

SANDHILLS FAMILY HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

Practicing the Art of Culture Based Philanthropy



Produced by the Transforming Philanthropy Project Research Team, Dept. Anthropology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Sandhills Family Heritage Association Background

Beyond the sprawling military complexes of Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base, in the rural Southeast North Carolina town of Spring Lake, lies an innovative organizational effort to build economic self-sufficiency and preserve the natural and cultural heritage of African Americans in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. The Sandhills Family Heritage Association (SFHA), a grassroots community-based nonprofit, was founded in January 2001. The Association involves people in a variety of activities related to their cultural connections to the land.

SFHA combines land-focused African American heritage tourism and local giving practices, with community revitalization and economic development. Assisting African Americans in land retention and ownership, Sandhills makes the important link between the preservation of family land and cultural heritage. The organization works to develop the deep connecting elements involved in linking people to the past through sharing recovered memories, knowledge, places, cultural practices, and material artifacts, while also connecting people through community building activities like festivals, farmers' market, regional outreach education, monthly discussions, and annual appreciation dinner.

With over 300 members, the SFHA is primarily made up of African Americans, both within the Sandhills region and in other states, with many former residents of the region maintaining their membership. The SFHA is in the southeastern part of North Carolina known as the "sandhills" because of the white sand, a reminder of an earlier geologic era when the region was a part of the Atlantic seashore. This fact is vital to the SFHA mission of preserving and sharing local knowledge about herbal medicine and local vegetation. The Sandhills region includes six counties: Harnett, Cumberland, Hoke, Moore, Lee, and Richmond.

The origins of the Sandhills Family Heritage Association illustrates the organization's focus on local African American heritage, cultural practices, and community well-being. In 1984, almost 25 years ago, Ammie Jenkins, a formidable, self-trained documentarian of Black community life in Cumberland County, North Carolina, unwittingly began the work of SFHA while seeking to learn about her family's history. At that time, Jenkins, an African American woman and founder and executive director of the Sandhills Family Heritage Association, began to interview community members. During her first interview with a 93-year-old African American man who was her neighbor, Jenkins discovered that her own great-grandfather was a slave. The man asked if she wanted to learn about her great-grandfather:

"He gave me the names of my granddaddy's brothers and sisters. So I decided to go out and interview some of the descendents who were willing to share their memories of life in the Sandhills. And they had stories to tell. So what started out to be family research ended up being a community-wide thing, which spread to neighboring counties. I noticed that the people in the stories were located in six of the Sandhills counties. So this was no longer a family thing, it was really an African-American [thing]. . . . we [repeatedly] heard similar stories about [African American] people losing their land. After I heard that my great-grandfather had 658 acres of land, I wanted to know what happened to it. So in doing the

research, I discovered that there was a lot of fraud, trickery, scams and everything to take the land [of African Americans].”

Since this early conversation, Jenkins has collected roughly 130 interviews with other community members, and the SFHA’s research has recovered knowledge, memories, and practices that have assisted African Americans in maintaining viable, sometimes thriving, communities in a racially segregated, and sometimes outright racist, region.



Transforming Philanthropy the Sandhills Way: Reviving and Sustaining Local Giving Practices

During 2005 the SFHA was invited to join the *Transforming Philanthropy in Communities of Color* project (TP), a part of a larger initiative, *Cultures of Giving within Unleashing Resources: Expanding the Boundaries of Leadership*, funded by the W.K.K. Kellogg Foundation. TP seeks to refashion how organizations and communities conceive of and practice philanthropy. With the support and encouragement of the National Community Development Institute of Oakland, California and a fellow southeastern North Carolina organization, the Center for Community Action, and SFHA decided to participate in Transforming Philanthropy. In doing so, the SFHA has offered a vitally important perspective to Transforming Philanthropy.

The SFHA approaches its goal of transforming philanthropy by valuing and making explicit those practices of giving that exist within communities such as the African Americans in the Sandhills. These practices often go unrecognized as philanthropic ventures, both within the Sandhills population and by mainstream philanthropy. The SFHA has identified several practices that fit within the parameters of what the Transforming Philanthropy in Communities of Color research team defines as vernacular philanthropy, drawing attention to the native, everyday and culturally-situated character of such giving.

Vernacular philanthropy is embedded in social relationships and draws on locally-situated cultural schemas of giving. For our purposes, vernacular philanthropy will be used interchangeably with “culture based philanthropy”. It involves corporeality, immediacy and connection, as opposed to the disembodied, calculative and reformist characteristic of mainstream philanthropy. These factors are a vibrant element of the Sandhills community experience and heritage. Sandhills philanthropy goes beyond fundraising and prioritizes supporting local friends and neighbors through practice. These values are illustrated in SFHAs work which is focused in Sandhills communities that have high poverty rates and low community resources. The African American community has a history of people working together and sharing what they have. It is this type of giving of time, talent and treasure that helped the community survive since slavery.



