

LEVERAGING PUBLIC  
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

The Role of Arts-based Economic  
Development Strategies in  
Georgia Communities

# CLARKSTON



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## Clarkston: A City of Enterprising Entrepreneurs

The 2010 Census deemed Clarkston “the most diverse city in America,” and for good reason. Though the city’s population is less than 8,000, an estimated 55 different languages are spoken there. They are the dialects of refugees who began arriving in Clarkston in the 1990s from all corners of the world – Somalia and Sudan, Burma and Bhutan, Nepal and Nigeria.

Some settled; others moved on. All faced the challenge of beginning a new life in a new country. For those who continue to call Clarkston home, they have a friend in the Clarkston Community Center. Since opening in 1994, the center has been a focal point for the community to come together to socialize, connect and learn new languages and skills.



While the center leases the school from the DeKalb County Board of Education free of charge, and receives some financial support from the city of Clarkston, the center is an independent non-profit responsible for raising their own funds.

“The Community Center fills an important void that, because of limited resources, the city couldn’t provide,” says Clarkston City Manager Keith Barker. “This is a place where there’s recreation, education and cultural activities. It is needed in every community.”

Art has played a special role in these efforts. More than a few refugees are skilled in a craft, and the Community Center has worked to help them develop their talents — even take them to market.

“For some, art is a hobby,” says McKenzie Wren, the center’s executive director. “But others would really like to make a living out of their art, so we try to get them to that place. They may know art, but they don’t know business.”

Prior to joining the Center in 2010, Wren worked with a group of Bhutanese performers, also refugees, who formed the Bhutanese Artists of Georgia. A National Endowment for the Arts grant - procured by Wren and a colleague - offered support for costumes, rehearsal space and more and culminated in a cultural music performance at the Horizon Theatre. The troupe became so successful that it moved its performances to Center Stage, a performing arts space in midtown Atlanta.

“Helping artists make a living is something I brought with me to the center,” Wren explains, “but now we’re dedicated to making it a more formal effort as opposed to just being on the sidelines.”

“We teach them to fish,” adds Michael Molina, director of art and education for the center, “but we also give them access to the pond.”

The Clarkston Farmers Market, established by the center four years ago to strengthen a sense of community, is part of that “pond.” The market – formerly held Sundays from April until November and opening on Saturdays in 2015 – features locally grown produce, prepared international foods, handmade crafts and live music performances.

“We are now changing the model,” Wren says, “and not doing a traditional farmers market focused on food. This will allow us to expand into more wares and crafts, and create the energy of an international street market. It’s a chance to share and showcase multiple cultures of both refugees and the American-born population.” Artists can also sell their art during special events and activities in an 8-foot kiosk set up in the foyer of the Community Center. In exchange for shop space, the woodworker gave back to the center in the form of the kiosk.

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“We support artists in a couple of different ways,” Wren says. “From giving them a place to showcase and sell their work, to hiring them to teach classes and camps.”

Beyond providing a marketplace for artists, Wren says the center helps these budding entrepreneurs develop their business acumen. That includes connecting artists with outside resources designed specifically for them.

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Two examples are C4 Atlanta, a nonprofit that offers classes in how to write a business plan, develop a marketing strategy and create a website, as well as mentor and peer support, and Start: ME, a business accelerator that offers a 13-week business training class. In addition to Bhutanese Artists of Georgia, other success stories abound.

One is Doris Mukangu, from Kenya, who started Johari Africa to market her African-themed clothing, jewelry and handmade crafts. All of her goods are made from recycled products, including necklaces made from used paper, bags sewn from scraps of cloth, and powdered glass beads used in the jewelry. She hires refugee women from Clarkston to help assemble her crafts.



Another is Sushma Barakoti, a native of Nepal, who owns Sunavworld. Her mission is to “promote sustainable, fairly traded local and global gifts for the socio-economic empowerment of artists and artisans, especially women.”

She imports handmade products from Nepal to sell here, and also employs refugee women in Clarkston to sew products such as traditional baby blankets.

She also helps Bhutanese basket weavers sell their crafts at markets around the area.



While neither came through the refugee program, both women are providing employment opportunities for refugees who may otherwise struggle to find a job due to cultural and language barriers. In turn, the center helps both businesses in several ways.

“We provide vending opportunities for them to test drive their lines and get experience in the community before launching on a wider scale,” Wren says. “We have also connected them with other resources and used our network to promote them.”

Serving these artists, both refugee and American-born, benefits not only the Community Center but the city of Clarkston as well.

“Whenever you keep money in the local community, it not only helps strengthen the community, it also adds energy,” Wren says. “We also believe that the arts are a vehicle for learning about other cultures and providing the artists with an opportunity to share their heritage.”

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