

Program for the Rural Carolinas Forges Alliances That Change Lives and Revive Regions

By Rah Bickley for MDC

Much is made of the “new South.” Wealthy, flourishing metropolitan areas like the financial powerhouse of Charlotte, N.C., draw young workers from all over. The Research Triangle Park is a Mecca for high-tech corporations and entrepreneurs. Charleston, home of the Spoleto Festival for classical music, is one of the South’s most chic and sophisticated cities.

But for every such metro area, there are isolated pockets of rural poverty. In places like St. George, S.C., the railroad tracks divide neat subdivisions from rotting shacks. In mountainous Alleghany County, N.C., high-paying manufacturing jobs are being exported overseas by the hundreds. Poverty persists and threatens to envelop the newly unemployed. These are the places that have been left behind while the New South roars ahead.

In an effort to reinvigorate poor, rural areas, [The Duke Endowment](#) in 2001 launched the Program for the Rural Carolinas (PRC), a \$10.5 million grant to 20 sites over four years.

MDC designed and helps run the program. It also sends a staff member to coach the local “teams” on PRC principles and addressing challenges in each site.

The guiding principle of the program is that local people must form diverse alliances – breaking long-held barriers of race or county lines – to rebuild their local economies.

The aim is to nurture new community leaders and grow local networks through which they can work together to bring about important changes.

Each local group finds its own path. Business training for rural entrepreneurs, job training for local industries, matched savings accounts for first-time homebuyers, creating websites to sell goods, and help claiming Earned Income Tax Credits are some of the most common.

Here’s a closer look at two Program for the Rural Carolinas sites – one in North Carolina and one in South Carolina – where local people are turning things around.

In the Mountains of North Carolina (“Northwest Alliance Program for the Rural Carolinas” - Wilkes, Alleghany and Ashe counties)

[A few years ago, you didn’t see much going on in Sparta, North Carolina.](#)

Against the surrounding peaks of the Blue Ridge, the Alleghany county courthouse, with its monumental white columns, dominates downtown. Across the street is a storefront marked “Christian Views,” which displays an open Bible and hand-lettered warnings of doom.

The factory in the middle of town closed a few years ago and now houses a nonprofit agency. In March, a textile plant in nearby Galax, Virginia, announced its closing due to outsourcing. The 332 jobs lost will be a blow to Alleghany County, as many residents drive half an hour to Galax for work. “Young people

don’t want to leave the county,” said Barbara Bare, a local woman who works downtown. “But with so few jobs or opportunities, they have to.”

[Alleghany has one of the smallest populations in the 11-county mountain region of North Carolina](#), and it has suffered badly as furniture, textile, and apparel plants have closed and their jobs have been exported overseas. From 1999 to 2002, when employment statewide stayed flat, the county lost 12 percent of its jobs.¹

Things are different today. Three years after the foundation sent its first grant check, Sparta and her neighbors are showing signs of recovery.

A Farm Wife Turns Entrepreneur

It’s lunchtime on a Wednesday in Sparta, and people are jostling to claim every seat at the lunch nook at the Olde Tyme General Store. A knot of older women commandeers one table, and businesspeople take some others. Stockbroker Mike Wagner sits with his sandwich on a red diner’s stool at the old-fashioned soda fountain. A couple hovers over his shoulder to place a take-out order, their Northern accents blending into the hubbub.

Next to Wagner is Melanie McFadyen, of local nonprofit New River Community Partners, PRC coordinator for the Northwest. When a tall, ruddy lawyer walks in — he’s back for a visit after moving to California—heads turn and arms reach and in an instant, he’s engulfed in a clutch of old friends. “You didn’t know I got married, did you?” McFadyen tells him. “We’re expecting our first.”

¹ From <http://www.advancedmaterialsnc.org/econ>.

Just two years ago, this building was empty.

The one-story, rock-faced structure was Smithey's department store – a small-town chain with deep roots in these mountain counties. Smithey's was where people came for new school clothes, work boots, and a bite to eat at lunchtime. But the store closed in the mid-1980s, and things began to slow downtown.

Then LeAnn Gambill saw an ad in the *Alleghany County News* about a course for entrepreneurs. Gambill, a blond woman with a wide smile, is married to a third-generation dairy farmer. She had always dreamed of having her own business. She called the number in the ad.

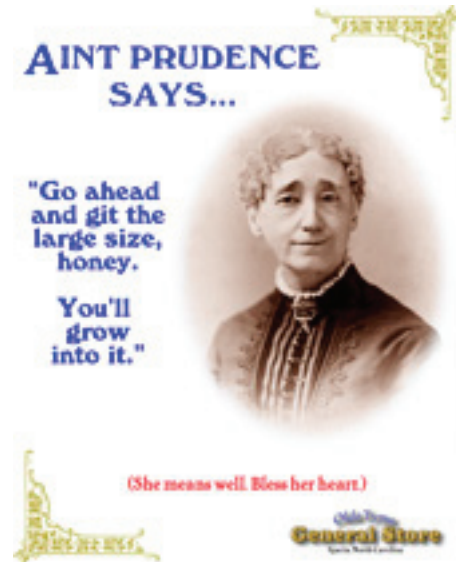
“I knew I wanted to do retail, but I didn't know where or what,” she said. “How to start? What to do? Who do I talk to? What steps to take?”

The course, one of the local PRC group's offerings to spur local entrepreneurship, helps people transform business ideas into hard-nosed, well-researched business plans that significantly boost the odds of success.

