

# Retail Farmers' Markets and Rural Development: Creating Jobs and Growing Business

*by Chris Lewis and Gail Feenstra, SAREP*

Early on a Friday morning several years ago, Trini Campbell and Tim Mueller showed up at their first farmers' market in St. Helena, Calif. They brought with them produce from their nearby acre-and-a-half market garden and left that afternoon with \$30 in gross sales. Within a few years their market garden business has expanded to become Riverdog Farm, with more than 40 acres in cultivation, a restaurant and wholesale accounts, a community supported agriculture project (CSA or subscription farm) with over 100 subscribers and, of course, participation in several farmers' markets.

This is only one example of the many business success stories brought to life through farmers' markets. Across the country, many of the over 2500 farmers' markets appear to act as informal "business incubators" for farm, food processing and craft businesses. In 1998, Gail Feenstra, SAREP nutrition and food systems coordinator, and Chris Lewis, postgraduate researcher, were funded along with researchers from Cornell University in New York and Iowa State University to conduct a three-year study of the ways in which farmers' markets stimulate businesses and contribute to community economic development. While each group is conducting the research in its home state, and will provide analysis independently for their own states, a final report will be made based on the findings from all three states. We hope to document the features of farmers' markets and the initiatives taken by managers and vendors that support small business growth. Since most previous studies of farmers' markets have focused on consumer opinions, rather than management and vendor issues, the results of this study will provide valuable new information to those interested in starting or strengthening farmers' markets as well as to those involved with small business and community development.

All of the managers surveyed gave examples of vendor businesses that have grown beyond their farmers' markets in the last three years. Examples of such growth include selling at additional farmers' markets, developing a CSA or expanding to include retail and/or wholesale accounts. Most managers also feel their markets have had an effect on other local businesses in their communities. Restaurants seem to benefit most from the increased customer traffic on market days, but a number of examples show that even large grocery stores gain customers. In one community, the local chain grocery store was so impressed, they now sponsor an annual benefit for the farmers' market and contribute the proceeds back to the market's operating fund.

Other strategies for integrating a farmers' market into the larger business community include free ad space for local merchants and non-profits at the market; raffles and contests involving both farmers' market products as well as merchandise and services from local business; and direct sales to local florists, restaurants and grocers of market vendor products.

## **Community Farmer's Market Uses Tech Tools to Gain Competitive Advantage** By Fast Company Expert Blogger Susan Solovic, Sat. Aug 28, 2010

For nearly 40 years, the Belleville Farmer's Market in Belleville, IL has been delighting its customers with fresh fruits and vegetables. The moment you walk in the door you feel as though you've stepped back in time. Beautiful displays of colorful fresh fruits and vegetables greet you along with helpful, friendly staff members.

But in recent years, the produce industry has seen dramatic changes. Always challenged by the seasonality of the business, now the community market faces fierce competition from big box stores and large grocery chains. In order to compete, the market's general manager, Rick Delaschmidt, says they focus on leveraging their customer relationships.

"We are a small guy so when folks come in here we know their name and their kids names," Delaschmidt explains.

"Those things bring value to the customer and it is something you can't find in larger stores."

While you might consider a local produce market a rather low-tech business, the Belleville Farmer's market utilizes technology tools to help level the playing field with its competitors. Lacking the funding and the marketing budgets of the big guys, Belleville Farmer's Market created innovative marketing strategies to expand its brand and boost business. For example, about a year ago the store launched an email marketing campaign. It started with zero email addresses and now boasts a database of more than 10,000 customers. The twice weekly emails offer special discounts and promotions so recipients look forward to receiving them.

"So the customer doesn't have to print out the email and use up their printer ink, they write down the coupon code with each promotion. We track the coupon use so over a year or so we get upwards of a 10 percent conversion rate," Delaschmidt says.

Traditional media options such as direct mail or advertisements typically only drive a one to two percent conversion rate. "There is nothing in our business that we've found that has a better return on investment. It's a game changer," Delaschmidt adds.

In addition to its email marketing strategy, the market also hosts a Facebook Fanpage which has several thousand fans. The market uses Facebook to boost business during cold winter months. The Fanbook page provides an opportunity for customers to place their produce orders online, then pick them up later.