Photograph courtesy of Ammie Jenkins

While vernacular philanthropy emphasizes giving, many givers are also involved in the supply side of local production. In the case of SFHA, both vernacular and mainstream philanthropy share concern for healthy communities and residents; however, they differ in the embeddedness of place and personal relationship of one, and the disembeddedness and formality of the other.

SFHA's emphasis on land, tradition, people and cultural heritage connections is grounded in giving practices that are not commonly understood as philanthropic. This conception of giving rests on the role that land has played in the lives of rural African Americans in the American South. Jenkins explains:

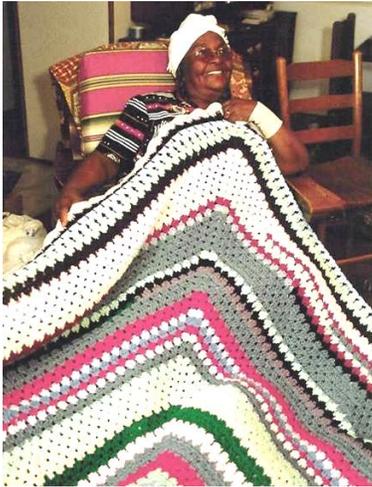
“ . . . land is important. It sustains life. It's our home, it's our family security, it's the source of our income, food, medicine, and recreation. The land is our legacy to our children. It's a source of food for the elderly, sick and shut-ins, and needy families. There are people in our community who grow gardens for the sole purpose of giving to those in need. Our culture that is tied to the land is lost whenever we lose land . . . it is very important to hold onto the land and pass it on to our children and grandchildren . . . so when you take that away, it's like taking away the very core of the people because you steal their identity, their way of life and means of self-support. Our goal is to rebuild that self-sufficiency and self-support system that instills self-worth and self-respect. SFHA defines self-sufficiency as land and home ownership, a sustainable food system, a healthy and nurturing environment, a livable family income, and knowledge of ones history and cultural heritage. Self-reliant individuals have the means and ability to help reduce poverty, hunger and/or homelessness in their community.”

This particular perspective is at the heart of one of SFHA's primary efforts, a farmers market, which will serve several functions aside from the obvious one of providing produce.”

Through her research and participating in the community assets mapping project, Jenkins also found that many African American Sandhills communities relied on small businesses that locally provided the goods and services that self-reliant communities need. Because of segregation and racism, these communities often had to address their own key needs. This self-reliance was important because the development of Fort Bragg (ca. 1918s) disrupted these communities and the farms and enterprises that sustained them. Diverse goods such as fresh produce, meats, dairy products, soaps, wine, canned foods, molasses, clothes, and liquor were produced locally, a reality remembered only by some of the Sandhills' oldest residents.

Today's adult generation continues the giving practices that they witnessed as children growing up in the rural Sandhills. Last year SFHA members volunteered their time, talent and expertise to help build brush arbor and plank road replicas for our outdoor historic exhibits. Other examples of vernacular philanthropy in African American Sandhills communities are people who grow produce and give it to needy people in their community; people who make the special effort to visit and assist the sick and needy, cooking and cleaning for them if they are unable; people who donate produce and crafts to the farmers' market; an 86 year-old soap maker who still makes a variety of handmade soaps for health and utilitarian purposes, which she donates to various

needs, such as our Sankofa Festival (contributing to fund raising); the woman who loves to cook and who loves to feed people, free of charge; and the ladies who make handmade afghans and quilts, some of which they give to SFHA to assist in fundraising.



Photograph courtesy of Jo Gravely



The SFHA organization also practices vernacular philanthropy and demonstrates the same values in how it does its own work. Thus, there is an effort made to give back to the community sustainable assets that will teach future generations about the value of preserving their history and cultural heritage. The organization provides free monthly educational workshops that address family and community needs. For example, 15 SFHA volunteers who prepare and cook food for all SFHA functions received training and certification in food preparation and sanitation.

SFHA incorporates these practices into their organizational mission of identifying and supporting African American heritage, in connection with building self-sufficiency through land retention, land ownership, and job and enterprise creation. The SFHA approach catalyzes their idea of:

“ . . . being good stewards of the natural and cultural assets we inherited from our ancestors and using their legacy as a model for working together and supporting each other to build sustainable communities and self-sufficiency. We have always given. Lots of the things we’ve talked about were examples of people helping each other, to me those were philanthropic acts. Our people give because it is inherent in our culture to help those who are in need. They give from the heart and not because they expect recognition or a tax deduction. They are true Humanitarians.

This is a legacy we think should be passed on to future generations.”