REAL, for Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning (www.ncreal.org), helped Gambill conduct her market research, define her target market and competitors, and estimate her break-even date.

Gambill decided to model the business on the popular Mast General Store, a regional six-store chain. Now her Olde Tyme General Store sells a mix of nostalgia items

—buckwheat pancake mix, local honey, candies in old-fashioned bins—and up-to-date fashions in outdoor clothing by Columbia, Woolrich and other popular brands. Gambill aims to attract both the local shoppers, who have slimmer budgets, and the affluent visitors who've built second homes in the scenic mountains nearby.



“Aint Prudence” was designed for LeeAnn Gambill's Olde Tyme General Store by Jeff Halsey, another local entrepreneur who went through the Rural Entrepreneurship Through Action Learning (REAL) training with Gambill. The REAL graduates make a point of swapping business with each other.

At her store's one-year anniversary in March, Gambill said she expects to break even in her second year—half the time her business plan projected. She has eight employees, three of them full-time. Several are family: Her mother works the lunch counter, and her sister manages the store.

“When we opened, the foot traffic picked back up,” Gambill says. “I hear all the time from my customers, ‘It's so nice to see all the people walking down the street.’ I hope we draw more businesses.”

The REAL courses are a staple of the PRC. The economy of most

rural places in the Carolinas was built on low-wage manufacturing—chiefly textiles, tobacco, and furniture. That underpinning is being ripped away as manufacturing jobs are outsourced by the hundreds of thousands to Central America and Asia. As MDC sees it, rural entrepreneurship is the road to recovery for “left behind” places like Sparta.

Attracting Industry – a Three-County Northwestern North Carolina Partnership

Because of the PRC and local industry recruiter John Hauser, leaders in the three-county Northwest region are taking an entirely new tack on recruiting industry. They're aiming to create an “advanced materials cluster.”

“This is a huge opportunity for this region,” Hauser said.

“This is a transformational change for the way people talk about economic development.”

Hauser, a self-proclaimed “redneck” with a buzz cut and an industrial engineering background, first heard of advanced materials in 2002. A Raleigh, NC-based company called Martin Marietta Composites leased a plant in Sparta to manufacture parts made of advanced materials for bridges and commercial truck trailers.

Advanced materials, or composites, are manufactured out of resin, carbon and other ingredients. They're stronger, lighter, and stiffer than steel and other metals. Plus, they don't rust. That makes them highly desirable for bridges, truck bodies, powerboats, modular

homes, military machines, and a slew of other products.

When Hauser, the industry liaison at Wilkes Community College, met plant CEO Grant Godwin, he quickly learned that Godwin wanted more than just a building. He wanted to change everything about the way county leaders recruited industry.

Ashe, Alleghany, and Wilkes had never worked together on economic development.

They'd always competed. Each would offer incentives, such as free land, as enticement—and some plants would come, and a few years later, some might leave. Nor did the counties have the staff to recruit major factories. Alleghany County has never had an economic developer, and Ashe County had none until 2004.

Godwin had a radical vision: The three counties would work together, not compete. They would market themselves as a region. They would create a “regional cluster.” It would be the first time any of these things was done.

Creating a cluster meant enticing related companies to move in and locate near Martin Marietta Composites, like satellites around a mothership. They would be suppliers of materials, parts, and services to Martin Marietta or to each other. They would all feed off each other, and attract even more businesses. If it worked, it would mean a huge leap forward for the three-county area's economy.

Hauser became a believer. He brought together the top economic officials of Ashe, Alleghany, and

Wilkes counties. [\[see sidebar\]](#). It wasn't easy—he met with stiff resistance at first—but he persuaded them to stop competing for plants, and start marketing the region as one body in order to land bigger industries.

“This is huge,” said Melanie McFadyen, coordinator of the local PRC. “It's been unheard of for our three counties to work together even though we share a workforce.”

They signed a working agreement. It hinged on two things: If they were going to lay aside decades of fierce competition, then John Hauser had to lead the charge. He had gained their trust in seven years of helping them recruit. Also, the cluster had to be run out of Wilkes Community College, a neutral state government agency created expressly to serve the three counties.

Around then, Hauser bumped into the director of New River Community Partners, just as it was putting together the local board of the PRC. The timing was exquisite. The director quickly saw how Hauser's project fit the program's goal of creating jobs and improving the local economy. They persuaded Wilkes Community College to free up part of Hauser's time for the cluster project; the PRC would pay his salary.

Hauser set to work building a local brain trust, using funding from the PRC's “technical assistance pool.” He attended a week-long training session at the Economic Competitiveness Institute in Berkeley, California, an influential think-tank on regional clusters. He took along Brian Crutchfield, a

top executive at the local electric company who had served for more than a decade as the *de facto* economic developer for Ashe and Alleghany counties.

When Hauser came back, he became an evangelist of a regional cluster around the advanced materials industry. He made speeches at every civic or business group that would have him. He set up a group with its own executive committee and website. “We got global buy-in,” he said.

He recruited one company to the area, and so far has persuaded three to look into making their products out of composites.

To begin building the workforce, he set up a technical program in manufacturing advanced materials at Wilkes Community College. It begins in June 2006. Also in the making is a two-year degree in advanced materials at WCC, plus two new degree programs at nearby Appalachian State University in Boone – a four-year and a master's degrees in the subject.

He also knit together the Knowledge Coalition—WCC, ASU, and the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—to train regional leaders on cluster development.

