

Patrick Whitfill had never even driven through South Carolina when he decided to come to Spartanburg in 2008. “I understood that when I made the decision to be a ‘career poet’ I would be rootless,” the west Texas writer with a Ph.D. explains. “But this was a chance to plant some roots and get accustomed to a place.”

What drew Whitfill to Spartanburg, a city of less than 40,000? It was the ground-breaking Hub City Writers Project with its thriving program of arts, cultural events and outreach that’s unlike anything in the region.

The grassroots project started modestly in 1995, when a handful of writers gathered in a Spartanburg coffee shop. “Our goal was community building through literature,” explains Betsy Teter, the group’s founder. Teter, along with John Lane and Gary Henderson, wanted to pay tribute to the town’s history as a railroad hub in the early 1900s. They modeled their literary efforts after Depression-era work projects that employed writers to document the American experience. Soon, the first book was born: *Hub City Anthology: Spartanburg Writers and Artists*.

The HCWP began branching into fiction, poetry, history, nature writing and humor. But they didn’t simply produce books and wait for people to notice; they hosted lively book-launch events that drew traffic-clogging crowds. They convinced local shopkeepers to sell the books in hardware stores, beauty salons and restaurants. They solicited corporate support and sold books “out of our car trunks,” Teter wrote in 1998.

National attention followed as media from *Southern Living* to *The New York Times* took note of the nontraditional publisher that was prospering in an unexpected corner of the Carolinas. The HCWP continued to grow, harnessing the power of place.



HUB-BUB In the Hub City

*How the “Write Stuff”
Is Revitalizing a Southern Community*

By Amy Rogers





ALL PHOTOS BY STEPHEN LONG/COURTESY HUB CITY WRITERS PROJECT

HUB-BUB art openings at the Showroom often draw hundreds of people to a once-forgotten area of Spartanburg's downtown. This space also hosts music, readings, theater and film. The Hub City Writers Project Publications Board (below left) make decisions about what books to publish. Below right: Two spoken-word artists entertain during a poetry "slam."

Though Whitfill and the other artists who soon would make their way to Spartanburg couldn't have known it back then, local officials took steps in 2004 that would lead to nothing less than an arts renaissance for the community. The City Council was studying how to revitalize the town, and they learned it would be good business to attract and retain painters, photographers, sculptors and other creative professionals. City leaders started imagining Spartanburg as something more: an art destination for visitors.

"We wanted to find partners, but we didn't have to re-invent the wheel or create a bureaucracy," says Mayor William Barnet III. And so the next phase of Spartanburg's arts evolution naturally pointed back to the group that had been the original trailblazer: the Hub City Writers Project.

Implementing and managing decisive growth can be daunting for a grassroots organization, even a successful one. Spartanburg investors became interested in an abandoned warehouse in the South Daniel Morgan neighborhood, near the old Spartan Grain silos. The three-story brick structure was built in the 1920s and had housed a Nash Rambler auto dealership. The building was ripe for restoration, and with that came the birth of HCWP's sister organization, HUB-BUB.

"A 'hub-bub' is a loud noise of many voices," Teter explains. It's a clever concept and one that broad-



ens public awareness. “We wanted to have the guts to energize and nurture the creative juices we’ve had for generations,” Barnet says.

“The Hub City Writers Project had a track record of nontraditional creative activities,” Teter notes. In that spirit, HUB-BUB established itself as a gathering place for art exhibits, film, theater and live music at “The Showroom.” In a typical week, a visitor can participate in a writing workshop, hear a gallery talk or attend a CD release party.

A key component of HUB-BUB is the Artist in Residence program (AIR). Each year, three emerging artists and one writer are selected to live, work and create in studio apartments above The Showroom. The 11-month residencies are very competitive; participants receive stipends in addition to lodging and must contribute 15-20 hours a week toward HUB-BUB events or projects.

Resident Patrick Whitfill “was shocked at how much more there was to it than I had assumed or conceptualized.” He was drawn to Spartanburg for its focus on place but was impressed when he felt the excitement from the community. “In other small towns, if you want to seek out something cultural you have to leave. But in Spartanburg you have the opportunity to invest yourself in a cultural center.” Others agree; this year’s residents came from Chicago, St. Louis, Kentucky and Kansas.

Together, the HCWP and HUB-BUB form HubCulture, Inc. Teter is its executive director. Advisory boards and staffers are crucial to managing all the day-to-day and long-range details. But Mayor Barnet still firmly believes in the power of intuition and the energy that “bubbles up” in creative professionals. “If we give them resources they can do great things. Betsy’s leadership is essential.”

To date, the publishing project has produced 38 titles, pub-



HUB-BUB artists in residence for 2009-10, from left: Jameelah Lang, Esteban del Valle, Greg Bae and Claudia Dishon.

lished nearly 250 writers and sold 65,000 books. It’s inspired writers in other cities to undertake publishing efforts of their own.

The once-decrepit building that houses HUB-BUB is now home to a European-style restaurant, Brasserie Ecosse. Other area development is in the works. “It’s on the leading edge of an entertainment district that Spartanburg has always dreamed of,” Teter says. “And it all

began with a group of writers at a coffee shop who wanted to restore a community’s sense of itself.” ❖

Amy Rogers is the author of Hungry for Home: Stories of Food From Across the Carolinas and a founder of Novello Festival Press in Charlotte. She credits the Hub City Writers Project for helping empower Charlotte writers to begin their own community-based publishing project.



This article is sponsored in part by:
* **City of Spartanburg**

The Hub City Writers Project has received many awards, including two prestigious IPPYs from *Independent Publisher* magazine. The first was in 1998 when *New Southern Harmonies* was named best short fiction collection in North America. In 2006, *South of Main* received an IPPY as best multicultural nonfiction title for adults in North America.

Hub City won the 2005 Palmetto Book Award, which recognizes individuals or organizations that promote the literary arts in South Carolina. Hub City in 2002 earned the Governor’s Elizabeth O’Neill Verner Award, the top award given for the arts in South Carolina. In 2006, it received the Governor’s Award for the Humanities.

For more information, see www.hubcity.org.