

# Entrepreneurial Community of the Month

## Brookfield, Missouri

<b>Population:</b>	4,769
<b>Location:</b>	north central Missouri; about 100 miles northeast of Kansas City and 200 miles northwest of St. Louis
<b>Organization:</b>	Brookfield Area Growth Partnership – Becky Cleveland, Executive Director
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## A Team Approach to Hometown Development

In Brookfield, Missouri, a group of citizens working on community development asked the following questions to graduating seniors on the eve of their 2007 ceremony:

*What would you want to receive from your community upon graduation?*

*... A set of keys to a new car?*

*... Or perhaps a set of new luggage?*

*But what would be the message you were receiving from your community?*

*Would it be that you have to leave here to be successful?*

*What if your community gave you ... a mailbox?*

“We actually did give them each a mailbox with their name on it,” said Becky Cleveland, Executive Director of the Brookfield Area Growth Partnership. “The response was just unbelievable. We wanted these kids to get the message that there’s a place for them here in our community, in our economy.”

A letter in each mailbox encouraged students to always consider Brookfield their home.

Students wrote letters of thanks to the Partnership that included, “What a cool idea,” and “Thank you for reminding us that we are important to Brookfield’s future.”

The class salutatorian stopped by the Partnership office to say that, after a senior year of hearing much talk about leaving town, it was refreshing to receive an invitation to stay.

Giving out senior mailboxes is one small, highly visible idea in a large cauldron of community development strategies used by this small town. The overall mission of the Brookfield Area Growth Partnership is to create a higher quality of life, stronger business environment and greater economic opportunity in the area.

Engaging a diverse group of citizens, including youths, Brookfield uses a team approach to achieve its goals.

### “A Great Place to Land”

Situated in north central Missouri, Brookfield is a manufacturing and agricultural community. The town was founded through its important status as a shipping stop on the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad in 1859.

At the turn of the century, the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad (later to become a part of the Burlington Northern/Santa Fe System) moved its headquarters to Hannibal; but the opening of the Brown Shoe Company in 1907, along with other small industries and farm trade, compensated for the loss and provided new employment. By 1910, Brookfield boasted a population of 5,749.

More retail businesses and a small coal company also played a role in the city's economic development. After the coal mines were closed in the 1930s, additional industries moved in before the agricultural crisis hit the town – as it did much of the Midwest – in the 1980s.

Brookfield lost more than 500 jobs from 1981 to 1983.

“Our past is our prologue,” Cleveland said. “This town has always pulled together to grow, as they did in 1905 when they raised \$70,000 in four days to bring in the shoe factory. However, as in much of rural America, even though we are very hard working, we’ve grown accustomed to allowing external forces shape our future.”

In their new model of development, growth comes from an internal drive toward entrepreneurship and boosting small businesses.

## **Home Town Competitiveness**

In 2004, Cleveland and a Brookfield leadership group met to talk about a strategic plan for the community.

The leaders were a diverse public/private partnership, including the superintendent of schools, a local banker, representatives from the city hospital and the city council, a prominent local business leader and Cleveland.

Through investigation, Cleveland had found information about a leadership academy called Home Town Competitiveness (HTC) and immediately signed up her crew.

“When we heard the HTC presenters talking about creating your own pot of gold through a community foundation and about involving youth in community development, it truly sparked our interest” Cleveland said.

Cited nationally as a promising new initiative in community and economic development, HTC provides a comprehensive strategy for long-term rural community sustainability. The model encourages communities to take immediate action in four strategic areas: mobilizing local leaders, energizing entrepreneurship, capturing wealth transfer and attracting young people.

Tagged “A Come-Back/Give-Back Approach to Rural Community Building,” HTC was developed and is carried out through a partnership between the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and the Nebraska Community Foundation.

HTC calls for rural communities to invest in local human resources and to build and retain local wealth.

After attending the HTC leadership academy in January of 2005, Cleveland’s team returned to Brookfield energized and formed the Brookfield Area Growth Partnership. They continued to meet every week for an entire year.

“We were just so committed,” she said. “Yet, the process was not an easy one for our community. It was such a new concept. There was a lot of heated discussion because it was a whole new paradigm for us. We were not chasing smokestacks any more.”

HTC made sense. And they rolled out a new plan to the community in July of 2005. They needed about \$60,000 to get programs started. The new model was embraced in such a way that they exceeded their goal.

“Everyone became a partner – from lending institutions to hospitals, schools, the city government and economic development organizations,” Cleveland said. “Everyone had a vested interest.”

A host of volunteers gathered early on in the process. Now 70 community members comprise the backbone of the organization as task force chairs, co-chairs and members in charge of Leadership, Youth, Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy.

The University of Missouri Cooperative Extension also got on board by funding Brookfield’s efforts through an ExCEED grant.

