

The Reclamation of Downtown; AHA! 's Economic Impact

By Matthew Ferreira

Decision to do something about it

For the older generations who grew up in New Bedford, many of whom are now grandparents, the downtown area holds volumes of good memories—memories of charming streets crowded with people talking, shopping, and simply enjoying the unique vibe of the city's social epicenter of the time. However the coming decades would see the closing of businesses and the desertion of many dynamics that made the area into the vibrant hometown marketplace it once stood.

In 1999 a small group of like-minded individuals decided to do something about it. Now, nearly a decade and a half later the folks behind AHA! and their dedicated partners continue to restore and even surpass downtown's former glory from the inside out, tapping into the infinite resource of the city's own artistic spirit.

For the 1,500-3,000 visitors on average who fill the streets every second Thursday night of the month to wander through the seemingly endless trails of festivities, AHA! Night is a few hours of consistently unique, educational and culturally enriching entertainment openly available to them and their families free of charge. For downtown businesses, AHA! Night is a dependable financial stimulus and vessel of general good fortune, placing them in the midst of thousands of new faces every month and attaching the universal appeal of the arts culture and interactive fun to their brand. The economic impact is undeniable.

Increasing Art & Culture

"When you really look at New Bedford's development," says AHA!

Director Lee Heald, "... you had whaling, then you had the textiles, fishing, and then the next piece of the puzzle is the arts and culture community and 'place-making' or tourism. This really is part of the survival or development strategy for New Bedford at this point and to be successful at it you need to create a climate that's comfortable for the people who are part of the community and from there you'll attract other people in as you become 'the regional place to be'. We are all looking for that face to face, on the street, intimate scale of being able to be together."



*Fun is contagious during
AHA! – Photo by Stephen
Dupuis*

According to a report published by the Umass Center for Policy Analysis in 2009, titled "The Economic Impact of the Vibrant Marketplace in Downtown New Bedford..." it was determined that AHA! Nights' free programming generated a total of 634,570 throughout the fiscal year. This means that for every dollar spent out of AHA!'s \$289,093 budget for FY2009, \$2.50 was returned in economic impacts. For the state's \$35,000 in grant funding for AHA! through the Massachusetts Cultural Council, about \$21 were leveraged for every dollar spent. As the report states, "This result is significant because there was almost no economic activity in downtown New Bedford in Thursday nights before AHA!. The majority of cultural institutions and businesses were closed during the evening hours, thus much of

the economic activity generated on Thursday nights is a result of AHA!."

Help from the Massachusetts Cultural Council

Four years later, though another in-depth study has yet to be released, word on the cobblestone street is that the continuous "asset-based community development" project has only been gaining traction, pushing its own boundaries with each coming year. The Massachusetts Cultural Council, a consistent and generous source of funding for AHA! since its inception, has on many occasions used AHA! as a model for other cities to follow in attempts to initiate their own arts and culture night, pushing what started out as a good idea into a nationally recognized format for any community seeking similar results.

Testimony among downtown business owners to the positive impact AHA! has had on themselves and their neighbors is anything but hard to come by.

"In the past five years I've been here I've noticed a growth in enthusiasm for AHA!," says Freestones restaurant owner Joe Costa. "There's a lot more people showing up and a lot more programming going on. I've watched a general growth in downtown period and I feel AHA! is responsible for a big part of that. There's a lot of other things too like the festivals and everything but AHA! is the most consistent and I think that really helps."

Like any other AHA! partner in the food business, the most obvious effect the night has on Freestones is a substantial increase in foot traffic undoubtedly stemming directly from the crowds AHA! brings in, even requiring extra staff in their case. While some customers slide through for a bite in passing either before or in between AHA! programming, others stop in to catch Jeff Gobush and his partner Tom Hiller playing acoustic renditions at what has become their regular monthly AHA! gig at the legendary New Bedford eatery.

“Earlier in the evening it’s always a lot of families stopping in before they start venturing off. Later around when the music starts we attract a lot of small groups of local folks from the 30 and up crowd who may have been walking around for a while.” Mr. Costa says. “We’ve always done live music on Thursday nights so that works out well being aligned with AHA! Night. Jeff Gobush and Tom Hiller do a nice mix of older and newer stuff.”

Bond among business partners

Besides the arts culture and entertainment programming AHA! offers, perhaps one of its most impressive components is the sense of camaraderie that can be openly observed between downtown businesses who might usually see each other as competition. According to Ms. Heald this spirit of mutual benefit is the norm amongst the partners.