“I could see the leaders needed training, to take it to a regional level,” he said. “Let's look at ourselves, let's learn to interact differently with people across county lines.” One group has gone through the training, and Hauser plans to offer them a follow-up course while offering the training to a second group.

Hauser's newest project is to find money to build a \$12 million Advanced Materials Center at Wilkes Community College. The center would produce trained workers; research and test new products; and offer investment capital. It would establish the three-county region as the heart of a new rural economy – an advanced manufacturing cluster – where Northwest North Carolina borders eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia.

The Duke Endowment grant stimulated this," he said. "If it were not for The Duke Endowment grant we would not be here, bottom line."

Trickle-Up Economics

Bud Hill of Ashe County Partnership for Children was asked to start an Individual Development Account program.

At the time, he said, "I didn't know IDA from ABC."

But now he does. In March, his client Stacy Grubb Cox became the first person in Ashe County's IDA program to buy a house. *The Mountain Times* pictured her on the front page, beaming, in her brand-new kitchen.

Cox saved \$1,000 from her slim paycheck at a domestic violence agency, and Hill's program at the Ashe County Partnership for Children matched it with \$2000 for the down payment.

IDAs help people buy things that will build their wealth and earning power—a house that

builds equity; a business; a college degree.

To get an IDA, one must be earning money, have good credit or commit to fixing it, and take a seven-week "financial literacy" class. The program takes up to 18 months.

Hill has about 15 clients in the program. Three more should be able to buy houses in the next six months. The numbers are small but steady, he says.



Bud Hill, with community leader Carol Dodson, started the local Individual Development Account program, which provides financial training and matching funds to help people save money and build assets.

IDAs are a key element in the PRC because money is leaving the region fast. Factories have closed, and thousands of livelihoods have disappeared as if into a sinkhole.

That's why 23-year-old Holli Hauck, a waitress at the Morningstar Café in West Jefferson, is using her IDA to finish her nursing degree at Wilkes Community College

Hauck had toyed with the idea of using the IDA money to buy a house, or to expand her side business of making organic soaps and lip balms. But Hill helped her see that with a six-month-old baby girl, and a waitressing job, the degree spells F-U-T-U-R-E.

"Wherever I live, if I'm a nurse, I can buy a house, I can save money to start a small business," Hauck said.

For people like Hauck, accumulating IDAs to buy something of value raises their self-esteem, Hill said. "It gives people a chance to see that their lives can be more than they ever thought they could be."



Holli Hauck, a waitress in West Jefferson with a six-month-old daughter, is using her Individual Development Account funds to finish her nursing degree at Wilkes Community College.

Hauck agreed. "It does give me hope to be able to help other people and help myself at the same time."

Hill has added a new twist: credit counseling. Almost every one of his clients has bad credit. Much of it comes from medical debt which is relatively easy to relieve – except that his clients didn't know that.

Hill found another grant to bring the credit counseling nonprofit from Winston-Salem—the big town "off the mountain"—to Ashe and Alleghany counties for regular visits. Now his clients can

get 12 visits a month. Before the PRC, there had never been a credit counseling program in Ashe or Alleghany counties.

“The people I get in Alleghany are in such a world of hurt that thank God we’re bringing [credit counseling] in,” Hill said. “We’ve got to help these people with their credit.”

Despite the need, however, Hill often finds it tough to sell the IDA concept to the local people who grew up, as they say, “on the mountain.”

“We have people who’d die before they’d go on welfare. They’ll take care of their own,” Hill said. “They’ll go slaughter a hog. They’re extremely independent. That’s a mountain trait.”

It’s hard enough to recruit IDA clients in Ashe County, where Hill works and where several churches help recruit. Tiny, isolated Alleghany County is even more stubbornly self-reliant. Hill has been struggling for two years to get the word out there, and he’s frustrated.

When the PRC money runs out, the IDA program will continue and will grow, Hill said. People need it, for one thing. For another, Hill – a former minister – doesn’t plan to let it die.

“I believe this program is so vital to the people of both these counties that there is no way it will ever stop.”

Building Local Leaders

The most lasting change PRC is making, says program coordinator

Melanie McFadyen, is to cultivate a new crop of local leaders through leadership training programs.

The PRC has funded three leadership courses – one each in Ashe, Alleghany and Wilkes counties. Nearly 100 people have gone through the training. Some have gone on to school boards, county commissions and other groups. They have formed alumni groups, where graduates network with each other and carry out service projects.

MDC developed the two key concepts upon which the training is based. First is the [“cycle of development.”](#) This is the basis of a strong economy anywhere. Good jobs offer good income, which should result in strong schools and other government services. Those, in turn, create a viable workforce, and that attracts new businesses.

The second is the [“Building Blocks of Economic Development.”](#) The six “blocks” – represented in the course by foam blocks painted like bricks — range from business opportunities to cultural life to good government.

A healthy economy needs all the elements together – not just one or two. To draw good jobs, for instance, a place must have some cultural attractions.

Brian Crutchfield, the electric company executive who works with Hauser on the industry cluster project, has run two of PRC’s three leadership classes and consulted on the third. He learned about the “building blocks” more than a decade ago when he went through an MDC training session. “This is a good framework,” he said.

When you ask Crutchfield for an example of someone who became a leader through the program, he talks about Carol Dodson.

“She’s been a real asset, even though she’s a newcomer to the area,” he said.



A relative newcomer to Ashe County, North Carolina, Carol Dodson quickly took the lead in revitalization efforts in West Jefferson, including applying for grants to expand the local farmer’s market.

