



Greensburg: The Story Behind the Story **Excerpt of Interview with Greensburg Greentown founders Daniel Wallach & Catherine Hart by Simran Sethi**

Simran Sethi: As the 1 year anniversary of the tornado approaches, what are your feelings, looking at the progress of what's happened in Greensburg? How would you kind of characterize where things were on May 5th and where things are today?

Daniel Wallach: I would say the most striking thing, I think, is the progress. We've come a very long way in a very short period of time. When you consider the psychological impact of the experience in the community and the trauma and the ability to regroup from that and not just come back, but come back much bigger and better and different, I think it's awe-inspiring that you can rebuild an entire community in that period of time. If many different elements didn't come together, an aligning of the stars, it couldn't happen. All these things came at just the right time. That to me, is what's powerful.

Catherine Hart: I would add to that, not only people are recovering from the trauma and rebuilding, but just what they've done to learn about the green piece, the sustainability and energy efficiency. You go to any of these city council meetings or business redevelopment meetings—people are bandying about these terms that ten months ago they had no familiarity with. So now they're talking about LEED platinum and wind turbines- it's just absolutely astonishing. And the amount of natural leadership that has emerged from this disaster is just so inspiring [among] people who never, I think, even knew what it felt like to be empowered. People are going to hundreds of meetings and learning and sharing with their neighbors. All these people who are running for office- I mean they had 15 people running for 5 city council seats. There's just a groundswell of community-building going on that is absolutely inspiring.

Simran Sethi: It's extraordinary to see how people really see the results of their actions, so they know that they have a direct impact on the future of their town will be. I was blown away...not even LEED gold- you want LEED platinum? You were instrumental in helping some of this move forward. How did you initially broach this? People were struggling just to put the pieces of their lives back together after a really horrible event, and there you were saying "I've got an idea for you." How do you get buy-in for rebuilding in an environmentally friendly way, when people wouldn't even necessarily identify themselves as environmentalists?

Daniel Wallach: That, to me, is the most significant outcome of this, personally, is to see an issue of such importance become depoliticized and embraced as their own in this community that otherwise wouldn't be interested in it because of



the political associations and affiliations. It's done by respect. It's done by talking to people. We spent a lot of time just talking to people and listening. What I said to everybody that I spoke with was, "We're not here to impose something on you—we're not imposing an agenda on you from outside and this is ridiculous that environmentalism is considered a political issue." As conservatives, as independent types of people, it's just so easy to frame the environmental challenges we face and the opportunities in language that they understood and related to, that it was, that it happened. It wasn't that hard—it was a lot of listening and a lot of respect. . .and helping people see the natural resource in the adversity. That was my favorite parts of the experience. . .where you take the adversity and make something really wonderful of out it- It makes suffering and adversity much less fearful.

Simran Sethi: What the world says to you is "Move on, snap out of it, slap up a trailer, get your house back in order and move forward." Was that challenging to support people and be patient through this process?

Daniel Wallach: Huge- the most challenging. Psychologically, when your world is turned upside down—literally, you lose your business, your lose your home, your family, your friends and the entire community that many of these people grew up in—it's devastating to the psyche. And any Psychology 101 class will tell you that the first thing in a situation like that you want is you want is what you know and what is familiar and what is comfortable. This is something that I heard early on this had been tried in other communities and hadn't worked- because people want to build back quickly. [Our question was], "How can we approach it in a way that honors that but helps people see that it is worth the wait?". . . What happens if you slap it back together? You can see towns around the country where that's done—it's like trailer parks or subdivisions. People in rural communities who have had all the character they've had in a community like this, they don't want that. When you say to people, here's the vision of what this place can be. That inspired people, probably the most.

Rural communities generally are dying—and this one is no exception, so that was another factor. People said, "We are dying, we really don't want to come back that way. So why not take this tragedy and make it something better?" The one that was probably most powerful relating to the green initiative was talking about what this could mean [to] multiple generations revitalizing the community. You know, the average age of a farmer is 55— it's not a sustainable model. We talked about what green meant, especially to younger generations. People got it because they talked to their children who lived in other places, and the response was profoundly positive. All of it was about just making people feel better. You know you're not going to feel good for a while. Everybody knows that regardless of what you do, no matter how fast you build back, you're going to be uncomfortable for a while. Why not pace yourself



a little bit more and the rewards are going to be really great in proportion to that wait.