"We have the shopping cart built in where folks can order and check out with Paypal or a credit card. Then we provide curbside take away. We bring the order to their car so they don't have to get the kids out again when it's cold," explains Delaschmidt.

Technology truly levels the playing field for small businesses. Leveraging technology tools in creative ways can build your brand and increase your bottom line.

## At Scituate's farmers market, it's all about the people

Posted July 22, 2010 06:50 PM

[http://www.boston.com/yourtown/news/scituate/2010/07/at\\_scituates\\_farmers\\_market\\_it.html](http://www.boston.com/yourtown/news/scituate/2010/07/at_scituates_farmers_market_it.html)

By Molly A. K. Connors, Town Correspondent



Some come to a farmers market for fresh, local produce, and others come to find unique artisan treasures. But Wendell Davis, a Weymouth resident who runs a small business called “Baking with Joy” says it’s the people that draw the crowds.

“People come to markets to meet their neighbors,” said Wells, 63, standing by his table covered with zucchini bread, banana bread, and other items at the farmers market in North Scituate.

And it would seem that more and more people are coming to the market in Scituate. Started in the late summer of 2009 with just a few vendors, nearly 20 small business owners now set up shop in the parking lot across from the commuter rail station every Wednesday from 3 to 7 p.m.

While still not even half the size of neighboring Hingham’s market, locals say Scituate’s market is starting to get some buzz. Four more vendors -- including a juice vendor, an artist who sells solar plate etchings, a Mediterranean restaurant, and a bakery – were approved last week by the Board of Selectmen.

“It’s getting bigger and bigger,” said Jenna Perette, 25, who runs a bakery called Jenna Cakes and sold almost 10 dozen cupcakes Wednesday. “I think it’s word of mouth,” she said. The Scituate market also a growing Facebook presence, with 219 fans.

Vendors sell items ranging from lobsters to baby bonnets and say they like the family friendly atmosphere that market has to offer. They also say they like the nearby playground.

“The older kids look out for the younger kids,” said Jessi Lane, 31, who runs Lane’s Lobsters. Jessi was one of the first vendors at the market and helped recruit others to the site.

Allison Guinan, 38, was visiting the market for the first time on Wednesday. Holding her 1-year-old Erin and keeping an eye on Tommy, her 3-year-old, the Scituate mom said she had driven by the market before and wanted to see what it was all about. “I was hoping for some fresh corn, and I found it,” she said as her son picked through produce.

At the next booth over, Norwell resident Ralph Young, 69, was selling hydrangeas and berries with his lifelong buddy, Philip Edwards, also 69. They went to high school together and are both retired – Young from his family’s boat yard, Edwards from social work. They say selling their items at the market isn’t particularly lucrative, but that’s okay by them.

“The people make it fun,” Young said.

## Farmer's Market Launched To Combat Obesity



*Market attendees receive diabetes and nutrition information from The University of Texas Hispanic Health and Disparities Research Center. (Credit: Image courtesy of University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston)*

*ScienceDaily (Feb. 3, 2009)* — To fight an epidemic of obesity and its life-threatening complications in the Brownsville area, faculty and students at The University of Texas School of Public Health Brownsville Regional Campus have come up with a strong weapon: a farmer's market loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Research has shown that the predominately Hispanic community of Cameron County in the Valley has twice the national average of diabetes, a co-morbidity of obesity. According to the Texas Diabetes Council 2008 Fact sheet, Hispanics ages 18-44 have the highest prevalence of diabetes (6.8 percent) among all ethnic age groups in Texas. In 2002, The U.S.-Mexico Border Diabetes Prevention and Control Project noted diabetes as the fourth leading cause of death among Hispanics in Texas.

The Brownsville Farmer's Market, a collaborative effort to provide locally grown produce and increase the awareness of chronic diseases associated with obesity, is the brainchild of Belinda Reininger,

Dr.P.H., associate professor of behavioral sciences at the UT School of Public Health. The market provides affordable fresh produce to the community, and it provides local farmers an outlet to sell their produce. It also gives health care experts the opportunity to educate shoppers on nutrition, obesity and diabetes.

Through a grant from the Texas Department of State Health Services, farmer's market partner Su Clinica Familiar provides a voucher system for low-income families, who can receive \$10 in vouchers to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.