Dodson, a fifty-something commercial real estate investor from Orlando, Florida, bought a vacation home with her husband in Ashe County in 2002. She is one of those creative and ambitious people who, once something captures her interest, feels compelled to devour every scrap of information about it and then reinvent it as something bigger and better. When she went through the Ashe County leadership program, it touched off an all-consuming interest in local economic development.

“I learned how our county works,” she said. “Who the county players are – the clerk of court, the register of deeds.” She also learned about issues such as the local water and sewer system, and how it limits development.

First Dodson bought and renovated an old hardware store in downtown West Jefferson and rented it to another transplant, Karen Radcliff, for a gift store. But she had an idea: she convinced Radcliff to help her start up Sallie Mae's Emporium as a venue for local arts and craftspeople.

Radcliff shrank her gift offerings to accommodate the artisans' booths featuring handmade pottery, skeins of yarn from local sheep, porcelain dolls, framed photographs and other merchandise.

“The PRC program helped me see that heritage and arts are part of the economic development equation,” Dodson said.

Dodson joined the board of the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce and took the helm of its business development committee. Then she went through two other rural development courses. When the next Ashe County leadership course rolled around, she taught the “civic infrastructure” building block session.

She became president of the West Jefferson Downtown Revitalization group and reshaped the board to include more people with connections. She helped start the High Country Business Network for entrepreneurs in an eight-county area. Along the way, she renovated another building, and turned it into an attractive office for herself. She launched a website advertising local vacation spots and cultural events.

“That's what it's all about: having great people who are willing to become leaders, how they can make things happen by working together,” Crutchfield said.

Dodson might have done the business deals without the leadership program. But she believes it taught her some priceless lessons about how people do things here, and how to work with them.

Right off the bat she faced being an outsider. In these mountains, one is classified as either a “been here”—a native from generations back—or a “come here.” And those who “come here” are often met with deep skepticism.

Worse, she was one of the wealthy Floridians who have bought expensive vacation homes, driving up the price of land and housing for lower-income natives. In Ashe County, over half the tax bills go to out-of-town landowners, Dodson said. In Ashe County, a familiar saying goes, “We don't care how you did it in Florida.”

When she first took over the downtown revitalization committee, the people involved in the downtown farmer's market weren't showing up for meetings.

She was upset. But she started dropping in on the farmer's market meetings, she said. “Now, I'm trusted.”

“That's what leadership does. It helps you understand the intangibles of the culture,” Dodson said.

Forming Alliances

Alan Rice is the superintendent of the North Wilkesboro United Methodist District of the Western North Carolina conference. Because the Dukes were staunch Methodists, Buck Duke spelled out that The

Duke Endowment would grant money to rural Methodist churches, as well as a few other entities. So the local PRC grant money flows through Rice's district, and when the checks come from The Duke Endowment in Charlotte, they land in his mailbox.

Rice says what amazes him is that everything is getting done by separate organizations working together.

“[The program] is like the big pot that the soldier brought for stone soup,” Rice said. In the postwar Eastern European story of stone soup, the soldier arrived in a village where everyone was hoarding his or her own small store of food. He set a cauldron of water to boiling, then shook a stone out of a velvet bag into the water. He enticed one villager to add a head of cabbage to the “stone soup,” another some meat, and so on until everyone had pitched in to make a fine stew.

Those pitching in to make the “Northwest stew” include a range of local people, from farmers to social services, the community college, hospitals and churches, said coordinator Melanie McFadyen.

“We don't depend on just one organization to run everything. We rely on as many organizations as we can get to bring what resources they can, bring their ideas and go from there,” McFadyen said.

The Northwest Alliance for the Rural Carolinas has a board that makes the big decisions and separate committees for each program, such as the leadership program and IDAs. McFadyen calls it a spider web.

“Talk about teambuilding - that was the whole idea behind the program and the reason for its success,” McFadyen said.

From Competitors to Allies

Trust among the major players on the Northwest Alliance board is essential. But it didn't start out that way. In the beginning, they applied separately, competing against each other for the grant. Rice applied for an eight-county region. McFadyen applied for Alleghany County.

The Duke Endowment asked them to combine their applications into one, pulling in Ashe County as well, and to focus on the three-county region. It wasn't easy.

“One of the first things we had to do was get over our county loyalties – Alleghany needs this and Alleghany needs that, and Ashe doesn't – to realizing we were representing our region,” McFadyen said.

“That's an ongoing problem. We get bounded by those lines.”

McFadyen and Rice convened a meeting. “We all got together in a room and started talking, talking, talking. Who's missing? Who else do we need?” she said. They got the right people on the board of the Northwest Alliance and started a six-month planning process in 2002.

That's when MDC stepped in. Sam Scott, an expert on group facilitation and workforce development, acted as the group's coach, guiding them through sometimes angry discussions. He worked to keep everyone focused on the PRC's

goals: “to increase employment, income, and wealth for people left behind by the economy;” and “to build the leadership, assets, and structures that support the long-term economic renewal of the community.”

Tensions erupted when people discussed creating an economic “cluster” of industries around the new Martin Marietta Composites plant in Sparta, McFadyen said.

“People said, oh, well, that's Alleghany, so Alleghany is the only county that's going to benefit. Sam was able to say, Who works at Martin Marietta? So we said, yes, people do drive over from Wilkes, from Ashe.”

Scott says that the Sparta-area program required much less coaching than some others. They already had plenty of capable people, organizations, and good will, he said. “By and large it was interjecting new ideas.”

