



Reinvigorating interest in Laurel's downtown started with building a more positive perception among residents and businesses.

One downtown's comeback

A revitalization story with Mallorie and Jim Rasberry and Josh Nowell of Laurel, Mississippi.

By Shelby Fiegel

At the 2019 Community Development Institute (CDI), Mallorie and Jim Rasberry and Josh Nowell of Laurel, Mississippi, shared their “downtown comeback” story as keynote speakers at the 33rd annual institute. Mallorie, Jim, and Josh are known for their recurring roles on the HGTV series *Home Town*, a home renovation series that focuses on the restoration of historic homes in Laurel, and are business partners of the Laurel Mercantile and the Scotsman General Store.

As residents and business owners in Laurel, they utilized community-wide preservation, promotion, and economic development efforts to revitalize their hometown, and they shared insights with our staff at the University of Central Arkansas about their journey.

CDI: As a resident and business owner in Laurel, what sparked your interest in restoring your downtown?

Josh Nowell: For us, the fact that we chose to live in Laurel meant that we didn't have a choice when it came to improving our city. It was important for our families that our time and resources be spent [improving] our place as much as they were spent

on our businesses. I mean, we do the same thing for our homes, so why wouldn't we do it for our city? Sometimes people think that in order to be successful in business, you have to sacrifice time volunteering to build your community. We discovered that there doesn't have to be separation between business success and town success. The two are intertwined and support one another. In fact, if you look at successful



entrepreneurs, it is often difficult to tell if their city made them or if they made their city.

What are some first steps communities can take in an effort to revitalize their downtown?

Jim Rasberry: The good news is any town can experience a revitalization if downtown residents, merchants, and supporters are willing to get their hands dirty, meaning that everyone brings value and there has to be an inclusive team atmosphere to bring everyone together. A game plan is important but having everyone on the same team is paramount to being successful.

How do you generate buy-in and interest from current downtown businesses and citizens in revitalization efforts?

Jim: Realizing everyone brings value and providing a way to share each other's vision for what your downtown can be. Let everyone have a voice and agree on the action plan. Making sure everyone has a voice in the direction of the revitalization effort is very important.

Mallorie Rasberry: One of the hardest things we had to do in the beginning was bringing pride back to our community. Before we could even think about telling anyone else about how wonderful we thought Laurel was, we had to get the local folks to believe in and be proud of their own community. We did this by rebranding the downtown district—new logos, new signage (when we could afford it), hosted events. But the most powerful thing we did was speaking positively about the downtown area as often as possible. We started changing the perception of downtown one conversation at a time. Positivity is a powerful thing.

What resources have you used as you restore historic places?

Mallorie: We've utilized our state and federal tax incentives as well as our city's tax abatement program. For any new developers out there, the earlier you start the conversation/application process with your local, state, and federal programs the better. Most of these programs have strict requirements, so it's best to get all of this information beforehand so there are no surprises. We also have a facade grant fund that we created within our Main Street Program: 25 percent of monies raised through all of our fundraising (mainly in the form of downtown events and festivals) goes into this matching fund, and any business or building owner can apply to get reimbursed up to \$5,000 of any improvement they do to the exterior of their building. We all know that cash flow is paramount to



From left, Josh Nowell and Mallorie and Jim Rasberry, HGTV hosts and proud Laurel residents.

a small business owner so no matter the scale of the project it's a big deal for [our local business owners] to invest in the way their buildings look. We want to support and encourage them as much as possible. We are also working to utilize the new federal program for Opportunity Zones. We recommend any community that is starting this revitalization process to research Opportunity Zones. If any of your downtown's footprint is in one of these zones, it's a game-changer for attracting investors.

What other pieces of advice would you give to a community looking to create their own "downtown comeback?"

Mallorie: Don't try to be something you're not. Laurel spent many years trying to reinvent ourselves. The same can be said about a lot of struggling communities out there. True change didn't happen in Laurel until we started embracing our strengths and telling our story. Authenticity brings sustainability. It doesn't happen overnight; it's taken us every bit of 12 years to get to where we are today and we still have so much left to do. Stay with it, stay positive, and celebrate every victory, no matter how small.

To learn more about Mallorie, Jim, and Josh visit www.downtowncomeback.com. To learn more about the Community Development Institute visit www.uca.edu/cdi.



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