“The businesses will cooperate and recommend the other partners as possible next stops to visitors because they see themselves as part of this connected space and they speak well of each other,” says the AHA! director. “It’s quite remarkable. People are always willing to promote the whole, understanding ‘a rising tide floats all ships’.” Freestones stands as a prime example of this phenomenon.



AHA! was conceived of in

has helped revitalize the downtown area – Photo from AHA's Facebook page.

“We end up being kind of an information booth as well as a restaurant and a place for music on that night,” says Mr. Costa. “The day before AHA! Night they give us copies of the schedule and people might ask us ‘Hey, where’s Gallery X?’ and we point them in the right direction. If people don’t really know what to do we’ll show them the schedule and help them figure out a plan. Every partner wants AHA! to be successful so we’re more than happy to help each other out.”

Other partners in the dining industry, owner of Cork Wine & Tapas, The Rose Alley, and Pizan’s Pizzeria Jay Lanagan and Café Arpeggio owner Rob Gould also share in the collectively communal experience of being associated with AHA!.

The more businesses, the better!

“Our overall philosophy is the more businesses that are down here, the better it is for everyone and we’re glad that AHA! sees it the same way,” says Mr. Lanagan.

The entrepreneur, who has made his 3 downtown restaurants openly available for a range of AHA! programming from music to arm-wrestling competitions, notices the impact the monthly celebration has not only on the registers but also on his staff.

“We anticipate that every AHA! Night will bring more people downtown and into our restaurants so a lot of the people working that night are happy because they know they’ll make some extra money. And it’s dependable—you know despite the weather or any other factors that it’s going to be a good night.”

At Café Arpeggio, one of the earliest AHA! partners and former steering committee member Mr. Gould doesn’t think twice to

reach out to a business he believes might need a helping hand.

“With businesses in general it’s very hard to get people to have the kind of mindset the partners have because a lot of people are so self-centered but that’s not the spirit of AHA!,” Mr. Gould says. “For example, if a gallery is on the outskirts of AHA! Night and they’re not getting a lot of traffic I might say ‘Well why don’t you put some of your pieces in the café? We fill up early—a lot of people will see it,’ and in return they’ll take some of my menus and put them down there; so everybody helps everybody to succeed and really AHA! is what holds everything together.”



Artwork courtesy of UGLY gallery in conjunction with 3rd EyE Youth Empowerment, Inc.

Being an AHA! participant for over a decade, Mr. Gould has gotten to see it grow as an event and an organization from ground level.

“When I opened up downtown I was one of the only restaurants down there and there were a lot of empty storefronts,” he says. “I was Chairman of the Convention of Visitors Bureau at the time and we were giving out grant money to AHA! so I was familiar with what they were doing. Like anyone else, I was seeing the kind of foot traffic they had and I said ‘Well, this is something we can capitalize on,’ and right from the start it was good for us. We’d fill right up and it still

continues to be that way every month.”

Emphasis on quality relationships

One of the most apparent threads that seems to weave through all things-AHA! is the organization’s emphasis on quality relationships—whether forging new ones based on mutual need and potential benefit or mining existing ones to continue finding new ways for those involved to help one another. One example illustrative of this concept in action is this month’s ‘Police Vs. Fire B-Ball Challenge’ –part of the year’s ‘March in Motion’ theme.

“This month we have a basketball game between the police and fire departments. We work very closely with them and they’ve always been great to us so I thought, ‘Well we’ve got all this textile stuff going on this month but the theme is really ‘March in Motion’ so let’s think about a March Madness basketball game with the New Bedford police taking on the fire department.

Then I remembered Nativity Prep School had mentioned after we’d done some programming with them in the past that they’d be open to us doing something there,” says Ms. Heald, who also found sponsorship for the game by way of New Bedford-based backboard company True Bounce, who happens to have built the hoops at the game’s chosen venue. “The school said, ‘Sure, our place would be great to use’, so a lot of stuff just falls together nicely because of the relationships we’ve formed through the years.”

“Anytime there’s a problem...” says Mr. Gould, who Ms. Heald confirms as an invaluable and diverse AHA! resource, “I’m the first one Lee (Heald) emails because I know a lot of senators and a lot of people involved with giving out Adams grant money so I’ve written a lot of supportive letters and things like that to make sure we always get our funding.”



Owner and head instructor of Yoga on Union Juliet Loranger has shown her support by making her space available for programming.