Life after PRC

McFadyen believes the most important elements of the PRC will continue even after the program ends in 2007.

The REAL program that Gambill went through in Sparta generated so much interest that New River Community Partners hired someone to run rural entrepreneur's programs for the region. Kenneth Scott has already put on one Entrepreneur Boot Camp in Sparta, and has a second one scheduled.

The IDA program has become a permanent program of the Ashe County Partnership for Children, a county agency.

The leadership programs are already run by the Chambers of Commerce of each county, and Hauser's new version, the Knowledge Coalition, is up and running.

Hauser is already looking beyond the PRC and is applying for grants for the Advanced Materials Cluster organization to continue its work.

The bottom line, McFadyen said, is that through the PRC, a group of local people have developed a shared vision for bringing life back to the failing economy of Northwest North Carolina.

As for the team working behind the scenes to coordinate the work, that too will continue, as an ongoing partnership of planners, think about how the region can bring its resources together to keep addressing the challenges they face - challenges no single town or community can solve on its own.

In rural South Carolina (Lower Orangeburg/Upper Dorchester counties, or LO/UD)

On a motorist's map of South Carolina, Bowman is a speck just off roaring Interstate 95. To get there, you drive through fallow fields strung with collapsing farmhouses and barns. In the middle of town, once-stately houses sag on their foundations. It's quiet as a tomb except for the people coming and going at the convenience store on the corner.



Small towns in the Lower Orangeburg/Upper Dorchester region of South Carolina have been left behind in the new South economy.

Bowman, one of three main towns that make up this local Program for the Rural Carolinas site, is a town of 1,178 people, 69 percent of them African-American. Most working people hold down two jobs, making the minimum wage of \$5.15 or so per hour at fast-food joints or gas stations. On Wednesday nights, churchgoers gather at small fellowship halls, Bibles in hand, to study the Scriptures.

This is what sociologists call the "Black Belt," an 11-state swath of former slave and sharecropping territory that is home to some of the poorest people in the United States.

All of South Carolina has a stark divide between blacks and whites in most quality-of-life factors, from family income and

health to school dropout rates. But in the Black Belt, which in this state runs down Interstate 95, the gap has not narrowed since the Depression.

A few mainly white families still own the majority of the land. A large percentage of white students have fled to private schools. In the now-majority-black public schools, the dropout rate is 10 percent higher than the statewide average. Those with the means to leave the region, do, while the dropouts stay behind. Thousands of families have been poor for so many generations that "wealth"—as in a house of their own, or even a bank account—is a word they don't know.

Getting Started

When state Senator John Matthews, an African American and a Bowman native, heard about the PRC, he knew his electoral district contained exactly the kind of "left-behind" places the grant program was aiming to help. He quickly pulled together a team of local leaders and submitted a proposal for funding.



SC state Senator John Matthews has been the guiding force behind the Lower Orangeburg/Upper Dorchester PRC initiative.



Senator Matthews garnered state money for a new industrial park in his district.

As a legislator, Matthews had fought for years to pull his district out of poverty.

He helped Bowman's school district merge with a wealthier one and build an attractive new school for kindergarten through 12th grade. He garnered state money for a new industrial park that bears his name. He used his clout in the state Senate to create a commission to find ways to alleviate the persistent poverty of the Interstate 95 corridor.

"People aren't learning the skills they need to get decent jobs in today's economy," Matthews said. "That has created a stagnant attitude. Even though people want better things, they're not willing to make the sacrifices up front, or understand that connection. This state isn't going anywhere until this corridor is developed."

Matthews has deep roots in Bowman. He was born here on his parents' farm. His father was a Methodist pastor as well as a farmer – and he ran a barbershop, a soda shop and one of the two black theaters in the county. His mother was a schoolteacher. She earned far less than the white teachers did, Matthews recalled, and she had to let her students out to work in the fields for six months a year. "She used to teach her classes out of

old books stamped ‘For Colored Only,’” he said.

Both his parents had college degrees, and they made sure their six children earned theirs too. In turn, Matthews and his siblings sent all their children to college. But many of his cousins didn’t. His family is a living example of how a university degree creates a better future.

“That’s why I’m so passionate about education,” Matthews said.

“In this knowledge-based economy, if you’ve got an education, you’ve got a shot. If not, you’re out of the game.”

His PRC grant proposal targeted the poorest parts of lower Orangeburg County and of upper Dorchester County, next door to the east. Most of the people served would come from Bowman in Orangeburg County, and tiny St. George, 16 miles north, in Dorchester County. The area is rural, largely African American, and suffers much higher unemployment than each county as a whole.

Once Matthews’ team won the grant, they formalized the board of the local PRC. One key member was Dr. John Elliott, a respected black pastor and Bowman native who ministers to three local churches, including the oldest black church in the area.

Elliott leads the local Ministerial Alliance, and his Shady Grove United Methodist Church, whose graveyard holds headstones from slavery days, was chosen as the official recipient of funds for the LO/UD PRC.

“Dr. Elliott has been a stabilizing influence in St. George for a long time.” Matthews said.

Matthews also invited representatives from the two technical colleges—Trident Technical College in Charleston, 70 miles east of Bowman, and Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College (O-C Tech), 18 miles west in Orangeburg. (Technical colleges in South Carolina are the equivalent of community colleges in North Carolina.)

Also at the table were representatives of both counties’ social services and adult education departments.

“We didn’t know each other,” Matthews said. “It was the first time in these two counties when we brought the service providers to one table, and said ‘What piece of this can you help us with?’”