That amount of money goes a long way at the market. "Last week I bought four cucumbers, six grapefruits, a dozen farm eggs, fresh cilantro and dill all for \$10," said Rose Gowen, M.D., medical director of the Clinical Research Unit at the UT School of Public Health and chair of the market's board of directors.

The idea was developed over a year ago when graduate students, faculty members and the Texas Department of State Health Services saw a desperate need to provide residents with resources to prevent obesity and diabetes. Part of their plan of action was to research the current fruit and vegetable consumption of the Brownsville community.

"Based on our initial assessments of the community, it was clear that creating access to fresh fruits and vegetables was needed. As with most behavioral change efforts, education alone was not enough; environmental changes were needed too. That is when we partnered with stakeholders, including public officials, to create the Brownsville Farmer's Market," Reininger said.

"Many of the diabetes cases are related to the problem of obesity, which is beginning in childhood and adolescence years," said Gowen, a long-time local resident and a driving force behind the market. "A significant portion of the obesity problem here is because local diets are high in carbohydrates and include very few vegetables and fruits."

In 2008, faculty of the Brownsville regional campus led by Susan Fisher-Hoch, M.D., professor of epidemiology at the UT School of Public Health, conducted a study on obesity in Cameron County. Fisher-Hoch's analysis found 52.2 percent of Cameron County adults older than 18 are considered obese (body mass index of 30 or higher) compared to the national average of 28 percent. The area also showed 27 percent of adolescents, particularly boys, are obese compared with 16 percent nationally.

Making healthy diet choices and changes is critical in fighting signs of obesity and preventing diabetes in the area, says Gowen. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, which provide vitamins and minerals that help maintain and improve overall health as well as protect against chronic diseases such as diabetes. The 2000 Texas Healthy People Report revealed that only 23.4 percent of Texans were consuming five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Residents of the Brownsville area tend to not select vegetables because they often lack knowledge about healthy ways to incorporate them into their diet, Gowen said.

At the market, shoppers can discover a wide range of produce from cilantro and eggs to dragon fruit and tomatoes from local farmers at low prices.

Frequent market shopper Lee Lopez says, "The market produce is definitely fresher and has been handled less. My family and I enjoy the fresh produce and supporting local farmers."

On-site nutrition, obesity and diabetes information is provided by the UT School of Public Health, Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and other organizations. Health screenings, such as glucose testing, are provided at a weekly health booth sponsored by the UT School of Public Health, local hospitals, DSHS and other organizations.

The response to the market has been strong. On opening day last November in Linear Park, more than 600 people attended. Several of the 13 vendors were completely sold out of their produce within the first hour of opening.

"I was overwhelmed by the positive response of the community to the market. Seeing local growers interact with community members and sharing information about their produce and healthy recipes was very rewarding after all of our work on the market," said Vanessa Gartrell, graduate research assistant at the school's Brownsville campus and one of the founders of the market.

The market is located along Linear Park's walking trail, which the committee hopes will encourage people to increase their physical activity. Market shoppers walk or ride bicycles as they browse the merchandise from vendors. Combining fresh produce with physical activity is important for obesity and diabetes prevention and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Students studying kinesiology at The University of Texas School of Education Department of Health & Human Performance provide physical activity for children while parents shop.

The market is in its final stage of a certification process to become a state recognized farmer's market. Once certified, organizers hope to allow families to use their Women, Infants and Children (WIC) card and food stamps to purchase fresh produce. Certification could also provide WIC with an opportunity to expand their Farmers Market Nutritional Program to Cameron County. The committee also hopes to provide chef classes for attendees to learn healthier cooking options for their fresh produce.

"It is important that everyone learn about healthy eating and active lifestyles. We hope the market will create a change in the entire city," Gowen said.

The committee hopes the market will spark an interest in creating community gardens and eventually a co-op in the Brownsville area. The market is scheduled to be open from 8 a.m. to noon every Saturday until March 2009.

The committee is seeking funding opportunities to bring the market to the community year-round.

## Winter markets and value-added products

*Growing for Market* in partnership with **Johnny's Selected Seeds** has created a library of expert information about growing and selling vegetables and flowers.

