



LET'S PAINT THE TOWN

Three years ago, Kentucky documentary filmmaker Sam Koltinsky shot footage of downtown Princeton for a project he was working on about Caldwell County. When he viewed the footage, however, he was dismayed. Although he had tried numerous locations and angles, the results were uniformly unattractive.

What the unflinching eye of the camera had shown were peeling paint, boarded-up windows, and faded aluminum siding on the once-proud historic buildings Koltinsky remembered. Having recently moved back to Princeton after 30 years, he found this decay difficult to accept. "When I started looking at the footage, it occurred to me that it was not in the best interest of the community to show it in this light," he said.

Although he was raised in Jackson, Tenn., Koltinsky had roots in Princeton that went back four generations. His grandfather ran a store downtown, and he visited regularly as a child

Jamie Wells, president of the Greenville Tourism Commission, helps uncover a historic sign painted on the front of a building. Pictured on the opposite page is just one block of several that have been in the Let's Paint the Town project.





Far left, Nancy Newsom, owner of Newsom's Old Mill Store in Princeton. Let's Paint the Town volunteers repainted the outside of her store. Left, Bobby Flener, 8, of Greenville was the youngest volunteer.

and attended his last two years of high school there. "During that time, of course, the town was vibrant. We had businesses, we had restaurants," he said. "And I missed it when I came back here to live."

Fueled by his love for the community, he came up with a plan. He was impressed by the progress that had already been made restoring certain buildings and redoing the downtown's streetlights and sidewalks. While there was clearly an interest in historic preservation in Princeton, it needed focus and direction, he realized.

Koltinsky met with Mayor Gale Cherry and other members of the Main Street Renaissance Committee, and the Let's Paint the Town project was born.

The concept of Let's Paint the Town is simple. Volunteers provide labor to strip away unsightly renovations and aging paint from the façades of buildings and refinish them in historically accurate colors. Building owners pay for only the paint, which is provided at a discount. Other materials and supplies are donated. The result is a pro-

gram that can be funded by the community and produce maximum results in a relatively short period of time.

First, Koltinsky consulted with Mark Dennen, executive director of the Kentucky Heritage Council. Dennen visited Princeton and looked at each building to be included in the project's initial phase, giving technical advice about correct methods of preparation and historical accuracy.

As the project got started, Let's Paint the Town gained momentum, attracting volunteers and sponsors of all ages and from all walks of life. Since the first "Paint Day" in spring 2006, when a dozen volunteers restored the façade of a local flower shop, the program has refurbished 50 business fronts, raised more than \$65,000 in private and public donations from more than 120 sponsors, put in more than 6,000 volunteer hours, and reduced the vacancy rate downtown from 12 buildings to one. The project also has won several statewide awards, including the Kentucky League of Cities Enterprise Award, the Kentucky

Community History Award from the Kentucky Historical Society, and the Ida Lee Willis Memorial Foundation's Preservation Award.

According to Cherry, Let's Paint the Town has been instrumental in bringing Princeton's residents together and fostering a sense of ownership in the community through volunteerism. "And the community has really jumped on board with this, absolutely," she explained. "So I think what has happened is that we have set a new expectation for the community, given them hope."

Nearby Greenville launched a Let's Paint the Town project of its own in October 2008 after hearing about Princeton's success. Four building façades have been refurbished, and the town is enthusiastic about the prospect of further restoration. "The whole spirit of this community is in revival," said Jamie Wells, president of the Greenville Tourism Commission. "People are excited about it. People have come up and said, 'Thank you, we've wanted something like this for a

long time.' It's just getting everything to come together. The people have brought it together."

Let's Paint the Town has also had a significant economic impact on downtown Princeton. Besides reducing the vacancy rate with new businesses locating downtown, the revitalization has encouraged further investment. Attorney Todd Wetzell recently restored the interior of the law office he purchased that was painted by Let's Paint the Town volunteers. "The appearance of downtown definitely makes you want to be here," he said. "It would have been a lot easier to go out and try to get some space in one of the strip centers or even build a new structure, but I wanted to be downtown."

Nancy Newsom, owner of Newsom's Old Mill Store in Princeton, believes downtown revitalization is key to developing and maintaining tourism in small towns. She said Let's Paint the Town has made a distinct difference in the number of visitors to Princeton. "Last Christmas, I saw an influx of people that I've never seen before," she said. "You can build on your history, and people are interested in it."

As word about Princeton has spread, more than 45 communities across Kentucky have initiated or are planning Let's Paint the Town projects. In a partnership program with Let's Paint the Town, Tour Southern and Eastern Kentucky, a Somerset-based tourism organization, has awarded grants over the past two years to 42 towns to initiate their own programs.

In March, Let's Paint the Town went national when Koltinsky and representatives from Princeton and Greenville were invited to present a session at the National Main Streets Conference in Chicago. So far, more than 20 communities from California to New Jersey have decided to start Let's Paint the Town projects after attending the session.

"It's really nice to have this type of response so quickly after the session in Chicago," Koltinsky said. And he is delighted the idea is catching on across Kentucky and the nation: "I think we have a spirit here in this community today that is very different than it was three years ago. At the end of the day we felt it wasn't just painting and putting in new glass and taking off the wood or vinyl. It's people helping people and creating a better place and changing the spirit of the community."

—LUANNE CERVELLI



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