Job Training

Every local PRC team starts with a blank page and the question: How can we create jobs? And not just any jobs, but stable jobs that pay well enough that families can cover their expenses, save some money, and eventually buy houses or college educations.

It soon became clear to the LO/UD PRC leaders that there was a strong demand for entry-level medical personnel from the thriving health-care industry.

Between Charleston and Summerville, 45 miles to the east, there are four hospitals, seven nursing homes, and a myriad of other clinics, home health agencies

and hospices. Even in Bowman and St. George, there was strong demand for health services because of the lack of doctors in the rural area.

The idea of starting a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) program in lower Orangeburg and upper Dorchester counties came from a speaker at a PRC “Learning Institute,” a periodic gathering of local PRC leaders arranged by MDC.

“We made the connection and said, ‘Let’s look at whether that would be useful where we are,’” said Kim Sturgeon, the PRC coordinator. Program leaders talked to the owner of the nursing home in St. George. They were told that the home constantly needed new CNAs because of the high turnover rate.

Both the technical college in Charleston and in Orangeburg already offered CNA programs. But for unemployed people around Bowman and St. George, the 45-minute drive meant the colleges might as well have been on the moon. Few owned cars for the commute, or could afford child care. They were unfamiliar with the cities and with the technical colleges in general. As one graduate put it, “If you don’t know what’s out there, it makes it much harder.”

PRC board member Jean Nisbet, Trident’s nurse training coordinator, addressed the problem by volunteering to bring instructors and equipment for the 100-hour course to St. George. But she needed a place to conduct classes, and to keep the hospital bed and mannequin that the students practice on.

Renee Rivers, another PRC board member who is the Program

Coordinator for the Dorchester County Adult Education Department in St. George, offered the use of her building.

The two women got the shabby interior of the blue cinderblock building cleaned from top to bottom, painted, and filled with furniture donated from Trident Tech.

“It was sitting down and saying, who could we bring to the table to take it a step further?” Rivers said.

They opened the course to applicants and posted flyers to attract potential students. PRC funds would cover nearly all the students’ expenses—tuition, books, the watches they used for timing patients’ vital signs, and the cost of the state CNA exam. The program also paid for uniforms and shoes and for a re-test if a student failed the state exam the first time.

Melissa’s Story

Melissa Gardner was sitting at the hairdresser’s when she spied the flyer posted there.

The 37-year-old divorced mother was living a life so hemmed in that her world seemed to end outside the front door. She and her two children lived with her mother. She had no job, and no car with which to look for a job.

Her only work experience was short stints at one temp agency after another, none longer than three months. She’d tried before to get a college degree, but money troubles had always blocked her path. “I didn’t have child care, and it was

so far away. So I’d start school and quit a semester, then go back.”

Gardner hurried to enroll in the six-week CNA course. Getting through it wasn’t easy. Many nights, her mother was unable to give her a ride, and she had to ask PRC board member Rev. Elliott or local coordinator Garon Jackson for a lift home.



Melissa Gardner (center), along with fellow classmates Angela Goodwin (top) and Sharon Manor, graduated from the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program in early 2004. Earning her CNA credential netted the formerly unemployed Gardner a job the day after graduation.

Still, the day after graduation—Two months after starting the course — she got a job at the nursing home in St. George at \$6 an hour. The pay rose to \$6.50 when she got her state CNA license. “It wasn’t much, but I didn’t have a car, so I couldn’t go anywhere else to look for work,” Gardner said. When she had saved up \$800, she bought an old car that barely made it between Dorchester and St. George.

Like most others in her class, Gardner soon moved on to better-paying jobs—first, an \$8.45 per hour CNA job at a Summerville nursing home, and today, work at an Alzheimer’s facility in Charleston that pays \$12.75 per hour.

“What makes this program so unique is that they can find opportunity in

Charleston and still live here,” said Jackson. “In Charleston they can’t live on \$12 an hour.”

Gardner credits the PRC for helping her change her life. “I’m more self-sufficient, and I can do things on my own,” she said. “It’s not like welfare, where you’re just waiting for a check every month.”

After her last job change, Gardner moved with her children out of her mother’s house into a rented mobile home. Likewise, seven of her fellow CNA students were able to move out of the St. George public housing complex after earning their state licenses.

Building Wealth

Melissa Gardner didn’t stop striving after becoming a CNA. She went through PRC’s Earned Income Tax Credit program, which helps low-income people claim tax credits, and used her tax refund to buy a dependable car: a blue 1998 Saturn with only 45,000 miles on the odometer.

Now Gardner is enrolled in a local Individual Development Account program, which helps people acquire assets such as homes, educational degrees, and businesses. She has saved more than \$700 toward a down payment on a house and is working to improve her credit rating. Once she reaches \$1000, the IDA program will match it with \$2000, giving her \$3000 to put down on a home of her own.

Preparing for Success

Early on, PRC leaders realized that many applicants for the CNA course were academically unprepared. So they started a prerequisite called the “Pre-CNA” class—27 hours of basic math and reading, study skills, on-the-job etiquette, and interviewing techniques. Like the CNA class, “Pre-CNA” is offered at the Adult Education building in St. George.

To enter the Pre-CNA course, applicants must score above a certain point on the Adult Basic Education test. If they don’t make the cutoff, it’s up to Jackson, the local PRC coordinator, to tell them—and, more importantly, to coax them into a refresher course for basic reading and math, also at the Adult Education center.

