

# Strong Roots Inspire Social Entrepreneur

By Lisa Bauer

“Country roads, take me home, to the place, I belong  
West Virginia, mountain mamma  
Take me home, country roads”

- from “Country Roads” by John Denver

Pam Curry’s West Virginia home, as romanticized in John Denver’s lyrics, inspires her life work as a social entrepreneur.

“West Virginia is my home and I have no plans to leave,” Curry says from her office at the Center for Economic Options (CEO) in Charleston. “Our distinctive mountain culture supports this strong sense of place. With this invariably comes a strong determination and commitment to building on and preserving the uniqueness and special attributes of the region and its people.

Curry, CEO’s executive director, spent decades watching family and friends forced to move by lack of economic opportunities: the diminishing coal industry, the absence of corporate headquarters and the lack of large metropolitan areas.

“So many of us have left the state, always hoping to come back,” Curry says, pointing out that her father-in-law, a coal-miner, relocated his family to Cleveland to work in the auto industry before finally moving back. “But people get very attached to this place, the mountain culture. Part of our economic challenge is to keep them here and reverse the ‘brain drain.’”

Curry’s solution for West Virginia also became her means of staying home. During the past fourteen years, as the leader of CEO, Curry has helped West Virginia entrepreneurs realize their economic potential and at the same time dug her roots firmly in West Virginia. Having lived outside her native county only while she attended college in an adjacent county, Curry says, “Because I haven’t had to move out of state for economic reasons, I’m an enigma here, and I’m rather proud of it.”

## The Road Home

Curry, who lives on a 90 acre homestead with her husband and plays traditional Appalachian Celtic music, appreciates the culture and history of her home state.

The West Virginia of long ago boasted an economy built by home-based businesses rooted in agriculture and the natural resource base. In the early 1800s, families made baskets, grew ginseng and performed other homecrafts, which they marketed to neighbors. All that changed with the arrival of the timber, coal, and gas industries between 1880 and 1920. West Virginians went from having household businesses that added value to natural resources to working for large corporations that shipped raw materials out-of-state.

Curry is working to reverse this trend.

According to a video produced by CEO – West Virginia Microenterprises: Not Business as Usual – more than 10 percent of West Virginia’s workforce today is employed by microbusinesses.

Curry herself began in business at a young age, taking summer jobs in retail. She graduated in 1970 from Marshall University's business school with degrees in marketing and economics.

"At college, I was one of a small group of women in the business fields of marketing and economics," Curry says. "At the time it was a nontraditional field."

She landed her first job as a manager of a locally owned high-end woman's specialty shop, then later became a branch manager. With a strong reputation for high quality and solid customer service, the shop gave Curry "great training and an inside scoop on running a successful business."

But it was the early 1970s, and like many women her age, she felt compelled to work for the public good. Curry became a social worker supporting foster and adoptive families then moved to state administration for five years.

In 1988, she found a place to meld her business and social interests as the executive director for Women and Employment, a nonprofit organization that was renamed the Center for Economic Options in 1994. Since then CEO has made great strides in promoting home-based and microbusinesses as an appropriate economic development strategy for West Virginia. "The organization has always had a microenterprise focus, but during the past two years it has become much more strategic and focused on market access for rural entrepreneurs who are producing value-added goods."

"Instead of running my own business, I'm running a nonprofit business – a social enterprise," Curry says. "I'm really entrepreneurial. It's just how I think and how I see things. In being this way, I tend to pull other entrepreneurs to work with me."

### **CEO: West Virginia's Showcase for Small Businesses**

On a busy day in the Charleston Town Center Mall, customers stream in - not just for name-brand jeans and coffee, but also to shop at Showcase West Virginia to buy West Virginia-made products – from pottery and pet treats to furniture and fine arts.

The Showcase West Virginia retail outlet is the centerpiece of the Center for Economic Option's work as a social entrepreneur. Through the Showcase West Virginia program, CEO is creating a stable source of income for the social enterprise, while at the same time furthering organizational goals that directly benefit entrepreneurs.

