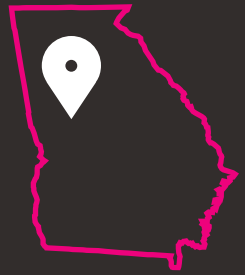


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The Role of Arts-based Economic  
Development Strategies in Rural  
Georgia Communities

# ZEBULON



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## PIKE COUNTY: Using Photography for Preservation and Revitalization

Andrea Noel remembers a conversation she had with her good friend Christine Curry. They were driving down the road lamenting the fact that buildings in Zebulon and neighboring communities in Pike County were being torn down and farmland was being turned into subdivisions.

“She said ‘wouldn’t it be a great idea to use photography to showcase the vanishing South?’” remembers Noel. “I agreed. And the next thing I know I’m knee deep in photographs trying to mount a show in the old high school building downtown. The rest is history.”

And for the last 17 years, Noel, Curry, and four others – they call themselves the “group of six” – have taken the lead in organizing a photography exhibit that showcases the rural South and has helped transform Pike County, located 45 miles south of Atlanta, and the small cities within it. From the very beginning, all proceeds from the show have gone towards preserving historic buildings in Pike County. These shows have brought visitors into Zebulon, Concord and Molena and have spurred growth and enthusiasm in renewing the downtown areas. Here is their story.

### Planning a photography show

After she came up with the idea, Curry gathered her five friends – including Noel – on the porch of her farmhouse and they began sowing the seeds of what would become SlowExposures (SlowE for short). It would be a juried show and they would invite photographers to submit photographs that showcase the “Contemporary Rural South.” Photographers could be from anywhere, but their photographs had to be set in one of 16 southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

“We had 188 entries from four states and 77 images were chosen, representing 40 artists. Jurors selected photographs from slides in a blind entry process. Noel hung the show in a large meeting room in a late 1800’s building that served as Pike County’s first high school.”

– Christine Curry, SlowE exhibit organizer



Photo courtesy of Dale Niles

That first year, they reached out to every friend they had – “anyone we knew who took photographs” says Curry – spreading the word by phone as well as a brochure they put together. They also had help from Atlanta Celebrates Photography, a nationally-ranked photography festival. One of its founding members, Jan Fields, served as one of SlowE’s first jurors.

“We had 188 entries from four states and 77 images were chosen, representing 40 artists,” says Curry. Jurors selected photographs from slides in a blind entry process. Noel hung the show in a large meeting room in a late 1800’s building that served as Pike County’s first high school. Volunteers constructed the display boards and helped with the lighting.

“After the first year, we knew we wanted to keep on going,” Curry says.

It became a bit of trial and error. The first SlowE was held every weekend for a month but they determined it diluted the viewing and burned out the volunteers. They tried different variations of weekends and months before settling on one three-day weekend in September. Curry says they also tried having two separate divisions – one that featured images of Pike and one for images from the southern states.

**“We took an unattractive alley and transformed it. We blew up photos into banners, added landscaping, a wooden fence and pea gravel. We took an eyesore and turned it into a place people wanted to be, and the process we created a yearlong awareness of SlowE.”**

– Beverly Walter, head of the Zebulon Downtown Development Authority (DDA)

“We consolidated after six years to keep it simple and make room for a solo show awarded to the last year’s first prize,” says Curry.

The show still stays at about 75 photographs, but has grown so much that the jurors now have to select photographs from nearly 1,000 submissions. There is also a youth show for budding photographers in grades K-12, which is sponsored by the Pike County Arts Council.

“It really has been slow, steady, incremental growth and now we’re at about 900 entries plus-or-minus every year,” says Curry, noting that in 2019 they received entries from photographers representing 21 states.

While SlowE has expanded beyond anyone’s expectations, one thing that hasn’t changed is the grass roots effort it takes to pull it all together. Curry says it involves about 75 volunteers, many of whom have been volunteering since first show. And with a shortage of lodging options, some even open their homes to jurors and visiting photographers. Andrea Noel still hangs the show every year. The jurors also serve on a volunteer basis.

“It’s a community effort and it has sparked community pride,” says Curry. “We couldn’t get it done without the volunteers – they give of their time, talents and even their homes.”

The show is paid for through grants, sponsors and contributions. A \$50 entry fee is also collected from the photographers.

“We’ve always done SlowE with our fingers crossed,” Curry says. “We’ve been the recipient of a grant from the Georgia Council for the Arts that’s been a lifesaver. We have loyal local businesses and ‘Friends of SlowE’ who contribute.”