Jackson, whose friendly manner immediately puts people at ease, never tells applicants their test scores. He never uses the word “fail.” Instead, he tells them, “You were *this* close,” holding his thumb and forefinger just a hair apart. Then he encourages them to take the refresher course and try again.

“If you want to destroy somebody’s self-esteem, tell them they’re reading on a second-grade level,” Rivers said. **“The word ‘test’ is scary, especially if you’ve been out of school a long time.”**

For the PRC’s first Pre-CNA class, 25 people applied, but only seven got in. Half of the 18 others enrolled in adult education classes. Of those nine, eight scored high enough to join the class on the second try.

The careful screening and preparation of students who eventually earn their CNA degrees is the reason the program has such a high job placement rate, said Nisbet, the Trident Tech nurse training director.

As of the end of March 2006, 92 of the 98 people who had gone through the pre-CNA and CNA courses had found jobs.

Many started out at the small nursing home in St. George—which now hires CNAs exclusively from the PRC program—and soon moved on to better-paying jobs.

In addition, the PRC area’s second technical college, Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College (O-C Tech), located 20 miles west of Bowman in Orangeburg, was to offer its own CNA course at a satellite campus. Three years into the program, it added the course to its new Lake Marion campus.

Another Step Up

Encouraged, PRC leaders started a second course for Patient Care Technicians (PCT) at the Adult Education building in St. George that Renee Rivers and Jean Nisbet had spruced up for the students. In 130 hours of training, PCTs learn to draw blood and do other technical tasks in hospitals.

PCTs are a step up from CNAs in pay and skills. The 27 people who had graduated by March 2006—who all found jobs—earned an average of \$10 per hour, as opposed to an average of \$7.85 per hour for CNAs.

Also, because they work in hospitals, they are exposed to other careers in specialties such as radiology, respiratory therapy and special testing.

By putting together the Pre-CNA, CNA, and PCT courses, the PRC team had created a “health care career ladder,” where people can gain training, get their first job, and rise step by step to higher skills, responsibility and pay.

Howisha’s Story

Howisha McFadden, 25, climbed that career ladder, graduating from both the CNA and the PCT programs. Before the course, the single mother of three had been grinding away at a low-paying call center job, making Holiday Inn reservations for strangers on the phone.

“There is a sense of hopelessness around here,” she said. “Like, ‘Oh well, I know I can’t find anything better because I don’t have the education.’”

When she saw a flyer in a gas station for the CNA and PCT courses, McFadden signed up right away.



Howisha McFadden graduated from both the Certified Nursing Assistant and the Patient Care Technician programs. Here she is with the Reverend John H. Elliott, a key leader on the local PRC team and head of the Ministerial Alliance in the St. George area.

During her rotation at the Summerville Medical Center, McFadden observed a doctor perform a Caesarean section. “Just to be there in the room with the doctors and everybody – just being there to comfort [the patient], that brought a lot of joy,” McFadden said.

McFadden says some of her friends got interested in the CNA program once they learned of it. “When they see you doing something positive, they want to get on board and do what you’re doing,” she noted.

It has affected her family, too. Her one-year-old has started toddling around the house with a book in her hand. “Now my daughter sees my homework,” McFadden said. “Instead of saying, ‘Mama’s just going to a job,’ she says, ‘I want to be like my mother.’ That’s how it makes a difference.”

Because McFadden and about 67 other graduates of the PRC health courses live in St. George, they put most of their earnings back into the local marketplace. The economic impact on St. George alone is substantial, Renee Rivers said.

Job Training for Manufacturing

The other significant job training element of the program takes place at O-C Tech. Orangeburg County is home to a fair number of manufacturing plants, where O-C Tech faculty already had longstanding consulting relationships.

Good jobs, like the PRC is designed to create, are

often manufacturing jobs. So PRC board member Rebecca Battle-Bryant, dean of Continuing Education at O-C Tech, called on her contacts in industry and set up a “pre-employment manufacturing” (PEM) training program to prepare students for entry-level jobs at five local plants.

As in the health care courses, PRC money pays for students’ tuition and books. The students could never afford the cost otherwise, about \$1000, said PRC coordinator Kim Sturgeon.

In the 96-hour course, students learn how to read a blueprint; safely use power saws, drills and other tools; build rigging for moving equipment around a site; do construction math; and acquire other plant-floor skills. They spend four hours a day in class, three days a week, for eight weeks.

People with manufacturing experience—not academics—teach the courses. To pass, students must demonstrate mastery of skills in front of an instructor.

The PEM training has credibility with instructors because it is based on the “Work Keys” system, a national manufacturing skills test that many South Carolina employers use to screen their applicants, said Cushman Phillips, who runs the courses.

“Most consider it more valid than a high school diploma,” Phillips said. “It tests performance rather than ‘seat time’ in class.”

Sen. Matthews of the PRC board used up political chits to persuade the plant representatives to promise every PEM graduate an interview.

Demand for the training is furious. “At the first meeting, 400 people showed up for 20 training slots,” Matthews said.

So far, 57 people of the 71 who began the course have graduated. About 36 were employed and making an average of \$8.63 per hour as of March 2006. For most, it is their first job with benefits. A fair number are single mothers.

“If we can keep a stream of 8 to 12 graduates every six months, we can place those people,” said Sturgeon.

Many students had never handled tools, equipment, and machinery before the class, said Phillips. Also, as in the CNA courses, some students were simply not job-ready. So part of the course teaches work habits like showing up on time, proper dress, and how to interview.

“Some of the students have a hard time adjusting to the fact that they really have to be there at 8 a.m., if not 7:50,” said Cushman, a former nuclear engineer.

