

*The Rural FES framework of "earn it, keep it, grow it" helps families increase their income, stabilize their finances, build assets and wealth. Twenty-five practitioners from across the country, who are working on RuFES strategies in their own communities, recently traveled to Arkansas to visit the Southern Good Faith Fund and its partners. The site visit gave them the opportunity to see, first-hand, the innovative efforts underway to build family economic success in the Mississippi Delta. It also provided an opportunity to share questions and ideas with their peers and learn valuable lessons to help fine-tune their efforts at home.*

## **Learning From Successes in the Mississippi Delta**

The 90-minute drive south from the Memphis airport to Helena-West Helena, Arkansas, takes you through three states—Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas—in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. The horizons are broad, the land is flat, and the small white puffs tumbling across the highway and collecting in clusters at the edge of the road are not escaped styrofoam packing peanuts, but cotton bolls. Real cotton.

This is the land of the blues, barbeque, southern hospitality, and deep-seated poverty. The contrasts are stark and inescapable. Beautiful, gracious turn-of-the-century mansions in Helena sit in close proximity to tumbled-down shacks and rusted-out cars. The fascinating Delta Cultural Center's Blues Museum, housing *King Biscuit Time*, the longest-running daily blues radio show in the U.S., is just down the street from boarded-up shells of buildings in the once-prosperous downtown. The region's proud history is matched by its deep and daunting problems.

Helena-West Helena was chosen as the location for a recent Rural Family Economic Success (RuFES) Site Visit because of the remarkable work of the Southern Good Faith Fund (SGFF) and its partners, regional nonprofits that are working to increase the incomes and assets of poor families in rural Arkansas and Mississippi. The Southern Good Faith Fund and its parent bank holding company, Southern Bancorp, have important lessons to share with others who are working to lift up struggling rural families and communities across the country.

Eleven two-person teams from ten states participated in the site visit. These included: Florida, Hawai'i, Iowa, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon (two teams), Pennsylvania, Texas and Vermont. At least one member of each team had previously participated in a RuFES Institute, thus attaining "alumni" status. There also were guest participants from several other states, and local participants from Arkansas. The site visit was planned and moderated by Janet Topolsky, John Molinaro and Kelly Malone, from the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG).

### **SGFF and Southern Bancorp Use RuFES Framework to Organize Efforts**

The purpose of the visit was to study how SGFF and its partners are very effectively using the Casey Foundation's RuFES framework of "*Earn It*," "*Keep It*," and "*Grow It*," to link and integrate their programs and services. The site visit provided time to learn from the experiences of SGFF and then for participants to exchange ideas, review their

own progress in light of what they were observing and learning, and refine their action plans to take back home.

SGFF was started in 1988 as a microloan fund modeled after the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. It is part of the multi-pronged strategy of Southern Bancorp to help transform rural economies by investing in people, jobs, businesses and property. SGFF works in a multi-county area in Arkansas and Mississippi, and has offices in Jefferson and Phillips County, Arkansas. The challenges are great: Jefferson County has a 21 percent poverty rate (31 percent for African Americans), and Phillips County has a poverty rate of 33 percent (45 percent for African Americans).

SGFF was first introduced to the *Earn It, Keep It, Grow It* framework at a RuFES Institute, cosponsored by Casey and the National Rural Funders Collaborative, and organized by Aspen CGS, held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in December 2004. The organization's president, Angela Duran, and four of her colleagues who also were at the meeting immediately saw that they were already working in all three goal areas, but their efforts were playing out in separate silos.

They knew that the framework would help them better understand and explain how their programs are interrelated, would help to construct bridges between program areas, and bring new energy and synergy to their work. Their four SGFF program areas—Asset Builders, Business Development Center, Career Pathways and Public Policy—easily lent themselves to the approach. Duran and her staff returned to Arkansas and retooled their thinking and program interactions using the RuFES rubric.

### **Career Pathways Program Helps Residents Increase and Stabilize Their Income**

During the recent site visit, SGFF program managers from each of these four areas explained their work and described how they tweaked and expanded their efforts in accordance with the RuFES framework to better help families reach and maintain financial stability and success. They also pointed out where they had struggled, the things they should have done differently, and important lessons they learned along the way. Site visit attendees relished the chance to pick up new ideas, compare their experiences, and to get advice from SGFF staff and other site visit teams, who labor in a similar vineyard.

The Career Pathways program at SGFF helps residents to *Earn It*, by connecting them with jobs that pay good wages or helping them get the developmental education they need to begin moving forward on a job track. It began as a pilot project between SGFF and Southeast Arkansas College, with the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges and local Phillips Community College soon joining as key partners in the program. It works closely with employers, to identify their workforce needs and the skills they are looking for. Career pathways have been developed in business, behavioral health, education, emergency medicine, industrial maintenance, manufacturing, nursing/allied health and welding.

