

BLACK BELT TREASURES: GROWING ARTS-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

“The artists we work with include people who want to be artists—either full-time professionals or hobbyists who choose to create art because they like doing it—and those who have to be, who use their artistic skills out of economic necessity,” says Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center Executive Director Sulynn Creswell. The nonprofit Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center (BBTCAC) was formed in 2005 as an outgrowth of an economic development initiative centered on tourism, identifying the region’s tradition of fine arts and heritage crafts as an economic asset that had gone largely unrecognized in earlier economic development studies.

BBTCAC is located in Camden, Alabama, with a satellite gallery located within the Greenville, Alabama Chamber of Commerce. The nonprofit serves 19 counties in Alabama’s Black Belt, named after the rich soil found in the region. BBTCAC fills two niches, serving as both a gallery to market arts and crafts products to local and tourist consumers, and as an arts education organization.

FORMING A VALUE CHAIN OF PARTNERS

BBTCAC serves as the value chain coordinator, developing relationships among organizations, enterprises, and individuals that are connected to the arts. The nonprofit was formed through the work of three of its current support partners: the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Council (a regional planning and development organization serving as the Economic Development District for 12 counties in Alabama), Ala-Tom Resource Conservation & Development Council (a U.S. Department of Agriculture-designated entity serving nine counties), and the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development. Those three organizations had completed an asset-based tourism plan which uncovered artistic talent that had not been addressed in earlier economic development efforts. As a result, Black Belt Treasures was formed as an arts organization and tourism destination to serve counties with high levels of poverty and unemployment.

The support partners continue to participate in the arts and tourism value chain, but many other individuals, organizations, and enterprises have joined in the effort. Artists themselves are a key constituency for Black Belt Treasures. The organization initially worked with 75 artists in its first year,

