

School of the Shoals (SOTS)

2006/07 progress

Background

The goal of SOTS is to create a community-based educational program across the river from Glendale, SC, an unincorporated, economically depressed yet historically, socially, and ecologically significant mill village and nature preserve located outside of Spartanburg, SC. The program would exist in two forms: (a) a three week summer experience for local high school students and, eventually, (b) a semester experience for local college students. The experience would highlight significant social and ecological issues and foster collaborative problem-solving actions between students and community members. Though hosted by the Glendale community, SOTS would seek to be a hub of interfaces between students, the Glendale community, other local communities, and communities throughout the Southeast and beyond.

Faculty members of Wofford College and Spartanburg Day School (K-12 independent school) have had conversations about the possibility of developing institutional partnerships with the goal of making the SOTS program happen. More broadly, the formation of an ENGAGE Alternative Education network makes it possible to link the SOTS project to ENGAGE's growing localized alternative-education emphasis.

Most all of this has been "talk." At times, it seems like there has been a lot of movement towards realizing the SOTS "talk"; at others, it will seem like nothing has happened at all, and that it is still just "talk." What is written below is meant to put this "talk" into a richer context.

Current Understanding (with a too brief history of Glendale)

Since August 2006, specific conversations and actions with members of the Spartanburg/Glendale community regarding the SOTS concept have gradually lulled to murmurs, due (at least superficially) to the fact that the two most interested in the discussions are overworked educators serving at relatively traditional, although friendly, institutions. Despite numerous expressions of support from colleagues and friends, limited time and flexibility within traditional contexts sequester most movement to the summer months. More significant reasons for the lull have been either circumstantial or strategic in relation to the complex nature of Glendale's human and biological ecology. As the year progressed, it became very clear that understanding Glendale's past and present is primary, and below is a brief (and oversimplified) attempt to encapsulate the village's place and people:

Glendale, legally defined by a 29346 zip code, is a riparian community upon which forces—from geological to human—have been converging for millions of years. It is a 19th century mill village founded along the Lawson's Fork of the Pacolet River in the Upstate of South Carolina. The human history of the area includes prehistoric soapstone quarries, Catawba and Cherokee settlements, colonial iron works and battle sites, 19th

century hydropower dam projects and the influx of northern textile magnate interests. Today, several churches, a post office, and a couple of small businesses serve roughly 250 residents living in mostly uniform homes built to house the textile workers employed at what was once the most prosperous cotton mill in the area. Nuclear and coal power and the digital age brought an end to hydropower in Glendale, moving the textile industry out and leaving the dam and the mill's community behind. In the last twenty years, the most visible activity pertaining to Glendale (aside from the daily life of its people) has been the preservation of 13 acres along the fork (called the Glendale Shoals Preserve), the construction of a new road bridge (the former bridge is now a footbridge), occasional efforts to preserve the village's cultural heritage (through local publications and documentaries), and educational field work (independent scholars, John Lane/Ellen Goldey's classes from Wofford College). The mill building tragically burned to the ground three years ago.¹

Today, the village and shoals' natural beauty, low real estate value, sentimental appeal, cultural/sociological/historical/ecological significance, slow pace, unincorporation, pastoral charm, and proximity to one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country make it an ideal place in which developers, real estate agents, kayakers, non-profits, poor tenants, middle class newcomers, wealthy city folk, nostalgic former residents, nostalgic current residents, educators and academics all want a stake. The village, one of the poorest areas of the county, is in the same zip code as at least two high-value housing developments; it is also just down the road from the Spartanburg Country Club. In other words, the area is ripe for an odd combination of suburban sprawl, historic preservation, gentrification, and experiential education.

Glendale's unincorporated status means there is no formal decision-making process on behalf of (or with accountability to) the people who would be most affected by change (whoever they may be and however they may be defined). Most big decisions or new developments (read below) have been or are being arbitrated by B.G. Stephens, a Glendale native, Wofford alumnus, former Wofford professor and administrator, and de facto Glendale "mayor." B.G.'s tireless efforts have been joined by a newly created Glendale citizen's organization, whose members thus far have organized a village clean-up and held a phone conference with an out-of-state developer interested in refurbishing the mill site with residential and commercial properties.

