

Leading the CROP in the Heartland

by Scott Fields

Who's your town's sandhill crane?

Rural small town America is dying due to a lack of private capital, government funds and inspired leadership. A group of teen-agers in San Pierre, Indiana are fighting back. Becoming their town's most precious asset, they are setting an example for small communities across the country.

The day John Egolf met Beverly Santicola was one of those special moments where paths converge in a very big way. It was Memorial Day, 2005, and Egolf was skateboarding down the pockmarked streets of San Pierre, Indiana with a few of his friends. Wearing his usual second hand suit and fedora, Jon's artsy bent stood out in a town where most 15-year-old boys were budding jocks. *Nice kid*, people would say. *Just a little odd*. That went for Jon's friends too. People just couldn't understand kids who chose the arts over football.

A big old Chrysler slowed down next to the boys, Jon turning toward a middle-aged woman who he assumed was an out-of-towner about to ask for directions. But Beverly Santicola was no out-of-towner. She had grown-up in San Pierre and was up from Houston to visit her mother and to launch her plan for bringing her hometown back to life.

When Beverly invited Jon and his friends to a meeting at St. Luke's church basement on the following Sunday to discuss the fate of San Pierre, the teens weren't quite sure how to respond.

"I didn't know what to make of her – it took a bit for it to all sink in," Egolf recalls. "But I remember thinking that something big was going to happen to this town and that this lady was gonna do it."

Not too different from other rural towns across America.

The Egolf family moved to San Pierre when Jon was five years old. Things weren't exactly thriving back then, but the small, northwestern Indiana community did have a number of commercial establishments that were doing decent business.

Ten years later, there was nothing left. First the IGA grocery closed its doors, then the San Pierre Bank, and San Pierre Elementary School. Not long after that, the baseball field was abandoned, the little league and t-Ball games curtailed. Then Gilberts Restaurant burned down, and the Lions Club building deteriorated.

"It was a weird thing to see the town falling apart," says Egolf. "And no one was doing anything to stop it."

At that first meeting in the church basement, Santicola spoke of her newly established non-profit organization, The Center for Rural Outreach & Public Services, or CROPS. She also stressed her commitment to not only revitalize San Pierre, but to focus attention on small towns in a similar predicament across the country.

"I knew any change had to start with the kids," explains Santicola. "The adults were just too busy struggling to make ends meet in a place like this... they were too ready to accept the status quo. We needed the young people to really fire things up and lead the way."

"We brainstormed for quite some time," Santicola recalls of the meeting. "The energy in the room was just so amazing. It was clear these kids wanted a better town just as much as I did."

After coming up with a list of potential projects, Beverly asked for volunteers to serve on the CROPS Board of Directors. Says Santicola: "Jon Egolf was the first to raise his hand."

Hope, inspiration and the sandhill crane.

Since 2005, CROPS has given Jon and 19 other young people in San Pierre hope, inspiration, and something to do with their time other than skateboarding. Due to their hard work, they have become the town's unlikely heroes.

"We improved the basketball court -- made it a full court instead of half, cleaned it up," says Egolf. "People from other towns come here to play hoops now. And the baseball diamond's in use again after we cleaned that up too." Same goes for the Lion's Club, the tennis courts, and the picnic pavilions in the park.

"It's been a long process," says Egolf, who has sat in on many more planning meetings than most people his age could ever handle. "But every little bit helps. You have to look at the long term goals instead of the short term."

Best of all for Egolf have been the opportunities to use his art. Early on, when Santicola asked the youth to design a fundraising goal chart that could be posted around the area, "What Jon helped inspire was truly extraordinary," she says.

The chart incorporated a large image of a sandhill crane, long associated with San Pierre due to the fact that 30,000 of these birds make an annual autumn stop in the marshes just outside of town as they migrate south. To add a personal touch, Jon came up with idea to use a skateboard as the marker that pivoted up as the donated sums grew higher.

The new sign gave CROPS an instant identity in San Pierre and was key in energizing the town to help support the group of teen-age volunteers.

In addition to his design abilities, Jon displayed his considerable musical talents when he composed the score for an educational book and DVD that chronicles the CROPS San Pierre project. In addition, the DVD's producers -- neighboring town residents and CROPS mentors -- taught Jon how to record the music himself.

This knowledge "gave me a head start when we produced our first album," Egolf says, referring to the CD he recorded last year with his band *Cross Town Collision*, which has played in towns all over Indiana as well as Chicago. "We're traveling all over for our gigs now -- we're getting a great response and we sell the CD's at the shows."

As for the sandhill crane chart, it stayed on display, welcoming visitors to town as they drove through on Indiana 421, until a truck slammed into it one night and knocked it down. Now, a more official sandhill crane "Welcome to San Pierre" billboard has taken its place.

As for this town's future, "I see everybody pulling together and doing what they can," explains Egolf. "I see businesses starting to come in, and hopefully making the town a place to get the resources people need and making it so that kids growing up here don't have to move away."

Jon Egolf is San Pierre's sandhill crane. He and his friends have become the town's true treasures.

"This experience really connected me to San Pierre," Egolf explains. "I like hearing people talk about what's happened to this town and thinking to myself that I had something to do with it."

Concludes Santicola: "Treasures like Jon are waiting to be inspired in hundreds of small communities across America." "We need to make that happen."

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