

## Belinda Stewart: Restoring Small-Town Mississippi

By: Emma Moffet

Bursts of crimson and golden light filled the skyline of the serene countryside in the Mississippi Delta. The light cast a glow across the grassy field and provided a few moments of illumination before dipping beneath the horizon.

The sun may have been setting, but Belinda Stewart was still hard at work. With a keen eye, she analyzed every facet of her environment and attentively watched how the light rose and fell upon the hillside. The rest of the world saw empty space, but she envisioned it as a home that would be nestled atop the grassy hillside.

The family who hired her firm wanted to experience that breathtaking sunset every day, and Stewart intended to go above and beyond to fulfill their dream. While Stewart could have taken her architectural genius anywhere in the nation, she chose to house her business, Belinda Stewart Architects, in Eupora, Mississippi, because of her belief in the power of small towns to inspire social change.

After earning her degree in architecture from Mississippi State University, Stewart quickly left her home in Webster County so that she could experience life outside of Mississippi. However, Stewart said every place she visited and her new home in North Carolina left her heart unfulfilled. Stewart said she missed the beauty of small-town Mississippi and realized it was often unappreciated by the rest of the world.

Only five years after leaving, Stewart returned to Webster County and opened her own architecture firm in Eupora. At the time, Stewart was one of the only female run architecture firms in Mississippi, but Stewart's love for her work and her clients helped her push through any obstacle that arose.

“The most fun I have is the first time I meet a client,” Stewart said. “I get to hear their dreams and dream with them. Nothing is real yet and you don’t know if it is going to work yet. Anything is possible at that point.”

Stewart said she recognized the political nature of her environment and chose to include her full name in the name of her firm so that any person who chose to work with her would know exactly who they would be hiring.

Dan Burchfield, former mayor of Eupora, has known Stewart since the start of her architecture firm and has worked closely with her on local architectural projects. The most notable of these projects in Burchfield’s mind was the restoration of the train depot in downtown Eupora where Stewart worked diligently to preserve local history and combine the history with innovative designs. “Belinda goes beyond architecture and incorporates social planning,” Burchfield said via phone.

While many people find it hard to grasp the depth of Stewart’s work, she said that architecture is her second nature.

Building something from nothing is a part of Stewart’s everyday routine. However, behind the glamour of design, Stewart must spend extensive time researching each property. Every piece of land or building Stewart encounters is rich in cultural history and environmental factors, both of which are equally important in her design process.

Joe Hayes, retired alderman of Eupora, grew up with Stewart and vividly recalls childhood memories of the two in church. Hayes was overjoyed when he discovered that Stewart was coming back to Eupora.

Over the years, Hayes said he has watched the success and depth of Stewart’s impact on small towns across Mississippi and believes she stands as a testament to the impact one

individual can make when they choose to bring their abilities to Mississippi. Hayes, stunned for words, said there is no one else in the world like Stewart, who runs her own architecture firm and is mayor of The Village of Walthall.

A pre-civil-war store front that once plagued a community turned into a quaint local library at the hands of Stewart. The empty, decrepit room now houses a picturesque story-time center for children and seamlessly brings members throughout the community together. In the center of the room is a circular checkout counter that furthers the open and inviting tone Stewart worked tirelessly to incorporate.

Stewart's firm works primarily in restoration in rural communities, particularly redesigning buildings that are in very heavy community use. It is these restoration opportunities that drive Stewart and motivate her to continue her work re-building small-town Mississippi.

Stewart has also designed multiple buildings for Mississippi State University. Stewart's most recent project with the university, Old Main Academic Center, evolved from a parking garage to a multiuse building that is used for both as a parking garage and as a building for classrooms.

In every aspect of designing and planning, Stewart worked diligently to create a building that she would be proud of and that would help her home state. Countless trips to universities in Georgia, North Carolina and Alabama helped Stewart form her plans.

Stewart also sought advice from key education-based architects and worked within the university's budget in order to bring the most cutting-edge technological advancements to MSU.

Through many meetings with university leaders, Stewart was able to design the Old Main Academic Center. While that five-story building may seem overwhelming to design for

onlookers, Stewart believes that her designs, like everything else in life, start from the same place. “You start with an idea,” Stewart said.

Back in her office, Stewart takes a depth breath and remembers that sunset in the Delta, the family she is working with and the promise of a new home that she has made. A whole process of land evaluation and applying for permits has already begun. Ideas and lists for this new project are swirling through Stewart’s brain, and she could easily be overwhelmed. Instead, she smiles and looks at her desk.

Making a difference in her small-town and countless communities across the South takes time and hard work. To Stewart, this Delta family is another piece to the puzzle of building a stronger and more beautiful Mississippi.