Catherine Hart: I think it really helped that some of the city leadership was in the position of choosing to slow down- like the mayor and the city council people and the city administrator. They have held this green vision, too. Here they are living in FEMA trailers and temporary housing themselves while they're leading the town through this. . .really setting a tone for the entire community. I think people really responded to that as well.

Daniel Wallach: Absolutely, the credit goes to the Mayor—the original mayor [Lonnie McCollum] who retired a few weeks after the storm, and [John Janssen] the gentleman who took over as mayor and many of the city council members and city administrator. They got it and again, they had vision and they said we're not going to respond to that short-term illusion of satisfaction and completion. That to me took remarkable political courage to do that and I knew [John Janssen] would suffer for that- because he was that lightning rod [and] had this vision. Part of the challenge for him was that he wasn't more political and maybe sensitive in responding to people's concerns about it. He was clear and moved things along track and that's why it got done.

Simran Sethi: Do you think green is permeating into people beyond just the idea of green rebuild? And how is the whole town impacted by all the media attention they are getting?

Daniel Wallach: Part of what I've liked about the process is that people here are just naturally green, for a lot of reasons. They are the original recyclers, they do not waste, they live off the land. . .There is an archetypal shift happening in our world-I think this is one of the power points- it's because it's a red red state and a red red region in a red red state that makes it so significant. There is an entire group politically that has no problem with environmentalism and embracing it, but there is a group that has been very antagonistic towards it- that has kept a lot of progress gridlocked in this country. Now [that] this whole voting bloc is making it their own, politically it's a whole new ballgame. For these people to come around and see it from a different angle, asking, "Why import oil when we can look to other technologies?" And in the looking for other technologies, create jobs and opportunities for [their' kids, it is a no-brainer. From my vantage point that is the most significant thing happening.

Green is exploding all over the country and the world. The reason it's so significant in Greensburg is that it so reflects the archetypal shift better than anywhere else and in a smaller, more precise way that you can get your arms around. It's almost a living soundbite in a sense. It's so easy to tell the story about what's happening. It is compelling that people say, "This little conservative



town in the middle of nowhere is taking a leadership role. “ It’s just so dissonant that it makes it really interesting. I think it will continue to be because it’s not a surface thing that is happening, this is a shift that is taking place down to the roots. It’s going to be fascinating to watch this community because they are leading and they will lead and where it goes will continue to be a compelling story. I’m convinced it’s not a flash in the pan.

Simran Sethi: Why hasn’t something like this taken hold in New Orleans, with so much more money and media attention?

Catherine Hart: I think the scale there is just so overwhelming. When you see how challenging it is to take a community of 1400 and work through these issues, and people who know each other and know each others’ skills and strengths and families. I just don’t know how in the world that could possibly translate to a town of over 2 million people or whatever we’re talking about in New Orleans. Plus the population here is so homogenous, I think that makes it a lot easier. People are all of similar faith and ethnic backgrounds. Their families have lived here for 150 years and there is a connection among each other that you don’t find in the city.

Simran Sethi: That’s what makes it so surprising about you two as people from the outside who have not been part of Greensburg for generations and generations, and were able to have such an extraordinary impact.

Daniel Wallach: Timing is everything. We were in the right place at the right time. We were outsiders with enough of a connection to be seen differently from all the other outsiders who were coming in and trying to tell people what to do. This is what I think is lacking in New Orleans. I don’t believe FEMA has learned a lot, I don’t know that it ever could. There is a tremendous psychological component that must be addressed first before anything else. You’ve got to make people feel safe, comfortable, inspired about the future, cared for. There are a number of things that we were able to do as a community on a smaller scale—it couldn’t happen in the same way in New Orleans. Part of the problem with green initiatives and movements is they are way too focused on the material level. There’s got to be a direct connect to the heart