SFHA has published two books, created DVDs, and recorded over 130 oral history interviews to document the contributions of African Americans to the community. This documentation will be housed in the Sandhills Heritage Center (formerly Spring Lake Civic Center) and made available to the general public. The Heritage Center building and land were donated to the organization in 2002, another example of giving for the good of the community. Jenkins explains:

“We publicly give honor and recognition to all our volunteers and community elders at the Annual SFHA Appreciation Dinner. We lift them up as beacons on light and role models who improve the quality of life in their community.”



The SFHA mission of vernacular giving has a greater effect in that it is supportive of community development and vitalization.

Activities

Some key SFHA ongoing activities include:

- A quarterly newsletter, Hometown Heritage News, to keep our local and out-of-state members informed of happenings in the Sandhills;
- Monthly workshops that seek to empower people through education (e.g., estate planning, making wills, cultural heritage awareness); SFHA identifies topics of interest to their constituency and then develops educational activities around them. An example is the workshop “How to Save Your Land,” which in the past has invited attorneys who specialize in land loss issues to help explain people’s rights and responsibilities as land owners.
- Connecting activities such as meeting with Black farmers in order to have the successful farmers share their practices and knowledge with new gardeners and farmers;
- Income generation through heritage education and tourism. One example is that of hosting family reunions tours. SFHA also does workshops and

presentations for family reunions, small landowners, civic organizations, community and church groups.

- The Sandhills Heritage Center will serve as a hub for family reunions, the farmer's market, tourism, providing local food, reenactments, storytelling, demonstration of folk medicines and remedies, and performances.

Research

SFHA, like many contemporary community organizations, conducts research. As previously mentioned, over a hundred interviews have been conducted. This particular research embodied SFHA strategy of seeking out three generations of African American Sandhills residents, in order to document their experience and to consider ways in which to bridge the gaps between the generations. For example, there is a youth "drain" whereby young people move away from the region to pursue higher education or better jobs. This disconnects them from place, kin, and other relations, and the heritage related to these. Thus, connecting and documenting activities have included producing a video documentary about land relations, and cultural productions based on heritage concerns.

SFHA research has availed itself to connecting activities, which has produced important outcomes. Project examples include the act of getting older community residents to identify places in the Sandhills where African Americans have made significant impact in the community, region and state; The Gardening and Gleaning Project that partnered youth with senior adult gardeners to teach land stewardship and gardening practices; The Home Remedies Project that resulted in the publication of *Healing From The Land* book that documents African American experiences with plants and herbs for medicinal purposes.

Collaboration

Beyond the independent research the organization engages in, SFHA has fostered relationships with various local universities, colleges, and researchers. Although it is not traditionally considered so, this collaboration is also a form of giving. Faculty and students at local universities have played collaborative and supportive roles with SFHA's research and related organizational needs. Collaborators include the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's School of Social Work and its Department of Anthropology (home of the TP Research Team¹), the University of Wisconsin, the Land Tenure Center, Tuskegee University, North Carolina State University, North Carolina A & T University, Fayetteville State University, and Campbell University. Other "givers" of time and resources include many local enterprises, such as the North Carolina Bar Association, the North Carolina Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities program, and churches in the region.

Other important collaborators and givers include churches (providing meeting space, information dissemination, volunteers), local libraries (meeting space), Town of Spring (listing on the town's website), and the area Conventions and Visitors Bureau (promoting heritage tourism).

¹ The team is led by Charles Price, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, with Ph.D. students Leslie Calihman Alabi, Cara Shank, and Carie Hersh.

Achievements

Success in small projects can be measured through both explicit monetary gains as well as more subtle-potentially more lasting- cultural and spiritual preservations, accomplishments, and revitalizations. SFHA is flourishing on many levels and in many projects. Key accomplishments relevant to, and preceding, TP and the organizations current goals include:

- Creating Spring Lake's first farmer's market. SFHA wanted its farmer's market to be fully compliant with existing regulations and to have official recognition, which led to what turned out to be a protracted effort to have the farmer's market written into the ordinance of the Town of Spring Lake. As a result of their struggle, they were able to successfully negotiate the creation of the first farmer's market, recognized by the town's ordinance. The farmer's market is one of the cornerstones of SFHA's efforts at community vitalization (e.g., local food production, processing, and sale) and a part of transforming philanthropy;



- Introducing Spring Lake's first African American festival (the Sankofa Festival, held annually, the first Saturday of October). The Festival is a site where giving converges with selling and heritage;



- Acquisition of the Heritage Center building (future SFHA headquarters, a tourist destination, site performances and food and craft processing). This building was donated by a local, elderly, African American man and has historic roots in the local African American community. Throughout the years this building has been used in many ways. It has been the site of family reunions, sock hop dances for teenagers, voter registration classes, and Civil Rights strategy meetings, which resulted in the desegregation of many schools, theaters, and restaurants. It was a hub for all activities that didn't happen at church.
- Creation of a community assets map, the Historic Resources Map (with the assistance of the North Carolina Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities

Program). The map depicts graphically the African American-owned assets – land, business enterprises, home and farmsteads – much of which has been lost through land grabs and displacement by industry and Fort Bragg. The Historical Resources Map will inform and be a part of the Sandhills Heritage Tourism Program.

