



PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF RUSSELLVILLE

#CommUNITY: How Russellville is coming together through a crisis

By Dylan Edgell

We are in difficult and unprecedented times. Our country is in the midst of a public health crisis that has led to millions of Americans losing their jobs and the health of our communities coming into jeopardy. Our small businesses are suffering from the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and are at risk of having to permanently shut their doors. Local businesses serve as the backbone of our communities by providing jobs as well as places to eat, shop and gather. We have never faced an issue like this in our lifetimes, but one Arkansas community found a way to come together in the face of this crisis.

Main Street Russellville Executive Director Danielle Housenick had a decision to make. The COVID-19 pandemic was getting serious in the United States, and social distancing measures began impacting the small business community.

“When I started seeing these guidelines come in, I started to think about what I could do for downtown,” Housenick said. The organization had \$9,000 left in their downtown revitalization grant fund and she, along with the board of directors at Main Street Russellville, decided to spend that money directly on downtown businesses to help stimulate the local economy. They bought lunches for first responders and health care workers, as well as gift cards that they would give away on social media to Russellville citizens to generate exposure.



At the same time, *River Valley Now*, a local online news site, was looking for a way to give back to the community. The executive board had a meeting to talk about new issues facing their community. According to Production Manager Mattie Lasiter, “We knew that there were going to be places in town that would not make it. It would be the worst thing if we make it through this but our favorite businesses didn’t.”

River Valley Now began to reach out to community leaders about what they could do and decided to team up with Main Street Russellville for a joint effort. The #CommUNITY campaign is a way for the citizens of Russellville to support their local businesses and develop a renewed sense of community during this uncertain time. According to their website, the purpose of the

#CommUNITY campaign is to “unite our community and band together for a common purpose: support our local economy.” Community members are invited to shop at the online store and purchase t-shirts, mugs, stickers or a bundle of the items, which feature a logo that says “#CommUNITY: You Can Make A Difference.”

All the products sold on this site are locally made and 100 percent of the profits from the store go to support local businesses. To date, the #CommUNITY campaign has raised over \$23,000 through the sale of products on their website as well as donations from community members and larger businesses.

Russellville Mayor Richard Harris thinks that efforts like these can go a long way. “These initiatives are an encouragement to the community and reflect the compassion that exists for our local business partners,” he said. “Our local businesses have been paying it forward for many years by sponsoring our children’s sports activities, contributing to local nonprofits and supporting community projects. Now is the time for the community to pay it back.”

Housenick was very happy with what she saw but was not surprised. “I knew the community would rally,” she said. “I’m not originally from here, but when we

moved to Russellville, we had our new neighbors coming to help us move in. I think this is unique to our community and to Arkansas. We tend to come together.”

We have never experienced anything like the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this global health crisis will be long lasting and, in some cases, permanent. The only way to get through a crisis like this is to go through it together and to continue developing the social fabric of our communities. The #CommUNITY campaign in Russellville is a great example of how one Arkansas community found a way to come together virtually, build community during this uncertain time and provide real relief to its small businesses when they need it most.

You can learn more about or participate in the #CommUNITY campaign at river-valley-community.myshopify.com.



Dylan Edgell is the assistant director for the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Learn more about CCED at www.uca.edu/cced.



ETC Engineers & Architects, Inc.

1510 S. Broadway, Little Rock, AR 72202 • (501) 375-1786
www.etcengineersinc.com



Architecture • Public Buildings • Parks Planning and Design
Stormwater • Hydraulic Modeling • Water & Wastewater Systems
Street and Drainage Designs • Aquatic Parks

Batesville Community Center