BUILDING AN INDUSTRY BASED ON TRADITIONS AND CREATIVITY

In these times we’re beginning to understand how important the label MADE IN AMERICA is to our economy. Nowhere is that more embraced than in Southwest Virginia where hundreds of artisans turn out high quality crafts as part of a flourishing CREATIVE ECONOMY, an economy that can never be outsourced. Here among lush valleys and inspiring mountain vistas is a sense of tradition and place that has been sustained over many generations from the time the earliest European settlers crossed the Allegheny and Blue Ridge Mountains in search of land and a new life. They brought with them their craft traditions, and by the early 1800s, cabinetmakers, potters, basket-makers, metal smiths and weavers were creating wares that rivaled the quality of anything produced elsewhere in the U.S.

In 2004 with funding from the Virginia Works Initiative, ’Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network brought together representatives from government, business, tourism and the arts community. Within two years the organization had become a nonprofit dedicated to raising the profile of the valuable artistic resources found in towns and villages throughout the region. Through its marketing, educational and entrepreneurial opportunities for artisans, artisan farmers and arts organizations, ’Round the Mountain has developed a reputation as an advocate for sustainable economic development.

‘ROUND THE MOUNTAIN
SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA’S ARTISAN NETWORK

Finding the color in the natural realm has been interesting to me. It’s as much the surprise factor as the scientific part of getting that color out of that material.”

Deborah Partridge
Smyth County
Early in the development of ‘Round the Mountain it became apparent that success would be tied to the strength of community partnerships. Throughout the 19-county, four-city region, artisans, small business entrepreneurs, nonprofits and tourism professionals joined together to draft what they like to call a BIG VISION FOR SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA. Such an ambitious project had many components and the group understood the mission would be both broad in scope and geography. Like quilters connecting and layering pieces of fabric into a harmonious design, the ‘Round the Mountain Trail Development Committee and many tireless volunteers successfully created a system of 15 artisan trails.

By focusing on the handmade and homegrown bounty of the region, ‘Round the Mountain has assembled a collection of heritage and cultural attractions that showcases the talents of the people of Southwest Virginia as well as its beauty and outdoor opportunities. Today, membership has grown to more than 500 artisan studios and venues, including specialty lodging, recreational points of interest and agricultural sites such as farmers’ markets and wineries.

“\nIt doesn’t really matter what I’m making, but the investigative process of creation and then the actual process of making it, and going through the steps, is where I’m the most happy.”

Priscilla Melesco
Grayson County
Each year 'Round the Mountain also plans workshops to assist members in developing the business side of their craft. Through these educational opportunities, artisans learn techniques for merchandising and marketing and how to develop a portfolio of crafts. Now with the opening of Heartwood, a 30,000-square-foot world-class facility located in Abingdon, a two-pronged approach to marketing the art of Southwest Virginia is taking shape. Four galleries with a total of more than 4,800 square feet feature juried artisans of the best craft the region has to offer. In addition, interactive exhibits and a highly sophisticated website with trip-planning capabilities offer visitors a customized itinerary of their choosing to studios, galleries and other cultural assets throughout the region.

Heartwood: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Gateway represents significant investment by the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Virginia Tobacco Commission, the Appalachian Regional Commission and the localities that make up the 19-county, four-city Southwest Virginia region.

Beyond an iconic structure, Heartwood represents a new way of promoting the region's music, crafts, locally produced foods, history and outdoor recreation. The strategy has already benefited partners in the enterprise and your support will further cultivate success, growth and a sustainable livelihood for the people of this region.

While established as a public investment, Heartwood and its affiliates—The Crooked Road and 'Round the Mountain—will become a community development nonprofit dedicated to advancing a Creative Economy throughout the region. Through an organization known as the Friends of Southwest Virginia, businesses and individuals will be able to help artists, localities, nonprofits and entrepreneurs mobilize and succeed. Such success will lead the way for a stable economic base for the people of Southwest Virginia.

WWW.ROUNDTHEMOUNTAIN.ORG
I just love taking something from nature, as simple as a log from a tree, just turning it and seeing what’s hidden beneath the bark. You know, it’s amazing what nature can provide.

—Jim Ketron
Scott County

“VISITING AN ARTISAN’S STUDIO”
or a trail site exhibiting locally-created artwork lends authenticity to those purchases of handmade pieces. The desire for handmade still trends upward, even in tough economic times, as shoppers are more particular about their purchases and want to take home, or give as a gift, the ‘story’ that goes along with the item. ‘Round the Mountain’s efforts benefit us throughout Southwest Virginia.

—Martha and Ed Biggar
Pulaski County

I have her wheel. I learned to spin on that wheel. I can spin on anything now because it was the most cantankerous thing.

—Leslie Shelor
Patrick County

“‘Visiting an artisan’s studio’ is an important effort for us. ‘Round the Mountain’s programs and...”

—Diana Blackburn, Executive Director
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