Transforming Philanthropy in Communities of Color

The purpose of Transforming Philanthropy in Communities of Color (TP) is to explore and promote new ideas regarding philanthropy in communities of color and to support positive institutional transformations for social change.²

Transforming Philanthropy is focused on organizations led by and serving communities of color, seeking to develop their capacity to identify, access, and use a variety of philanthropic resources including time, talent, and money. The aims of TP include changing how communities and other philanthropic institutions understand, talk about, and practice philanthropy, while developing their capacity to work collectively and effectively for social change informed by community voice. The Transforming Philanthropy project was conceived as operating on three levels: local, regional, and national. These ideas were refined through a “co-design”³ dialogue facilitated by the National Community Development Institute. The local level is the playing field of each organization, while regional is defined as the southeastern North Carolina. The strategies and practices developed locally and regionally will be disseminated nationally to the relevant organizations of the nonprofit and philanthropic sector. This case profile contributes to this latter goal.

Challenges to Valuing Culture Based Philanthropy

While TP is helping to identify, recover, and discover giving practices outside of conventional philanthropy, many challenges must be overcome. Vernacular (culture based) philanthropy must risk putting a price tag on its giving; otherwise conventional philanthropy will continue to ignore it. The food, afghans, quilts, produce, and volunteered time, are all valuable. In market language these goods and services cost their providers something (even if the pleasure derived far outstrips the investment). One risk to vernacular philanthropy is that putting a dollar value on giving that verges on altruism might have the undesired result of devaluing it. Nonetheless, an organization like SFHA is able to exist because of vernacular philanthropy, not because of mainstream philanthropy. Mainstream philanthropy lauds SFHA for being able to get by on \$92,000 per year. However, this budget does not include vernacular philanthropy, which for now remains invisible. However, the dollar-equivalent contributions of vernacular philanthropy may equal or surpass the revenue SFHA generates through grants.

Thus, the fundamental questions are: What if mainstream philanthropy recognized vernacular philanthropy in monetary or exchange terms? What if SFHA or other grassroots organizations could have their vernacular philanthropy matched by

² This section uses language taken from the National Community Development Institute’s 2006 annual report to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

³ Co-design describes a process by which stakeholders develop a shared vision of their concerns and goals.

mainstream philanthropy? This would require a real change in thinking and practice on the part of mainstream philanthropy. It would mean there was a real commitment to transforming philanthropy. However, ideas are easier to change than are institutions. Mainstream philanthropy would not only have to take serious vernacular philanthropy, it would have to change its accounting practices. And community organizations would have to devise a way to value and keep track of vernacular philanthropy. These changes will require adequate resources and capacity.

Sustainability and Vernacular Philanthropy

Sustainability is one of the key elements that SFHA surfaces for Transforming Philanthropy as it relates to vernacular philanthropy. By incorporating and building on local practices of giving, SFHA has laid a base that has the capacity to maintain itself while generating revenue and vitalizing local communities and economies. The Heritage Center is the centerpiece of this idea, providing the context for integrating heritage tourism, local production, performances, family reunions, farmer's market, and education about land, enterprise and local heritage itself.



The Heritage Center will be the focal point for activities that will constitute vernacular giving through actions involving heritage, education, tourism, the local economy and community development. The SFHA strives to be self-reliant, using its income generation and vernacular philanthropy as its economic base.

Needs of the Organization

- Volunteers, donors and fundraisers to help increase the building fund to \$950,000

- Filling two positions:
 - Youth age 16-25 to serve on Board
 - Adult age 26-45 to serve on Board
- A full-time staff assistant
- A part-time administrative assistant
- More attention to youth, preferably youth working with youth
- More members who want to give back to the community through volunteer service

Conclusion

During one of our interviews, Jenkins related a story of going on a heritage tour in North Carolina and realizing that most of the African American history was not mentioned. She listened in disbelief as the tour guide told a “history” that did not include the contributions of Native or Black Americans. Her work with SFHA has done much to correct this sinister oversight. SFHA has recently been recognized in a number of published news stories and was even featured on the PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer on September 17, 2007. The national broadcast highlighted SFHA's efforts to preserve African American land in the Sandhills.

Having success with their business plans and their heritage tour ventures has moved them closer to satisfying their goals, while maintaining their basic values. Their projects directly affect needs such as African American land retention and cultural heritage preservation. Relating another story of realizing at a meeting that her African American grandmother had the same herbal recipes as another person's Native American grandmother further drives home SFHA's mission of making connections through vital historic roots.

