

Success keeps flowing

Inside RiverCulture, its administrator

Lisa Davol is celebrating. After weeks of waiting anxiously, she's learned that the Turners Falls RiverCulture project has won another year of grant funding from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Lisa is the administrator for the project. A week or so ago, as she waited for news, we talked about the project, its impact on the community and on her own life.

Our conversation took place over cups of coffee at the Second Street Bakery in downtown Turners Falls. The business is a sort of offspring of RiverCulture. Its founders were looking for a place to open a bakery when they found the RiverCulture Web site. It helped convince them Turners was the right place. Just recently, the bakery expanded next door.

The bakery is among a number of businesses fostered by RiverCulture. One of the newest, a Mexican restaurant, opened the day of last summer's Block Party.

RiverCulture has been a success by many measures, not just new business openings.

As Recorder publisher, I was asked to write a letter supporting the grant request for an arts and culture program intended to help revitalize Turners Falls. I remember writing that I wanted the newspaper to have positive stories to print about Turners, after too many years in which the assumption was that stories with a Turners Falls dateline would be about crime, drug busts or poverty.

The grant came and RiverCulture started in 2006. Stories began to appear not just in The Recorder, but around the state, even in the Boston Globe, and in regional tourist guides, about Turners Falls' new artsy edge and about its comeback. New businesses took root. People came for festivals and events. Some decided to

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stay.

The new Montague Business Association spun off from RiverCulture as a more specifically business-oriented organization.

Davol says one of the best things about the project from her perspective is that it has not imposed something new on the community from outside.

"It's making people notice what's already here, things they see every day," she says.

RiverCulture, Davol says, has been "very much a sense of place project."

One of her favorite parts of the job, she says, has been the block party. Every year she's done it, she's at first been nearly overwhelmed by how much work it takes to pull it off. But by the time the block party gets there, she's overcome in a different way, because so many local people show up, "Everybody comes, not just a certain kind of person."

Like most of those who came to Turners Falls throughout its history, Davol came from somewhere else, in her case Cherry Hill, N.J. She studied art history and worked putting together art collections for corporations, commuting between Philadelphia and New York. She grew tired of the life.

Friends living in Springfield offered an extra room in their house for a while and she found herself in western Massachusetts. She spent some time living in Northampton, Leeds, Florence, Gill and Shelburne Falls before ending up in Turners Falls, the place she's come to prefer.

"Everybody who comes here is running away from something," she says. "I was running away from New

Jersey because there was no sense of community and not much appreciation for historic stuff."

Before she got to Turners, she says, "I didn't really know where I was or where I stood or have a sense of belonging, but I really found that here. I feel like I'm someplace that has been somewhere and is going somewhere."

The transition from New Jersey has not been entirely smooth, Davol admits. She decided to take up gardening, but her lack of experience was a handicap. At first, she had space in a very visible community garden, but says, laughing, that she was "kicked out" and shifted to a less visible spot because her garden was not up to neighbors' standards.

Too late, she also realized that planting wildly spreading raspberry bushes in a community garden was not a neighborly thing to do. She's trying to fix it. The climbing roses near her house are more successful.

Neighborliness and cooperation among people and organizations are a big part of RiverCulture's goal, Davol says. Take, for example, the project to put art work along a neglected path that connects residences and schools on the hill to downtown Turners below.

Still sounding a little amazed, Davol describes how the project grew. People called her, surprised that several paths were cleared. They said they hadn't thought RiverCulture was taking on more than one path.

RiverCulture wasn't. The other paths were not part of the official project. Neighbors decided to pitch in, a ripple effect, like tossing a stone into a river.

It's a ripple effect that offers good reason to be grateful for RiverCulture's new grant.

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