



Alive After 5 is an initiative started by small business owners in Helena-West Helena to encourage residents to buy local.

## Be local—Buy local

By Shelby Fiegel

A commercial that’s recently been circulating the airwaves perfectly sums up the importance of small businesses in our communities in one line: “Support the businesses that make your town a community, the people who make your community home.” Small businesses are essential to generating success within our communities. Without them our cities would lack uniqueness, personality, character, and charm (not to mention the economic benefits they provide).

According to the 2016 Small Business Profile released by the U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 96.6 percent of businesses in Arkansas are considered small businesses, with those small businesses employing 48.7 percent of Arkansas employees. Based on these numbers, there is no denying that small businesses are critically important to our local economies and are the backbone of our state.

When you buy from independent, locally owned businesses, significantly more of your money stays in your community, which strengthens your community’s economic base. Communities that encourage entrepreneurship and are made up of citizens that support local businesses tend to have thriving economies.

Though it may seem clear that we all need to do our part to support small businesses, sometimes we can overlook or take for granted valuable small business assets in our communities. To avoid this, our duty as community

and economic development professionals is to encourage our fellow citizens to think, shop, and buy local. There are a variety of ways to inspire those in our communities to shop local: shop local campaigns, giveaways and promotions, participating in Small Business Saturday, ribbon cuttings or special shopping events. Many communities throughout Arkansas are doing their part to cultivate small business support through such venues.

In Helena-West Helena, two local downtown merchants—Jordan Yancey, owner of Bella, and Cathy Campbell, owner of Handworks—have taken it upon themselves to kick start an initiative aimed at reeling in customers to local small businesses. The two have developed Alive After 5, held on the first Thursday of each month from 5 to 8 p.m. on historic Cherry Street in downtown. Alive After 5 brings together retail shops and restaurants to offer special shopping promotions and live music.

“The reason we decided to start Alive After 5 was because usually at 5 p.m. Cherry Street becomes a ghost town,” Yancey said. “With the addition of two new restaurants and new retail shops we wanted to give people an incentive to come downtown after dark. We all enjoy Alive After 5 because merchants and restaurants offer specials and there is also great live music. We want people to feel safe and enjoy everything that downtown has to offer. I think it has helped downtown businesses engage with Helena residents on a new level. We are

hoping it will draw people from outside of Helena to venture downtown!”

In Arkadelphia, the Arkadelphia Alliance and Area Chamber of Commerce holds a Spend It To Win It contest during the holiday season. Residents who shop at local Chamber of Commerce businesses are able to turn in their receipts on purchases of at least \$250 to the Chamber of Commerce to enter a drawing to win \$250 in cash. The Chamber also partners with local media stations to announce the grand prize winner.

Merrytime in Magnolia is a new shop local event developed by the Magnolia-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce that will be held from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. on December 9 and 10. The event’s goal is to entice Magnolia residents to stay in the city during a busy holiday weekend to partake in fun activities and shop at downtown businesses. Activities community members can partake in include ice skating, a gingerbread cookie contest, and much more. Magnolia Arts will also premiere their holiday play beginning at 7 p.m. each night. To entice shoppers, local businesses also offer free holiday gift wrapping.

“I think that creating shop local initiatives are important because our local merchants are the ones that are giving back to our children and our community,” said

Ellie Baker, director of the Magnolia-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce. “They are on the front lines and invest heavily in our city. Small businesses keep our community unique and thriving.”

Many cities across the state also partake in Small Business Saturday, a day dedicated to supporting small businesses across the country. Founded by American Express in 2010, this day is celebrated each year on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Those that participate in Small Business Saturday can elect to champion their own local campaign or utilize the free marketing tools available on the Small Business Saturday website. Free custom downloadable marketing materials are available online to use for social networks, websites and storefronts. Even the smallest communities can promote their small businesses by participating. Learn more about how your city can participate in Small Business Saturday at [www.shopsmall.com](http://www.shopsmall.com).



*Shelby Fiegel is Assistant Director, University of Central Arkansas, Center for Community and Economic Development.*