The PEM program helped turn things around for Roslyn Baker, who had been out of work for seven years.

She had applied several times to air conditioning maker Allied Air and always been rejected. Once she went through the PEM course, they called her. She started as a temp at \$8.50 an hour, was made permanent, and now earns \$10 per hour. She has

finally been able to buy a used car, a burgundy 1998 Dodge Stratus.

“You go seven years without employment and all of a sudden you get hired at a job you wanted,” local coordinator Garon Jackson said. “You can tell how happy and thankful they are to get that opportunity.”

Truck Driving Classes

When Phillips, coordinator of the PEM program, got a phone call from a trucking company desperate for licensed commercial drivers one day, he saw that the PRC should experiment with funding students to attend the Commercial Drivers’ License (CDL) course at the college. Truck driving is booming locally as a way to transport the goods that arrive at Charleston’s seaport. Phillips sees nonstop high demand for the next 10 to 15 years.

PRC funds paid for five people to complete the five-week class. All of them were immediately hired at jobs paying \$30,000 to \$35,000 a year.

“You can go from zero income to \$35,000 in five weeks – that’s pretty attractive,” Phillips said.

Preparing Rural Entrepreneurs

Believing that starting small businesses is one of the best ways to invigorate stagnant economies like that of the LO/UD region, the PRC tried to start a small business course for would-be entrepreneurs.

The first attempt failed. LO/UD pitched a joint effort with the small business development program at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, but the school lacked

the staff to send to the area.

Then they turned to Rural Entrepreneurial Action Learning (REAL), the program that helped LeAnn Grimes open her Olde Tyme General Store in the PRC program based in Sparta, N.C.

REAL classes started in 2005. About 12 people have graduated. Two have started businesses—a power washing company and a one-woman home health care service—and a third has strengthened her catering business, said Sturgeon.

Now Trident Tech and Orangeburg-Calhoun Tech are both delivering the REAL program—the only providers in the state. They have agreed to train other tech colleges to teach the course.

MDC Behind the Scenes

MDC’s role in every PRC site is different. In the LO/UD area, MDC had to intervene early to put the first PRC team on the right track.

The original grant proposal had too much money slated for staff and overhead expenses and aimed to duplicate existing services. MDC Senior Staff Associate Sam Scott, who acted as the team’s coach, guided the group to re-write the proposal and replace the original program coordinator with Kim Sturgeon, director of development at Trident Technical College.

It was touchy. The original coordinator was black; Sturgeon is white.

There were angry confrontations, and the leadership team endured a major shakeup.

But the show went on. “MDC played a critical role in helping me and the Senator and everybody else know how to handle that,” Sturgeon said.

The group also hired Garon Jackson, a 30-year-old Bowman native with experience placing people in jobs, to run the day-to-day operations in Bowman and St. George, while Sturgeon worked out of Charleston.

Scott took the PRC board members on a tour of effective community-based organizations around the South. He provided training on consensus-building and other board skills. At his urging, the group set up a “management team” of the PRC’s 12 or so most active leaders for quicker decision-making, as well as an “executive team” of five who could take action on the spot. Scott also helped the board begin evaluating the effectiveness of their programs.

“We made our own decisions, but Sam kept us on the [PRC’s] goals,” Matthews said.

Scott saw MDC’s role this way: “Like the stereotypical athletic coach, you keep pushing, keep pushing, keep pushing to get better.”

An Unexpected Offshoot

Like a shower of sparks from a fire, other progress arose out of the many face-to-face meetings and conversations among PRC leaders.

For example, Matthews found himself building a biracial group of leaders in the area to discuss other community problems – unbelievably, a first for the area.

“We’re friendly, but we really don’t know each other,” said Matthews of local whites and blacks. “We never really talked about community issues, and how to solve some of our community’s problems.”

Matthews and the chairman of the Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College board, a white dairy farmer named Brian Patrick, decided to bring some people together to talk about schools. “He said he’d find 10 whites and I said I’d find 10 blacks,” Matthews related.

As a result of the discussions, Matthews said, the group helped get a referendum passed on raising taxes to build a new high school—Bethune-Bowman School, a handsome brick building that houses kindergarten through 12th grade.

“It’s the first time we’ve had a referendum that will cost the community, and the white community didn’t fight it,” Matthews said.

After PRC Ends

For most PRC sites in the Carolinas, the program winds down this year. But the LO/UD group has been chosen as one of four PRC sites in South Carolina to carry on with an additional year of funding.

Matthews said the board plans to continue all its programs, including all its job training, at the current levels. He also expects some state money to come through, if the state House and governor cooperate. Rural entrepreneurship training will be a major focus, Sturgeon said.

In the meantime, leaders are setting up a new community development

corporation that Matthews hopes will be well-established enough to keep the PRC initiatives going after the additional year of funding ends.

“We want to sustain the model and try to replicate it up and down the I-95 corridor,” he said.

Looking Back

In the big picture, the Program for the Rural Carolinas has lifted dozens of people in Orangeburg and Dorchester counties out of chronic unemployment and into jobs with a future.

Most importantly, it has built a powerful new alliance of black and white local leaders who are re-igniting the area’s moribund economy. In South Carolina, where history has driven a wedge between the races, that’s especially important.

“It’s done more than create jobs,” said Sen. Matthews. “It’s begun to physically bring this community together and have some racial harmony where we can have some discussions. That’s going to be the lasting legacy of The Program for the Rural Carolinas.”