

6-10-2022

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Susan A. Kelly
North Carolina State University, susan_kelly@ncsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, S. A. (2022). Documentary Review – Two Roles in Urban Community Revitalization: Julian Price the Philanthropist and Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 10(2), 13.
<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/jhse/vol10/iss2/13>

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Acknowledgments

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Susan A. Kelly

North Carolina State University

Julian Price used his inherited wealth to revitalize downtown Asheville, North Carolina. This documentary review reflects on his passion for community, and the concepts he believed would bring the city back from decay. Some of those same community development practices are successfully used across the country by Extension professionals to assist urban communities in revitalization. Examples of Extension programs and techniques are provided throughout this review about an inspiring documentary about a man looking for purpose and finding it by transforming a troubled downtown with his generosity.

Keywords: revitalization, philanthropy, Extension, urban

Julian Price. Envisioning Community. Investing in People.

Julian Price is an oral history project (documentary) detailing the many ways a special philanthropist changed downtown Asheville, North Carolina forever. The documentary features inspiring commentary from people who were family, investors, partners, beneficiaries, and admirers of the man they describe as quiet, funny, clever, and smart. The 33-minute documentary was directed by Erin Denham and enhanced by original music performed by the Asheville Symphony Sessions. The 2016 documentary is an insight into favorite places for those who have visited downtown Asheville, and the story is very compelling for anyone who views a vibrant downtown as an important piece of urban development and community life.

1970s Asheville Settles into Urban Blight

The documentary tells the story of Julian Price, the heir to the Jefferson Pilot fortune, who was searching for his purpose in life when he landed in beautiful but disheveled Asheville. Walking through the boarded-up downtown past the pawn shops and pornography theater, Price found a crippled town full of empty buildings and few pedestrians. Nonetheless, he fell in love with this community nestled between the mountains and decided to invest his wealth in the city.

According to the film, the City of Asheville coffers became empty in 1929 at the start of the Depression, and that shameful memory lingered with the locals. By the time the Asheville Mall opened in 1973, little attention was given to the crime-ridden, empty buildings in the center of

the city. The story of commerce and people moving away from a downtown area to the malls in the suburbs is very commonplace in the United States during this period.

Extension and Urban Community Development Work

Extension has provided educational resources and extended the research of Land-Grant Universities for more than 150 years, mostly in rural communities. Tackling issue-oriented needs in urban areas is the greatest opportunity for Extension (Warner et al., 2017). Extension, when viewed as an impartial, objective resource, is uniquely positioned to help communities, organizations, and volunteer committees through the most difficult stages of large-scale community development projects (Davis, 1999). Price made a huge impact in Asheville using his fortune, but Extension also can play an important role in downtown revitalization, business retention and expansion, strategic planning, retail market analysis, entrepreneur support, and more.

For example, a Downtown and Business Market Analysis Toolbox was developed by three midwestern university Extension teams to provide a community education approach to conducting a market analysis, extending beyond retail to focus on the downtown assets, history, and quirks (University of Minnesota Extension et al., 2011). One of the strategies included in the toolbox resource is First Impressions, a method to collect data based on aesthetics and community assets. This method has been widely used since its development in the early 1990s by Extension professionals and communities to identify assets and challenges and raise local awareness and guide public action (Nix et al., 2013). Many more examples of Extension working to revitalize downtowns and communities can be found across the United States.

Philanthropy and Investment in Community

As portrayed in the documentary, Price appeared to be so much more than his wealth. He cultivated the dreams of the people he met, sprinkling investments strategically in the various segments of small business, residential, art, and media. He asked entrepreneurs, “What is your dream?” and engaged a small group of investors to make donations to support these businesses, which are all still thriving pillars of the downtown community nearly 30 years later.

The entrepreneurs who were Price’s benefactors were surprised by the unexpected windfalls. Price invested in restaurants because he liked their food and in other businesses because they were important to the community, in his opinion. Price and his fellow investors made it possible for a Self-Help Credit Union to be established downtown with a \$1 million deposit to make loans to start-ups and underserved populations who were not eligible through traditional lending institutions.

Extension as Economic Development Partner

Practitioners in the new era of economic development are recognizing the potential of philanthropy in revitalizing downtowns during urban sprawl (Rowan, 2019). Gathering data to be used by investors and economic developers through business retention and expansion strategies could be an option for Extension professionals. The University of Minnesota is one of the leaders of business retention and expansion programs and has completed more than 75 initiatives using community engagement, education, and volunteer data collection (Darger et al., 2017).

Creating Livable Downtowns and Preserving the Soul of the City

Through the documentary's narrative, we learn that the concept of livable downtowns supporting business and community was part of Price's dream for Asheville. He worked to provide housing and everything one would need without leaving the downtown area. He was interested in beauty, safety, cleanliness, and access. One of the interviewees in the film was a city official at the time and tells of Price renting wheelchairs for the city commissioners and taking them on an excursion through the sidewalks and streets to demonstrate the problems of accessibility to disabled people in the downtown, which led to sidewalk improvements. We learn in the film that Price said cities should preserve the past because tourists do not go to a city that has lost its soul.

Art and Culture Creating Place: A New Extension Initiative

Extension professionals working in economic development utilize creative placemaking through arts, multi-cultural festivals, and activities of interest to community partners. The University of Kentucky's Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky recently completed a creative placemaking toolkit for use as an emerging community and economic development process (Koo & Bond, 2021).

Conclusion

From a boarded-up, vacant town to a top-rated tourist destination in the country is the way the transformation of Asheville was described in the documentary. Price, who sadly passed away in 2001 of cancer at age 60, felt his wealth gave him the responsibility of using it to do "the right thing" and used it to save an urban area from extinction. While wealthy individuals who are willing to give all with such personal commitment are rare, many communities benefit from philanthropy and community foundations that provide grants and funds to aid downtown and economic development. In urban areas and rural areas, Extension professionals are also actively engaged in supporting economic development through resources from the Land-Grant Universities and partnerships with community members and organizations.

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Susan A. Kelly is an Extension professional with North Carolina State University who has worked in Community Development Extension as well as Extension Administration in both North Carolina and Florida since 2004. She served as the 15th president of the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) during 2019-2020, an organization providing professional development and scholarship opportunities to Extension Professionals in the areas of Community and Economic Development. Please direct correspondence to Susan A. Kelly at susan_kelly@ncsu.edu.

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