Missing from all of the above is an understanding of who currently lives in Glendale. Recent census reports do very little to illustrate the community demographics, and informal surveys (door knocking, the village clean-up day) weren't designed to document anything. The questions keep circulating: Who are the people in the former mill village? Do people living across the fork from the village count as Glendale community members? Do people just barely living in the 29346 zip code count, too? If someone grew up in Glendale but moved away, is she still a resident? If someone rents in Glendale, is he a resident?

Thus, the fundamental issue facing Glendale is the question of stakeholderhood. Much of the potential "high-end" real estate is absentee owned; and many of the voices advocating for progress or interested in development projects or educational initiatives are simply not residents of the village proper. For some, including the author of this reflection piece, the

¹ Read John Lane's "Reflections on the loss of Glendale Mill" at http://www.upstateforever.org/Newsletters/Sept04Newsletter/AGlendaleSep_04.html.

outside interests (those either competing with or complementing each other) spell a sensitive and complicated future for Glendale, full of promise and problems.²

Major Developments/Activity in Glendale (2006-2007)

The year's developments in Glendale have affected the progress of the SOTS idea in complicated ways. Major developments, in chronological order, include:

1) the purchase of Glendale United Methodist Church building by Palmetto Conservation Foundation (PCF) in late 2006. PCF aims to create an Outdoor Leadership School (OLS) in Glendale, and has already hired one full time staffer to fundraise and network for what will be a recreation-oriented program. The creation of the OLS is a positive development in the sense that it is a progressively minded project, and it helps to ensure continued efforts at preserving the area's green space. OLS' presence also suggests the support for alternative education programs in the area.

2) the South Carolina chapter of the Architectural Institute of America (SC-AIA) selected Glendale as one of six South Carolina communities to be featured for the South Carolina Community Design Summit. Representatives from Clemson University and SC-AIA held "charettes," or community meetings, in late January, wherein community members gathered to voice reflections and concerns about the past, present and future of Glendale. The most positive outgrowths of the AIA meetings were a heightened awareness of the potential of development projects; the conversations about community and "progress" amongst various Glendale stakeholders (including village residents); and the creation of a Glendale citizen's organization (as mentioned above).³ The formation of the citizen's group signals an important step in Glendale's future being more self-determined, and it could serve as a community clearinghouse (or creator) of SOTS programming.

3) Wofford College is on the verge of purchasing/receiving acreage of Glendale's former mill site, which is directly across the river (within spitting distance) from the originally conceived location of SOTS. The college seeks to establish an environmental studies center based out of the mill's former office building. John Lane, the community anarcho-activist and Wofford faculty member with whom I have developed the closest semblance of a partnership on SOTS, is the lead faculty-sponsor for the environmental studies project and will most likely direct the development of the program. John has been advocating for a Wofford-backed program for quite a while (before SOTS idea came about) and became interested in SOTS idea after we brainstormed about it in the fall of 2005 at his son's soccer game. John is a linchpin in all of the good things taking place here. It has always been my hope that a partnership with John will help the SOTS concept move forward.

² Information drawn from John Lane's papers, personal conversations with community members, and local publications.

³ <http://www.scdesignsummit.org/sessions.shtml>

Reflection

The most obvious effect the past year's developments have had on the SOTS concept has already been addressed, and that is the fact that the dynamics of Glendale must be understood prior to moving forward with the SOTS project. This is not to say that everything must be on hold; in fact, one could argue that everything converging upon Glendale makes it even more possible for an alternative-education program to flourish.