### Winter markets and value-added products

Although 88% of U.S. farmers markets are open less than six months a year, there is a definite trend toward stretching the market season in fall or holding special holiday markets. In addition, many communities have craft markets where farmers can sell value-added products. Many growers create a line of value-added products that they can sell after the main produce season is over. If you haven't specifically grown crops with value-added products in mind, this is a good time to survey your markets for potential niches. You might also find that you already have the materials for products you can sell this fall, as a way of testing the water. Here are a few ideas.

**Herbs:** Dried herbs can be used in many products including herbal vinegars, herb rubs for meat and fish, soup mixes, and dip mixes. Mixed bunches of dried herbs are even easier. The best herbs for drying: marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, savory, and thyme. For best results, cut the herbs when the foliage is dry but not wilted. Hang them upside down in small bunches in a warm, dry place with good air circulation or a fan on them. Once they are thoroughly dry, store them in an opaque container with silica gel dessicant until needed.

**Peppers:** As the frost date approaches, pay particular attention to your peppers. Once nighttime temperatures drop below 60F, peppers will stop flowering and setting fruit. You can cut off any small peppers that you think won't mature before frost; that will help the remaining larger peppers to ripen. Peppers take about three weeks to go from green ripe to red/orange ripe, but once a pepper is 50% colored, it will continue to color after harvest. Holding partially colored peppers at 68-77F with high humidity is most effective.

Small, thin-walled peppers can be made into ristras, swags, and wreaths and sold for culinary and decorative uses. They have the greatest impact when the foliage is removed so the peppers are in full view. To defoliate pepper branches, stand the stem ends in water like cut flowers, and store them in complete darkness at 68F for three days. After that, remove from the water and shake the stems. The leaves, but not the fruits, will fall off.

**Dried botanicals:** Fall and winter decorating is a favorite past-time for many people, but if they live in a city, they probably don't have access to the raw materials for nature crafts. Your farm may be a cornucopia of botanicals that you can sell at fall and winter markets. Take a walk around your fields, meadows, and hedgerows and see what you can find to sell at a "crafters' corner" of your market stand. Popular crafting materials include bittersweet and other berries; seed heads of sunflowers, Echinacea, and rudbeckias; broom corn, millet, and native grasses; overgrown okra pods (for Santa ornaments); dried flowers including carthamus, celosia, craspedia, gomphrena, statice, strawflowers; hydrangea heads; corn shocks and husks; small pumpkins that can be used as vases; gourds and ornamental squash; pine cones, sweet gum and other ornamental seed pods.

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## Texas Is The Best - Farmers' Market Season Begins

By [Patt Carpenter](#)

'Tis the season to be jolly, indeed. Sound like "Christmas in the Springtime"? Well, it certainly is to chefs and amateur cooks alike throughout Texas. Produce is coming into season all across the Northern Hemisphere, and there's simply nothing like cooking with fresh ingredients, or having that amazing blackberry-based fruit salad first thing in the morning. Doctors and health insurance companies alike recommend diets rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, and now is the time to maximize on that healthy produce.

The best way to buy produce is, of course, through the local farmers markets. Texas has some of the country's best markets, partially due to the state's long growing season and ability to produce a wide variety of fresh goods. Not only can customers feel good about buying directly from the farmer who grew it -- thereby giving him or her a higher profit margin in a competitive business and helping the local economy -- but they can also leave knowing they're buying a healthier product.

Farmers' markets are also wonderful social venues, bringing together members of the population that may not normally meet -- those from a variety of ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds. Cities like Dallas, Houston and Austin are great places to witness many cultures coming together to share good food, recipes, cultivation tips, and excellent company.

Many markets feature live music and local craftspeople as well, providing regulars an even better chance to get to know their community, and to honor those who still make products by hand. To meet the person who grows your family's food, or to have a conversation with the one who made your favorite hand-carved oak chest is incredibly enriching.

A recent study showed that an average piece of supermarket produce travels 2,000 miles before it reaches its destination -- and that's a national average, so it includes produce in agricultural states like California and Texas. It may seem silly for an avocado to be shipped to Texas -- a state that can, and easily does, grow it -- but it's all a part of the efficiency-first systems of mega corporations that literally collect, handle, and redistribute tons of food a day. In order to survive such a journey, much of this produce is sprayed with preservative chemicals. Such preservatives reduce spoilage and maintain the product's fresh appearance, but many of the plants' nutrients will still be lost.

