

What is Quilt Trails All About?

by Barbara Webster, Executive Director

We are a non-profit corporation, but I like to call us a community benefit corporation. We are doing several things that I believe benefit our communities enormously. The most obvious thing we are doing is putting up painted quilt squares on barns and buildings.

Each of those squares is a history repository. The blocks tell the story of the site where they hang, so in a way we are giving a voice to the land and the buildings, in addition to the families who host some of the blocks.

Finding the blocks and learning their stories is a great way to discover the counties and to learn their histories. I like to think of the blocks as mirrors of who we are.

The side effects of putting up these blocks are benefiting the community. The more blocks that go up, the more reasons there are for visitors to come see them. We now have one of the highest concentrations of quilt blocks in the country and because of that we are seeing an increase in tourists visiting the area. Each of those visitors is spending money while they are here and that money goes to local businesses and their employees, and indirectly to the entire county because of the tax revenues being generated.

Another benefit we have realized from these quilt blocks is the creation of several new jobs in the area. Two Mitchell County residents now have increased income because they are making the pins and magnets that are being sold in our Gift Shop. Two Yancey County residents now have part time jobs because of the Gift Shop. And at least six artists in both counties have seen an increase in their revenues because we are selling things they make in our gift shop. We also pay a bookkeeper and installers.

Additionally, we are bringing positive publicity to both Mitchell and Yancey counties. Stories about the project have appeared in Carolina Mountain Living, WNC Magazine, Our State magazine, Carolina Mountain Life, The Charlotte Observer, the Mitchell News Journal, The Avery Post, The McDowell News, Smoky Mountain News, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the Wall Street Journal, just to name a few. We have also been featured on WRAL TV, WLOS TV and My40 TV, and in radio spots sponsored by the NC Dept. of Tourism in 6 states. These stories have helped increase positive perceptions of Mitchell and Yancey counties, and they have brought us new tourists.

These new positive perceptions of our counties, along with the increased revenues and jobs have all happened because we have told the stories of our residents through the simple act of hanging painted quilt blocks.

Because I'm a quilter I have seen the power of a quilt to bring comfort and delight and to trigger deep emotions and feelings. So it is especially satisfying to me as the Director of this project to see the power of the quilt magnified so enormously and to see it still work its magic. Our communities are richer and kinder because of this project, our self-esteem is a bit higher, because, let's face it, we are all proud of these blocks and what they represent. We are discovering the many things we have in common, that help us realize we belong to a community that values family, hard work, education, creativity and resourcefulness. These are all values we can be proud of. Shining a spotlight on these values is one of the many things the quilt blocks do.

If you would like to help paint the blocks, write the stories, or photograph the blocks, we'd love to hear from you. Call us at 828-682-7331. Or come by our Gift Shop at the Ooak Gallery in Micaville to get a block application or sign up for one of our many projects. There you can buy the maps and tour guides that tell the stories. You can also buy maps and Tour Guides off our website and download a block application.