emery adds, “I always tell people what we are doing and get some feedback.”

Her hands-on approach to community development has paid off for Adams County and its residents. With many projects in the pipelines, and the constant need to round up funding, Emery stays busy.

Asked what inspires her, Emery simply states, “I just have a passion for helping, and I think I can make a difference.”

For more information:

To download the Fermata, Inc. Report, “Edge of Appalachia, Experiential Tourism Strategy,” go to

http://www.fermatainc.com/appalachia/pdf/appalachia_report.pdf

To learn about The Nature Conservancy's involvement in protecting southern Ohio's natural areas, go to

<http://nature.org/wherework/northamerica/states/ohio/>

To learn about the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, go to

<http://www.appalachianohio.org/>