"The beauty of CEO's Showcase West Virginia store is that it helps participating businesses diversify their markets," Curry says. "Since it's consignment-based, people use Showcase as a test market for the products, and to introduce new product lines." The consignment system serves both entrepreneurs and CEO well. The business person receives 60 percent of the retail priced items and CEO, which does marketing, sales and inventory of products, receives 40 percent.

Curry added that although the Showcase West Virginia store is less than two years old, sales statistics have been impressive. A recent survey of Showcase West Virginia entrepreneurs also found that 191 businesses currently employ approximately 400 people. The average yearly revenue of the businesses is \$80,000. The combined income of all Showcase West Virginia businesses approaches \$15 million per year. And 90 percent of those surveyed say that Showcase West Virginia has put them in touch with new markets.

CEO's projections for the next three years of business include: 54 new registered businesses; 300 new full-time, part-time and seasonal jobs; 680 total businesses retained; and

1,597 total jobs created. “If you want to know what kind of impact the CEO is having in West Virginia, you can just ask one of the nearly 200 people from all over the state who have products in Showcase West Virginia,” Curry says. For example, a mother of twins was able to operate her beaded jewelry business through Showcase West Virginia while raising her children. “She did not have to give up her business dream,” Curry says. “Consistently accessing a profitable and stable customer base such as Showcase West Virginia’s would have been extremely difficult for her to be able to do on her own.”

Curry also takes pride in noting that by running Showcase West Virginia, CEO is putting into practice what it encourages its clients to do. “The business values in West Virginia include trust, loyalty, ethics and a sustainable approach – not compromising the future for a short-term gain,” Curry says. “In Showcase West Virginia, we try to mirror these values and the microbusinesses that we support.

For instance, we don’t encourage businesses to automatically take on debt, and we don’t do that ourselves. We bootstrapped the underwriting for Showcase West Virginia the same way that our microbusinesses have grown – building it as resources come in and giving careful and deliberate thought to investment needs.”

And most resources have been secured from outside the state. West Virginia’s economy, and the lack of foundations and corporate headquarters leave little money for nonprofit ventures. Competition is tight for state and local funds. CEO has received funding for the Showcase West Virginia store and other Showcase West Virginia market access strategies through grants from national funders such as the W.K. Kellogg, the Mary Reynolds Babcock, and the Charles M. and Mary D. Grant Foundations. Some underwriting has come from the Washington D.C.-based Appalachia Regional Commission, run through West Virginia’s development office.

But the end goal is to drastically reduce the dependency on outside funding sources.

Curry added, “In operating a social purpose enterprise such as Showcase West Virginia, part of the dream is that it generates non-taxable income for the nonprofit.”

CEO’s Showcase West Virginia program, in addition to the retail store, is exploring trade shows, a distributorship, premium and corporate gifts, catalogues, and ecommerce as potential revenue generating strategies.

## **Business on Country Roads**

“Come into West Virginia,” Curry says, “and it doesn’t take too much driving to realize that you are in a real different place. It’s mountain culture.”

This culture and the charm associated with it helps CEO sell West Virginia products through Showcase West Virginia, but it can also be a challenge for social entrepreneurs such as Curry.

The state’s geography is an obstacle for some small businesses that have a long and often arduous journey to market through mountain roads. Many business owners are isolated from other entrepreneurs, making it difficult to share and network.

And, Curry added, it can be a challenge to think entrepreneurially.

“It’s difficult for some people in this culture to be assertive or aggressive in selling their products,” she says. “They are more pleased about reactions to their products versus how much they can sell to you. It’s our job to think about fitting entrepreneurship appropriately into the culture.”

In her quiet tone and humility, Curry herself embodies the West Virginian culture. She is modest enough not to mention the Presidential Award for Excellence in Microenterprise Development presented to CEO in January 2001 by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Of the five national recipients, CEO was the only organization from a rural area and the only one recognized for program innovations, such as Showcase and their broad-based marketing initiative focused on helping microbusinesses access retail and wholesale markets in the state and worldwide.

Just like the people of her state, Curry is modest but determined to succeed.

“My vision for the Center (for Economic Options) is to grow the Showcase West Virginia enterprise components to the point where CEO is economically self-sufficient. Then the organization and the small business owners can generate the revenues that we all need.”

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