One challenge they have is capitalizing on the benefits of SlowE beyond the one weekend in September. Four years ago, they developed an Artist in Residence program in which photographers apply to spend a week focusing on a project about the rural south. Curry selects two photographers and they stay in an Airbnb she owns.

“It gives them a reason to come to Zebulon and Pike County,” she says. “We get a lot of repeat artists.”

Through a tourism product development grant, the city of Zebulon created the Southside Photo Walk.

“We took an unattractive alley and transformed it,” says Beverly Walter, the head of the Zebulon Downtown Development Authority (DDA). “We blew up photos into banners, added landscaping, a wooden fence and pea gravel. We took an eyesore and turned it into a place people wanted to be, and in the process we created a yearlong awareness of SlowE.”



Photos courtesy of Dale Niles

### Preserving Pike County's buildings

From day one, historic preservation has been at the heart of SlowE. The show is always held in one of the county's historic buildings in order to "highlight their usefulness and potential for repurposing it in the 21st century," Curry says. And the committee always picks one building as the recipient of a donation of profits from each show.

Donations from SlowE – usually between \$2,000 and \$8,000 a year – are made to Pike Historic Preservation (PHP) Inc., a 501(c)3 that was started a few years before SlowE. Curry calls it the official "parent organization" of SlowE. These funds have allowed the organization to restore historic buildings with the hopes that they can be brought back to life for another use.

The Whiskey Bond Barn - believed to have been built around 1870 – is one of those buildings. Back in the day, whiskey bonding barns were used as warehouses to store whiskey as it aged. The PHP saved, restored and repurposed the county's Whiskey Bonding Barn and financed its sale to a local family-based event firm. It is now used for weddings, parties and other gatherings.



Photos courtesy of Dale Niles

**“It’s important to preserve a part of the town’s history. Having SlowE in the building not only gives visitors a view of the history, but it also brings people to Concord.”**

– John Strickland, Mayor of Concord

The PHP is partnering with the Zebulon DDA to restore the old Zebulon School building, which was built in 1926 and closed in 1979. According to Walter, the building was literally falling in. It has taken nearly 20 years, but renovations are close to starting, with plans to turn it into a boutique hotel. Zebulon DDA has been piecing together a mix of funding, including community donations, state and federal funding sources, and historic tax credits. A new roof has already been installed, and plans call for the six classrooms to be turned into 13 hotel rooms. The old auditorium will house a bar, restaurant and event space. Curry and Walter say the project should be finished in mid 2020.

Besides preserving the older buildings, SlowE has served as the catalyst to improving downtowns. The square in downtown Zebulon is lined with businesses around the perimeter – including Curry’s bookstore “A Novel Experience.” At the center is the Pike County Courthouse – rumored to be the oldest working courthouse in the state. Dan Dunnahoo, a retired high school art teacher and head of the Pike County Arts Council, is renovating a former insurance office into a coffee shop.

For the last several years, SlowE has been staged at the old Strickland’s building in nearby Concord. The Strickland family settled in Concord in 1887 and built a thriving family business, and this building was at the heart of it where they processed cotton and fertilizer and on the main floor housed a general store. John Strickland, part of the family’s fifth generation, held on to the business until 1992 and when it closed, gave the building to the city of Concord. It is now used for events.

“It’s important to preserve a part of the town’s history,” says Strickland, who now serves as the town’s mayor. “Having SlowE in the building not only gives visitors a view of the history, but it also brings people to Concord.” He admits that Concord is still a work in progress as they try to bring new businesses, but having a reason to come into the city is a big help.

“Tourism is a great economic development tool, and with SlowE and the things we are doing with the arts throughout the year, people have a reason to come to Pike County.”

- Beverly Walter, head of the Zebulon Downtown Development Authority (DDA)

Molena - just a few miles away - is also undergoing a transition. One block was snapped up by a businessman from out of town who came to SlowExposures. He has leased every building and the town now has a bed and breakfast with a restaurant and several boutiques.

Walter says there are still challenges in these towns that they are hoping to address. For example, there are no “white table cloth” restaurants, and lodging has always been a challenge. But she’s hopeful that all of that is changing.

“Tourism is a great economic development tool,” she says. “And with SlowE and the things we are doing with the arts throughout the year, people have a reason to come to Pike County. They need places to eat, places to shop, something interesting to look at and a place to sleep. You need a critical mass of these things, and we are almost there.”



Photos courtesy of Dale Niles