My immediate thoughts are in the form of questions:

- (1) Would adding the SOTS idea into the pot serve only to blur and confuse the existing developments? How would all parties perceive it? How would I go about introducing it?
- (2) Should I present the SOTS concept to the Wofford administration (via John Lane) after Wofford secures the mill property? Who else would be invited?
- (3) Does the SOTS need to be attached to an institution, or can it be a separate program (or ally to the other Glendale programs)?
- (4) Which comes first—the people of Glendale or the SOTS? In other words, can a school desiring to ally itself with the host community truly do so if it starts as an outside organization?
- (5) Do I work independently of all institutions involved, working directly with community members to (a) identify itself as a community and (b) identify the need to use education as a means of community empowerment? This seems right, but it also seems impossible to do alone.

My more complicated, fleshed out thoughts are in the form of rambling, slightly disorganized paragraphs:

Whereas the SOTS concept receives support from an individual and his allies, the other developments are highly institutional. Whereas SOTS aims to cultivate relationships and alliances with communities, the other developments—though benign in intent—appear to have no formal structures or programs in place to ally themselves with the local community. This absence is perhaps the SOTS concept's greatest chance for "making it," in the sense that it can serve as an intermediary between institutions and community members. To graft SOTS to, say, the Wofford program would be ideal, but there would have to be time and support to (a) cultivate an institutional understanding of the SOTS model and (b) identify community allies.

Why it might be difficult for Wofford as an institution to buy into SOTS, and why SOTS is weird to people in general: What we're really talking about here is introducing a different model of education to Spartanburg. The model itself relies on a willingness of the local communities and educational institutions to recognize and advocate for a different educational paradigm, wherein students, educators and communities work alongside one another to identify and solve problems rather than simply study them.

This kind of proposal is complicated, because it suggests the need for students, teachers, institutions and communities to reevaluate the way they operate and interact. As it is now, Glendale's diversity of interests and stakeholders coupled with its unincorporated status means the forward movement is very top-down, which to me fundamentally undermines any kind of grassroots alternative education program. Ideally, community members and interested outside parties would work side by side to create (or combat) all of the developments that are converging upon Glendale. In this case, however, all educational institutions (or ideas like SOTS) are coming from the outside, thus making it difficult (or nearly impossible) for any cohesive, consensus-driven decision-making.

Thoughts for Next Steps

(1) Though not fully fleshed out, the most important "next step" is the strengthening and broadening of the newly founded citizen's organization. As of now, it is composed primarily of Glendale area residents, but it needs to have more representation from the village, and this will only occur with a deliberate campaign to activate village interest in informally incorporating itself under the auspices of the citizen's group. This will require such tactics as door-to-door canvassing, goal-oriented community meetings, and workshops on formalizing decision-making processes (via vote or consensus or something). This process will ultimately help to answer one of the biggest questions—*who IS Glendale?*

(2) The scope of the group's focus must also broaden. At present, the group's leaders are concerned mainly with development projects, and rightly so. Efforts to include community voices in changes coming from the outside are already underway (that is, beyond B.G. Stephens' original work), and there is now a precedent for how developers should engage the Glendale area. This can't stop.

(3) The citizen's group attention needs to turn to the educational initiatives (this is, of course, assuming there has been no substantial attention paid to them thus far), particularly if the idea of developing a community-based educational program like SOTS is a welcomed one. Regardless, the success of any educational program in Glendale depends on the support from the community, and any program intentionally focused on community (SOTS) requires start-up cooperation from the host community. Though seemingly obvious, this has not yet occurred.

(4) Assuming that Wofford will secure portions of the mill property for a future environmental studies program, there needs to be a formal presentation on the SOTS model to those who can give it the green light at Wofford. It is my hope that John Lane will help to facilitate this.

(5) Planning for a 2008 model SOTS session needs to begin now. The session would include a small group of high school students from Spartanburg Day School and several "faculty" members from the community and local educational institutions. Its purpose would be to serve as an experimental three-week session, both for relationship building and program assessment. Relationships I have built throughout the last two years of teaching and that I aim to establish in a yearlong community-based course this coming year will help to foster the model session's curriculum.