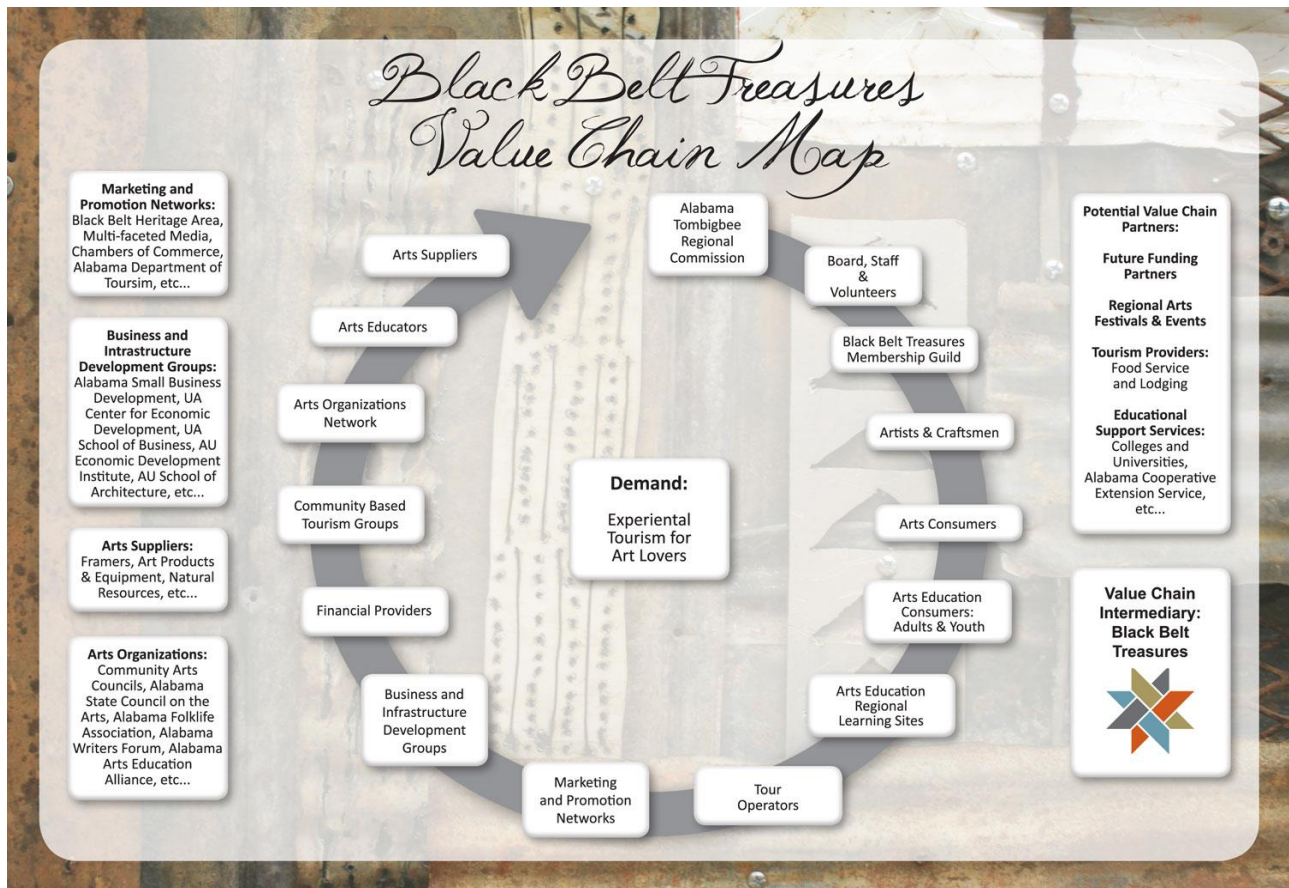


but has grown to represent 450 artists over a decade later. Artists function as “supply partners” who create the arts and crafts products sold in the gallery space and material culture taught through arts education programming. The artists are also “demand partners” accessing the business and artistic training offered by BBTCAC.

Individuals who purchase art and arts education consumers represent “demand” in the value chain. Both kinds of consumers include local demand as well as external demand brought in through tourism.

From the tourism side of the economy, tour operators are a current part of the value chain and can aggregate demand by bringing visitors to BBTCAC. Related sectors such as food and lodging represent potential partnerships as the region explores innovative lodging models that would appeal to the targeted tourist segments. Marketing and promotion networks, business development groups, community tourism groups, and arts-specific networks offer valuable partnerships as well, as do financial providers supporting activities and actors within the value chain. Arts educators and arts suppliers both benefit from engaging with Black Belt Treasures.

Each organization and individual engaged with BBTCAC has a stake in the success of arts-based economic development and tourism, and each brings strengths and information that support other actors operating in this value chain.



BUILDING MULTIPLE CAPITALS

Through the work of the staff, volunteers, board, and partners, BBTCAC is building wealth in multiple forms of capital for artists and communities in their service area. Black Belt Treasures provides the space for works of art to be sold, but the nonprofit positions itself as an educational organization, providing education for the artists themselves, and also instruction and outreach on the Black Belt's traditional and fine arts for the region's children and adults and "experiential learner" tourists.

In their education capacity, the organization's staff and volunteers often make presentations to school groups and civic organizations, meet with community arts organizations, and provide artist demonstrations and workshops. These activities enhance the social capital by celebrating the region's distinct arts, culture, and distinct history. Individual wealth is improved by providing arts instruction to children and adult learners. As a destination for tourists and a market for local collectors, BBTCAC also supports growth in financial capital by increasing the opportunities to import spending from residents of other regions and to circulate dollars locally through local spending on artworks and arts experiences.



To better serve the area's artists and to build financial capital, the organization is working to raise funds to redevelop an unused warehouse into 6,500-square feet of arts incubation space. Once completed, the incubator will help artists to grow their businesses and it will grow the built infrastructure assets of the region. In addition, BBTCAC is working with area colleges and universities to develop an ARTrepreneur certification program, to

enhance the business skills and profitability of the region's artists, including artists who are living on the economic margins. This is central to the efforts to build individual skill sets in specific business and marketing functions. A Black Belt Artisan Guild to recognize Regional Master Artists will be formed, and will entail artists' completing ARTrepreneur certification and a professional peer jury process. The certification and peer jury process enhance the intellectual capital of the region, by improving the stock of knowledge and resourcefulness in the region.

For some artists, the BBTCAC incubator space, ARTrepreneur certification, and Black Belt Artisan Guild are expected to ultimately serve as a pathway to gain the skills and name recognition to ultimately "graduate" from BBTCAC's gallery to retail spaces of their own or shared among a small group of artists. Many towns throughout the Black Belt have unused commercial spaces in their downtowns—underutilized assets that could become retail spaces for fine arts and heritage crafts for individual artists. This would help to revitalize downtowns and Main Streets, and add to the arts-related destinations for tourists and residents to celebrate the traditions of the Black Belt.

All of these efforts are intended to benefit all residents of the communities in the region. As an economic development strategy, tourism can be implemented in ways that privilege the experiences of the outsiders who have money to spend. The work occurring in Alabama’s Black Belt, however, seeks to market to tourists and provide infrastructure to support tourism that supports learning, such as regional dining and homestays, while also delivering programming and services to residents. The region’s arts and heritage crafts are positioned within the region’s culture, supporting the cultural wealth of the community. The arts education programs include outreach to schools and civic organizations, among others, an effective way to provide a service to children and families from all segments of society, not only economically privileged arts consumers.

The work of Black Belt Treasures continues to grow and evolve as the organization develops new partnerships, funding sources, and opportunities through stakeholder engagement. In its 11-year history, however, one thing has remained constant: Through the gallery sales and artist education, BBTCAC provides pathways to economic self-sufficiency for artists on the economic margins alongside others and supports their voice by celebrating their work.

For more information on Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center, visit www.blackbelttreasures.com. To learn more about wealth creation as an economic development strategy, visit www.wealthworks.org.



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