

INVESTMENT & MARKETS



BALLE: Local Heart and Soul

Words by Andrea Newell



MAY 30, 2012

I wasn't prepared for the emotion. I didn't realize that when people got together to talk about supporting and growing local businesses, how much they would care. When the speakers gave the audience members a glimpse into their communities, we could see that they were fighting for their homes, their friends and neighbors, their neighborhoods and a sense of belonging. They are teaching their children to stay, connect and rebuild, instead of leaving for more prosperous cities. But even after seeing all that, I didn't expect the tears.

It was my first time attending a [BALLE \(Business Alliance for Local Living Economies\)](#) conference. Most of the conferences I have been to were about business products or services. No one cries at those. Businesses outline and promote their tools, and many can have great impact on customers and even communities (like the recent [IBM PULSE2012](#) conference I attended), but you felt like you were viewing these products from a mile-high, bird's eye view, whereas the BALLE stories put your boots on the ground and you looked these community members in the eye. You felt their despair when their communities were abandoned and devalued when large employers folded or left town, and cheered when they described how a few

people led the way in revitalizing their small corner of town, and how that feeling, that inspiration spread.

At a time when most are championing a sharing economy versus consumerism, one of the themes at BALLE was ownership. Much of the discussion revolved around ownership of local businesses, ownership of your own career, ownership of your destiny and its place in your community.

We hear a lot about how famously sustainable communities like Austin or San Francisco are on the cutting edge of recycling and reuse and are nationally patted on the back in the media. Their accomplishments are impressive, their residents conscious and conscientious and their sustainable attitude is assumed. But, as [Robin Rather pointed out at SXSW Eco](#), you don't hear stories about the other communities who really need the help - those whose struggles aren't glamorous or in the news and usually only matter to their own residents. The most impressive stories are those where communities that are not steeped in a progressive, sustainable culture manage to turn not only their economies around, but their culture and way of thinking.

Cities that lie in the often-mentioned [Rust Belt](#) are just such towns. For many generations these cities relied on manufacturing and other industries that have not traditionally been known as sustainable, and when those companies and jobs dried up, these communities were left to pick up the pieces and pave an entirely new and unfamiliar path. In places where devastation reigned and sustainability was a foreign idea, real community bloomed.

In Cleveland, [Evergreen Cooperatives](#) is a group of companies that are employee-owned and include a laundry, solar company, and a food production greenhouse. Medrick Addison explained that the companies start all employees as temps for six months, during which they receive three performance

reviews. If they pass, they are hired as employees and given a \$2/hour raise that puts them well above minimum wage, and they receive free medical coverage and are considered worker/owners, sharing in the ups and down of business ownership.

Maggie Anderson, author of [Our Black Year](#), spent an entire year patronizing only black-owned businesses in her hometown of Chicago, sometimes traveling many miles out of her way to do so. She had to pause to steady her voice when she explained that she spent the last year of her mother's life, time she could have spent with her, pursuing this course of action because she believed in the importance of supporting these organizations and encouraging others to do the same.

Amy Kedron, founding member of Buffalo First, wept with pride at the turnaround she illustrated with her slideshow of people in her Rust Belt community stepping up. At Amy's Place (a restaurant), "everyone deserves the dignity of a meal," while the community's only skateboard shop deliberately chose a non-trendy location that afforded them space for the kids to skate off the street. It's known for sheltering those who need it, even going so far as to find some children new homes.

Far from hawking products or services, BALLE promotes community, fosters inspiration, builds determination and instills faith.

"When people try to tell you that small isn't beautiful, just tell your story." Amy Kedron, Buffalo First

"Black children now have a president who looks like them, but they can go their whole lives without meeting a business owner that looks like them." Maggie Anderson, *Our Black Year*

"Ownership is the key. And owning your own job is a beautiful thing. Poverty can't be eradicated by creating jobs, but by creating wealth." Medrick Addison, Evergreen Cooperatives

“Real prosperity is not about money, but strong communities and people.” David Korten, [YES! Magazine](#)

“B Corporations differentiate companies from those with a mission, and those with good marketing plans.” Sarah Van Aken, [SAVA](#)

“The things that are valuable are the ones you invest in (not buy). The more you invest (share and give), the more you get. It’s not what I need to get to feel whole, but what I need to give to feel whole.” Neal Gorenflo, [Shareable](#)

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Andrea Newell has more than ten years of experience designing, developing and writing ERP e-learning materials for large corporations in several industries. She was a consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers and a contract consultant for companies like IBM, BP, Marathon Oil, Pfizer, and Steelcase, among others. She is a writer and former editor at TriplePundit and a social media blog fellow at The Story of Stuff Project. She has contributed to In Good Company (Vault's CSR blog), Evolved Employer, The Glass Hammer, EcoLocalizer and CSRwire. She is a volunteer at the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. You can reach her at andrea.g.newell@gmail.com and [@anewell3p](#) on Twitter.

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