

Entrepreneurial Rural Communities National Case Studies Series

Eight case studies of entrepreneurial rural communities and a summary report have been developed from presentations and discussions at a National Entrepreneurial Rural Communities Workshop held in Fairfield, Iowa, on June 3, 2005. The series includes:

Report 1: The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in Athens, Ohio

Report 2: Northern Initiatives in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

Report 3: *Tapetes de Lana* Weaving Center, Mora, New Mexico

Report 4: Douglas-Coffee County, Georgia: An Entrepreneur-Friendly Community

Report 5: The IDEA Center Incubator of Tupelo, Mississippi

Report 6: North Iowa Area Community College Entrepreneur and Capital Networks

Report 7: AgVentures Alliance: An Entrepreneurial Value-Added Agriculture Network

Report 8: Fairfield, Iowa: The Emergence of a Serial Entrepreneurial Community

Report 9: Reflections on Local, State and Federal Policies to Support Entrepreneurs

Supplement: *"Entrepreneurial Community Ecosystems..."* by Sohodojo

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The National Entrepreneurial Rural Communities Workshop and Case Study Project was sponsored by Farm Foundation. The case studies were edited by Sue Lambertz, Sandra Burke, Becky Johnson, and Mark Edelman of the Community Vitality Center, Iowa State University. The workshop was organized by Burt Chojnowski, past President of Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association. Companion PowerPoint presentations are available for download from the CVC web site: www.cvcia.org. Video excerpts recorded by Fairfield Public Access Community television (FPAC) and are being made available at <http://www.brainbelt.com>.

Report 3: *Tapetes de Lana* Weaving Center in Mora, New Mexico

by Carla Gomez, Founder, *Tapetes de Lana*

Tapetes de Lana is a weaving center located in Mora, New Mexico, a town of 5,000 people. The territory covers 2000 square miles and Mora has become the genesis for a significant development project which includes a textile processing plant, textile business, an art center, a pottery studio, and a community based mill, with plans to expand into a theater and a rural development center.

It all started as a dream of one person with a love of weaving and a desire to offer welfare families alternative job opportunities and training for a unique skill. Carla Gomez weaved an entire industry from humble beginnings in a one room schoolhouse, with \$20,000 in start-up funds and a newly formed non-profit.

She used the grant funds to purchase textiles and her first weavers made their products out of their homes. *Tapetes de Lana* would purchase these products and re-sell them to customers at the one room school house, converted into a make-shift shop.

The weavers build their own looms out of scrap 2x4s and use all natural dyes. The wool is dyed by hand outside in big tubs and then dried on lines outside of the building. The final products are wool quilts that range from the very basic to more intricate designs. Contrary to what Gomez initially expected, many of her primary weavers and employees are men.

Tapetes de Lana quickly outgrew the school house. With a growing market, there was an increased need to have weavers in a production and retail shop. She began looking for a new place to accommodate the changing needs of the business. Sitting on a corner in the small rural town of Mora was an empty building of 11,000 square feet that stood next to a historic adobe house, a theater, and a hotel. The properties took up one entire block and had been vacated by its prior owners. The corner had become an empty void in the community.

Tapetes de Lana purchased the property and began renovations with a grant from USDA Rural Development for \$302,000. All labor has been provided by the locals and the vision for the community is to use it to bring a vision of rural living to life – raising sheep, shearing the wool, spinning it into yarns, dying it and making the final textiles.

As the business grew, new possibilities for revenue streams presented themselves. Specialized alpaca wool is high-value wool that requires special handling to keep the alpaca strands separate from other wools. Much of the alpaca wool has been in storage due to the lack of a facility with capability for spinning it. *Tapetes de Lana* is working with the alpaca breeders to process their wool, offering a capacity to spin 2,000 – 4,000 pounds of wool a day.

With most successful operations, solving space and capacity issues are more easily addressed than addressing competitors that object to public funding for private ventures. *Tapetes de Lana* met the challenge head on. Gathering all of the mills together to talk about collaborations, the participants reached a conclusion that most textile businesses were moving to Egypt, China and other countries. But by working together, they could help the New Mexico textile industry to survive and they concluded that they could compete by creating their own niches and synergies in advertising collectively, etc.

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The weavers continue to look for ways to add value to their products and to remain competitive. They are learning how to weave various kinds of yarn, offering services for a fee, adding new product lines, developing brand identification, and providing the story of the product for customers. Telling the story to customers about where the product is from and how it became the quilt or blanket is very important to the marketing process. It builds customer loyalty and helps to expand the market. The weavers also describe the concepts being implemented or under development to paint the picture of the faces behind the product.

Tapetes de Lana is an example of the power of one person with a dream, a desire to make a difference and willingness to take a risk. For rural America, one entrepreneur can be the catalyst to rejuvenate an entire community.

For more information on the Internet see:

www.tapetesdelana.com