In addition, there is serious debate on the health effects of agricultural pesticides. A strong organic farming movement has developed in response to the last several decades' increasing use of artificial chemicals on food products. The issue extends across the national border; certain pesticides that are legal in Mexico, and other countries from which produce is imported, for example, are banned in the U.S. due to known toxic side effects. Because the chemicals are not actually applied in this country, however, the food is allowed to be marketed here, sometimes with measurable levels of the banned substances.

In contrast, produce at a farmer's market only travels an average of 50 miles. Not only does this mean fewer chemicals on the delicate, absorptive skins of most fruits and vegetables, but also

that a higher nutrient value will be maintained. A selection of organically grown foods is also available at most farmer's markets. The fresher the food, the more vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals are present -- not to mention providing a much better taste. These nutrients aren't simply a way to eat healthy; they also serve to fight cancer, heart disease, aging, stress, depression, and many other ailments.

Texas is an unusually wonderful place for farmers' markets. In fact, even residents of cities like Houston, Dallas, and Austin have access to a plethora of locally grown produce, a luxury in any urban area. With its long growing season and varied climate, an array of fruits and vegetables is easily cultivated throughout the state. A short list includes apples, avocados, beans, berries, blackberries, black-eyed peas, blueberries, cantaloupe, citrus, cucumbers, figs, flowers, garlic, grapes, greens, herbs, honey, melons, nectarines, okra, onions, peaches, pears, peas, pecans, peppers, persimmons, plums, potatoes, pumpkins, raspberries, spinach, squash, strawberries, sweet corn, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, turnips, watermelon.

The Texas Department of Agriculture's website lists regular farmer's markets, children's activities, and provides a searchable database of all the produce listed above, including farms where the goodies can be picked by hand. Whether you're in Houston or El Paso, you can track where your local farmers' markets are, as well as actual nearby farms. Keep in mind that not every small farm, and not every farmer's market, will be listed on the site, so watch for local opportunities to buy and pick locally grown produce.

Here are a few tips for buying fresh produce from the farmer's market, as adapted from a recent publication of the University of Nebraska's Cooperative Extension:

- Carefully check for signs of spoilage or mold. Pick up the fruit, handle it gently, smell it, and inspect the piece from the front, back and sides. Fresh produce spoils quickly, so you want to make sure it hasn't started to degrade before it even hits the fridge.
- Handle all food gently. Bacteria grow quickly in a bruised area.
- Travel home soon after purchasing the produce. If proper storage conditions and temperatures aren't maintained, wonderful food can begin to degrade within hours.
- Store potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, winter squashes, bananas, and melons in a clean, dry, well-ventilated area away from direct sunlight.
- Avocados, kiwi fruit, peaches, nectarines, plums, mangoes, and pears can be ripened on a counter, outside of a plastic bag, and out of direct sunlight. After they ripen, it's best to refrigerate the fruit until they're ready to be consumed. To accelerate the ripening process, place several pieces in a single layer at the bottom of a paper bag. The insulated off-gases will speed the aging process.
- Most other produce is best stored in the refrigerator, below 40° F. Use commercial, food-grade perforated bags, or punch about 20 holes in a non-ventilated produce bag. This will maintain moisture, but provide needed airflow.
- Store fruits and vegetables in separate refrigerator crisper drawers. Fruits give off ethylene gas that can shorten the lives of vegetables, and certain vegetables (like onion) produce odors that will reduce the quality and taste of the fruits.

## America's best farmers' markets -- for travelers

By **Marianna Nash**, July 22, 2010 <http://www.cnn.com/2010/TRAVEL/07/22/best.farmers.markets/>

(CNN) -- Wherever he goes, Richard Ruben stops by the local farmers' market. The chef and author of "The Farmer's Market Cookbook" says he visits markets to get a taste of the culture off the tourist track.

Even though travelers can't buy a pound of beans and cook them, they can still enjoy visiting markets on the road, says Janet Fletcher, author of "Fresh From the Farmers' Market." "You can still get a wonderful sense of what's grown in that community, and what you can find in restaurants when you dine there," she added.