“I’m not a regular programmer but I’ve opened up the yoga studio to be turned into an art gallery at times,” says Ms. Loranger, who scheduled the grand opening of her facility to take place on an AHA! Night back in 2011. “Now I never hold classes on AHA! Night so I make no direct money from it but I think it’s just an important thing to be a part of and promote as a member of this community. However some people that might have been too timid to sign up for a yoga class have come back to try it out after stopping in for an AHA! thing. I think just having had the opportunity to walk around and check it out makes some people feel comfortable enough to do it who otherwise probably wouldn’t have.”

Rare cooperation between businesses

Aside from creating exceptionally rare cooperation between businesses, another trend that’s come along with AHA! is organizations aligning their own events and programming to land on an AHA! Night to benefit from the extra foot traffic.

“The New Bedford Art Museum (NBAM) benefits from the vital artistic culture of New Bedford thanks in part to their monthly participation in AHA!,” says NBAM Director and longtime partner Jennifer Lagrotteria. “NBAM schedules exhibition openings, lectures, and special receptions to coincide with AHA! Night to best reach the community with free

programming and fulfill its mission 'to engage the public in experiencing, understanding and appreciating art'. The average attendance for the museum is 600 members and visitors a month (including) 180-250 visitors who visit on ... AHA! night. Though the economic impact is not immediately felt through sales in the Museum Store and Regions Gallery, the AHA visitor tends to sign-up for the NBAM newsletter, make return visits to the museum and often becomes a paying member."

Dean of Umass Dartmouth's College of Visual & Performing Arts Adrian Tio expresses a similar sentiment regarding the school's Star Store with its ideal AHA! location on the corner of Purchase and Union Streets offering the public a unique chance to witness works of art in progress through various stages of production as a form of programming as well as other culturally enriching opportunities.

"Though AHA! Nights do not have a direct financial impact on the CVPA, the monthly events do bring a broader audience into the Star Store beyond our university community," says Mr. Tio. "This audience can visit the University Art Gallery, attend lectures, and participate in sales of student work or workshops that are open to the public."

Proprietor of the nearby UGLY ("U Gotta Love Yourself") Gallery Jeremiah Hernandez tells the story of how a type of alternative programming gravitated to his establishment and flourished through the power of AHA! Night.

Revitalizer of creative energy and genuine goodwill

"We have made great connections and built many relationships due to AHA! Night. One relationship we formed from an AHA! experience is the Hip-Hop Cipher. We noticed a group of young men freestyle rapping on the corner of Purchase and Union Streets in October 2011. We approached them and asked if it was something they do every AHA! and they replied, 'yes'," says Mr. Hernandez who also reports his hands-down biggest crowds come on AHA! Night. "We then invited them to join the

gallery every AHA! there after and the group has grown at times to 20-plus urban youth making use of our gallery to create music and add a level of experience to the gallery that really expresses our goal which is to deliver 'cultured street culture' from a base of love. ... We never in a million years could have predicted the vibe and socially relevant experience that it has had thus far. AHA! gives us an opportunity to engage an audience we don't always have access too."

As AHA! has become the potent, all-inclusive revitalizer of creative energy and genuine goodwill known today, it seems hopeful that the movement will continue to cultivate ways to thrive and sustain itself for the greater good of the city both from an economic aspect and a cultural one.

"As more businesses come downtown and more of a mix happens AHA! will continue to grow like it has been," says Mr. Gould. "It can't happen with just non-profits, or just restaurants, etc.—It has to be a mix of businesses and as I see the mix growing I see AHA! absolutely growing."

Educating neighbors and always thinking of the next move

"To me it's really about educating our neighbors about all that is good in New Bedford," says Steering Committee Co-Chair Stacie Charbonneau Hess, who has worked alongside Dr. Heald to cultivate relationships with sponsors and continue to find new sources of funding. "We need to reach out and connect with the community. When we form fiscal relationships with our sponsors, we are really connecting with people: bankers, property managers, doctors—all who have a stake in the success of downtown, and the city as a whole."

"We're always thinking about the next move," says an ever-enthusiastic Ms. Heald who reportedly has her sights set on establishing a partnership with the city's pier for summer programming. "I think eventually we would like ... to move out to different areas of the city and really focus on the resources of those places and think about what arts and

culture means there; to look at the architecture and art of the north end, south end, west end, and make people feel welcome like we've been able to do downtown."