“Had the University not joined us at that time, we may have lost some steam,” Cleveland said. “The grant really gave our efforts legitimacy. When we came back from the HTC Academy, we just knew we would need a strong partner in our own state, and we found one.”

Responding to the University of Missouri’s enhanced emphasis on economic development, Extension established the Community Economic & Entrepreneurial Development (ExCEED) Program in 2005 to focus on economic development opportunities in rural communities. ExCEED uses multi-disciplinary and geographically based teams to facilitate entrepreneurship as a rural economic development strategy in communities throughout Missouri.

Now in its second year of the grant, Brookfield has received more than \$120,000 for task force meetings, existing business visits, forming a community foundation and youth entrepreneurship.

A board of directors incorporated the Hometown LEGACY Foundation as a 501c3, and more than \$250,000 has been pledged to the foundation.

The grant also helped them start a small business visitation program to determine needs of local businesses. Leaders served 40 businesses through the course of a year. They were also able to host and promote a number of workshops, along with supporting several youth entrepreneur ventures and holding three tourism events with an estimated 22,000 people in attendance.

The BAGP also created a leadership curriculum relevant to Brookfield. Leadership Brookfield began in September 2006. The inaugural class exceeded the first year goal with 17 attendees graduating in March of 2007. Year two, with a class of 16, is presently in progress.

Cleveland said the most important part of this process has been emphasis on community and economic development as a self-propelled strategy.

“What’s been interesting is that as soon as we started investing in ourselves, others wanted to invest,” Cleveland said. “The people of Brookfield assumed ownership of their own destiny, a very simple concept but a remarkable accomplishment.”

## **Engaging Young Adults**

“This has everything to do with young people,” Cleveland said. “The young people get it (entrepreneurship). Young people are so much more open to change...and we need their spark.”

While the graduation mailboxes were a symbolic gesture to keep young people in town, Brookfield also provides a host of other programs and policies to reverse out-migration trends.

In the summer of 2006, the BAGP brought a VISTA volunteer on board to work full-time developing youth/business mentor partnerships as well as other youth activities. The positive community impact from this position clearly demonstrated the need for another full-time staff member, resulting in the hiring of an administrative assistant.

Cleveland said the BAGP Youth Task Force is charged with developing opportunities for young adults to live and work in Brookfield successfully. A young adult now leads the task force, which is helping establish entrepreneurial education, better connections between the schools and community and better use of the school’s Career Center.

The Brookfield community also made it possible for students entering 7<sup>th</sup> grade to attend the Heartland Foundation's emPower Plant, a workforce development program with an in-school learning curriculum.

A Missouri program designed primarily for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, the program lets students experience simulated community challenges in a classroom lab setting. The focus is on providing students with the civic activity skills to become responsible citizens. The curriculum and classroom experiences are designed to develop workforce skills, good citizenship and a commitment to the local communities by the participants.

Brookfield, working side by side with its neighboring communities, organized a regional youth entrepreneurship event for 223 high school students, which resulted in a business start-up by an attendee.

Cleveland said they constantly encourage youths to step up into community leadership roles, such as serving on the YMCA board and the advisory board for the Northwest Missouri Business Conference, as well as taking active roles in Brookfield Leadership Training and Missouri Community Betterment.

And, of course, the mailbox ceremony let graduating high school seniors know there is an open invitation for them to come back and give back to their home town.

“From my perspective, our biggest accomplishment has been the formation of the Brookfield Area Growth Partnership,” said Cleveland, who grew up in Brookfield, moved away to St. Joseph for - awhile and herself came back. She established a real estate business, spent a term as a county commissioner, and then began her job in community/economic development. “Our biggest challenge is continuing to make Brookfield relevant and, through our Partnership, continuing to work together.

“HTC was the process that institutionalized our organization. We now have a governance scheme where everyone can be a player. Partnership bonds us together and provides a better network of communication. Ultimately, Brookfield is now in a position to succeed.”

Cleveland said many community members still feel that getting a big factory could solve rural economic problems in Brookfield, but, “The circle of people who think differently has changed. It just keeps getting bigger.”

In October 2007, Brookfield received a \$15,000 check from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines for being chosen as one of the Bank's five 2007 Capital Communities. Brookfield was recognized for its entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to focus on community betterment.

Cleveland added, “We plan to be a case study for successful rural development. You're going to read about us in a national newspaper someday because Brookfield has a great story to tell.”

*-By Lisa Bauer, 11/07*

### **For more information on...**

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

... the Heartland Foundation's emPower Plant, go to [www.heartlandfoundation.org/YouthEmpowerment/emPowerPlant.html](http://www.heartlandfoundation.org/YouthEmpowerment/emPowerPlant.html)

... The Home Town Competitiveness program, featuring Brookfield's accomplishments, go to [www.htccommunity.org/mosuccess&print](http://www.htccommunity.org/mosuccess&print)