Students in the Pathways program can earn certificates of proficiency, technical certificates, or associate's degrees. "Bridge" programs are offered to help students transition from one program to another and to bring their skills to the level required for the next step. Students, employers and program managers all agree that a critical component of the Pathways success is the range of support services that are available to students, including individual assessments, counseling, job placement, and help with challenges like transportation, child care and financial aid.

Nearly 820 students have graduated from the Career Pathways program and approximately 600 are currently enrolled. The job placement rate for 2006 was 87 percent, including both students who stepped into jobs and those who moved to the next educational step. The six-month job retention rate is 80 percent. The Career Pathways program has been replicated at community colleges across the state.

### **Business Development and Financial Services Support Opportunity and Financial Stability**

SGFF's Business Development Center also helps families to *Earn It*. The center provides assistance to residents who want to start businesses and also works to help strengthen existing businesses. Services include: access to financing, business counseling, credit counseling, training classes, technical assistance, and workshops. More than 510 businesses have started, expanded or been retained through the assistance of the Business Development Center, resulting in the creation or retention of more than 880 jobs. In addition, SGFF operates a free tax assistance site, and helps qualified residents to access food stamps and other supports they might need to help fill the gaps while they move toward self-sufficiency.

SGFF utilizes numerous strategies to help residents to *Keep It*. An array of financial services and supports such as financial education, credit counseling, a credit-builder CD, and fairly-priced mortgage loans—through its sister nonprofit, Southern Financial Partners, or other banks—are helping area families to keep more of their hard-earned money. And, the public policy staff at SGFF is working for better regulation of payday lenders in the state.

Many of SGFF's Asset Builder products help families to *Grow It*. Through the matched-savings Individual Development Account (IDA) product, 355 families have met their savings goals, for a total of \$1.3 million in savings and matches. The SEED account (Saving for Education, Entrepreneurship and Homeownership) product has resulted in 75 children and their families saving more than \$100,000 thus far. Credit counseling, homebuyer training and counseling, and other products and services to "bank the unbanked" help families to stabilize their finances and begin to build assets for their future.

## **Re-Energizing Communities and Increasing Policy Emphasis are Critical for Future Progress**

In the meantime, Southern Bancorp, and its affiliate Southern Financial Partners, are working to help the region *Grow It* through a focus on specific geographic areas and strategic investments in targeted anchor communities. Southern believes that anchor communities exert an influence on other smaller communities in a 50-mile radius, and that transformation can be spurred by strengthening these anchor communities to drive regional growth and revitalization.

The Delta Bridge Project in Phillips County, funded by Southern Bancorp and the Walton Family Foundation, is an example of this approach. Over a 13-month period, community residents developed a plan for substantial education, health care, housing, leadership and economic development projects. The intensive planning process required numerous steering committee and goal team meetings, and a high level of engagement by the general public. The resulting Delta Bridge Project has jumpstarted projects such as: Southern Place, a \$1.5 million low-income housing development of 20 apartments; the \$1.6 million Southern loan to help finance the construction of the new KIPP Delta College Preparatory School building; the \$4.5 million Helena Health Foundation/Wellness Center; a \$2 million sweet potato storage and distribution facility; and many others. (To learn more: [www.deltabridgeproject.com](http://www.deltabridgeproject.com))

SGFF is increasingly moving into policy work, which plays into all aspects of building rural family economic success. They recently organized a state-wide coalition of IDA providers, called the Arkansas Assets Coalition, and are working to eliminate the way IDAs and other assets currently can create problems for people trying to qualify for public services. Together with their partners, they work to sustain and increase IDA funding, and share best practices amongst coalition members. They are taking on a broad range of public policy concerns, including payday lending regulation, sub-prime mortgage lending, and a housing trust fund.

## **Site Visit Attendees Return Home with New Ideas and Resources**

The RuFES alumni and newbies who attended the site visit in Helena-West Helena had the chance to see many of the same *Earn It, Keep It, Grow It* strategies playing out in Phillips County and Jefferson County that they are working to advance in their own regions and communities. From roundtable discussions to classroom presentations, from a bus tour of Delta Bridge Project sites to dinner in a lovely historic home, participants learned first-hand about the challenges SGFF faces on a daily basis and how they are addressing those needs. They compared what they were seeing and hearing at SGFF to what they are trying to accomplish at home. And they picked up a wealth of new ideas and approaches as well as an incredibly valuable network of experienced, engaged colleagues.

They left Helena-West Helena inspired, reenergized and ready to—in Janet Topolsky’s words—“keep that RuFES rolling.”