Nina Planck, author of "Real Food: What to Eat and Why" and founder of London Farmers' Markets, advises travelers to shop as though planning a picnic. "Go straight for the quiche lady, or sausage guy, and see if he has some cured meats," she said. "Or the cheese people and the fruit people."

These food writers and chefs told CNN their picks for farmers' markets across the US.

### 1. **Santa Monica Farmers' Market (Santa Monica, California)**

Curious about local specialties? You might try the Buddha's hand at one of [Santa Monica's four markets](#). You'll know it by its yellow color and its long, curling "fingers." "It's a bizarre little citrus fruit that has almost no meat. It's only about the zest," said [Ruben](#). "I'll never get it in New York, but I know that in December, if I'm on the West Coast, it will be in their farmers' market." California farmers' markets are great for trying new food, he added. "You need a slightly larger demographic and, shall we say, adventurous food culture."

### 2. **Ferry Plaza Farmers Market (San Francisco, California)**

All three food lovers shared praise for the [Ferry Plaza Farmers Market](#). "For the quality and variety of the produce, it's probably the top market in the country," said [Fletcher](#), who trained at Berkeley's Chez Panisse.

### 3. **Green City Market (Chicago, Illinois)**

The Midwest boasts some of the nation's most highly rated farmers' markets. Ruben's favorite is the [Green City Market](#) in Lincoln Park. "For me, in the Chicago market, it wasn't as much about the discovery of something new. It was just the richness that the fertile earth of the center of this country produces, the beautiful produce, the luxuriousness of our land."

### 4. **Portland Farmers Market (Portland, Oregon)**

Got a hankering for wild mushrooms? [The Portland Farmers Market](#) may be your ticket. When Fletcher visited one of the market's six locations, she found a mushroom vendor that had "incredible" wild mushrooms at a price she never would have seen at her local market.

## **5. The Union Square Greenmarket (New York, New York)**

As a cooking instructor, Ruben takes students to farmers' market locations around the city to shop for ingredients, but Union Square is his favorite. "There's a guy who does pheasant here and makes the most incredible smoked sausage -- of 100 percent pheasant meat," said Ruben. "There's another vendor that will grow a potato variety from the Andes, which I will long for in October."

## **6. Santa Fe Farmers Market (Santa Fe, New Mexico)**

[Santa Fe's market](#) is distinctive not only for its size, but for its wide variety of chili peppers. "At the height of chili season, [they] have the country's most elaborate, diverse collection of chilis, because they are so important to that New Mexican way of cooking," said Fletcher. "That's one of the things I look for at a farmers' market: what's unique to a community."

## **7. Dupont Circle FRESHFARM Market (Washington, DC)**

Planck says there is only one kind of authentic farmers' market -- a "pure" farmers' market, where farmers sell directly to customers without middlemen. [Dupont Circle](#) enjoys the best of those farmers' markets, she said. "As a shopper, I look for fresh food above all. If it's fruits and vegetables, and if it's meat or dairy, I'm looking for high-quality foods -- grass-fed meat, pastured eggs -- and I'm looking for someone selling the food who knows what he's talking about," she said.

## **8. Alemany Farmers' Market (San Francisco, California)**

For crops you've probably never seen before, try Alemany for a "global" experience. "The farmers are Southeast Asian, Hispanic, Indian, so it's very culturally diverse in terms of what's available and who the shoppers are," said Fletcher. "[Alemany Market](#) is a great window onto the cultural diversity of the San Francisco Bay Area."

## **9. Columbia City Farmers Market (Seattle, Washington)**

For a great urban market, Planck recommends Seattle's [Columbia City Farmers Market](#). With more than 40 Washington State farmers and small food vendors, travelers are bound to find something to take back with them.

## **10. Flint Farmers' Market (Flint, Michigan)**

[The Flint Farmers' Market](#) in Flint, Michigan, won first place in the "[Love Your Farmers' Market](#)" contest sponsored by Care2 and LocalHarvest last year. "The great thing about a farmers' market is that, if it's thriving, it's because people love it -- and if people love it, it's a good market," said LocalHarvest director Erin Barnett. "They all have their own cultures, but that culture is reflective of the community. And that's what makes it great."