



**“If a free society cannot help the many who are poor,
it cannot save the few who are rich.”**

— John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

*A recent participant in Delta
Directions “Baby University,”
this child’s expression says it all.
Real success and social change
in the Delta CAN BE achieved
one small step at a time.*

The Mississippi Delta has been called the most Southern place on earth,

a blend of cultural richness, fertile soil, courageous spirit and painful history. Blues music evolved in the fields. Key chapters of the U.S. civil rights struggle unfolded in its counties. Freed slaves cleared hardwood wilderness to found the historic town of Mound Bayou. A century later, Deltans Fannie Lou Hamer, Aaron Henry and Unita Blackwell (named a MacArthur genius in 1992) became national voices for racial and economic justice. While the Delta sits at the bottom of national measures of health, education and financial well-being, the area is also the cradle of American music. Jazz, rock 'n' roll, country and gospel, after all, each grew in part out of the Delta blues tradition. The region's humanity holds the kind of rich complexity that prompted state native William Faulkner to observe "to understand the world, you first have to understand Mississippi."

The Delta is a microcosm of the creative, social and economic forces that underlie America at its core.

Embracing the region's unique legacy, a potent innovative force for regional change is making its mark: Delta Directions. The effort is actually the story of two organizational streams that have converged into a unified front, a multi-faceted initiative partnering with Deltans to improve health and financial well being. Although the initiative is Mississippi-based, it also pulls in influential partners from beyond the state's borders.



Unita Blackwell



Mound Bayou Bank, c. 1910



Fannie Lou Hamer

A Consortium for Delta Synergy

The Delta Directions story opens with the Delta Directions Consortium. For over a decade, organizations and academics engaged in Delta work have maintained an alliance to learn of one another's work and seek ways to amplify impact. John Green, director of the University of Mississippi Center for Population Studies, explained the original structure as "a network of nonprofits, universities and foundations committed to health and economic development in the Delta region" through an interdisciplinary approach.

There was particular potential in linking academic researchers with nonprofits to develop programs and policy shaped by specific research findings. The Consortium focuses on making those needed connections between researchers and practitioners in order to create and carry through sustainable and evidence-based change. Delta Directions exists "at the intersection of research and practice," explained Dr. Green. The Consortium first operated loosely with leadership from Dr. Arthur Cosby of Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center as well as from Dr. David Mirvis of the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis. The Consortium's approach and mission statement:

"Potential for change in the Delta is so multifaceted and complex that it requires the contribution of various disciplines and professions, including health, social sciences, law, and policy, among others."

"We Could Make a Difference"

In 2002, the second stream of the Delta Directions narrative began with a Mississippi road trip taken by Pug Winokur and his mother Marge Winokur. The two arrived for an announced barbecue festival in Clarksdale that never materialized. The Winokurs were taken, however, with the small town's richness: genuine goodwill, along with its treasury of great music and—thanks to Abe's on U.S. 61—ample barbecue, festival or not. The Winokurs were also struck by the diminished quality of life of many residents. Much of the adult population was poor and unhealthy. Youth faced sparse opportunity. Racial disparities remained.

For two nights running, the Winokurs visited the eatery Madidi. On the second night, they met co-owners Bill Luckett and actor Morgan Freeman. Mr. Freeman lives nearby on land that had once belonged to his parents. The actor invited the pair to the Ground Zero Blues Club, a downtown juke joint that he also co-owns with Luckett, who is now the town's mayor. Before long, Marge Winokur and the Oscar-winning Freeman were shooting pool while Pug Winokur sipped a Budweiser.

Moved by Clarksdale's richness and challenges, Pug and his wife Dee began exploring how they might participate in efforts to improve Delta life. An admirer of the Gates Foundation's mission to address health and extreme poverty in Africa with a seemingly bottomless endowment, Mr. Winokur wondered what a smaller-scale project might look like in the Delta. "We don't have unlimited resources like the Gates Foundation, but the South is part of my roots," said Mr. Winokur, born in Columbus, Georgia.

Mr. Winokur pictured partnering in a strategic, directed effort. “With modest resources, we could make a difference in the areas of economic development and public health,” Mr. Winokur said. “Possibly, if we come up with good ideas that work in the Delta, they could be tested and exported to other places.” The Winokurs’ initial endeavor was co-funding Delta programs with the Dreyfus Health Foundation. As time passed, the Winokurs decided that a representative on the ground in the Delta would enhance their impact. The future concept of the Delta Fellow was in formation.

Delta Directions: Partners in Engagement

The two streams of the Delta Directions story merge when the Winokurs were invited to a Delta Consortium meeting in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 2006. The Winokurs hoped to increase their impact by partnering with Consortium members and potentially bringing together research and programming.

The creation of a Delta Fellowship became an example of how to fuse resources from within the region with those from outside. The Delta Fellow—there have been four since 2008—is a position jointly funded by Harvard Law School, supported by the Winokur Family Foundation, and Mississippi State’s Social Science Research Center (SSRC). The Fellow works through the SSRC, with support from Harvard Law School faculty and students. Chosen for typically two-year, Clarksdale-based terms, the Delta Fellow connects with community members to identify potential ways to improve Deltans’ well-being via programs and maps out policy priorities to achieve targeted change responsive to community

needs. The Fellow helps coordinate other Consortium members, creates and manages innovative projects, supervises pro-bono law student volunteers servicing the area, and drafts and facilitates policy change on an organizational, state and local level to promote public health and economic development. While each Fellow is new and brings a personal set of strengths, interests and pursuits to the post, there is an organizational commitment, both by the Fellow and Delta Directions, to continue existing efforts and projects of previous Fellows.

Along with coordinating with the existing Delta Consortium, the Winokurs also encouraged additional Harvard participation in Delta Directions work. The Harvard Mississippi Delta Project was founded in 2009. Through the project, participating Harvard Law students work closely with the residing Delta Fellow on the joint mission of improving



public health and economic development. Since its inception, over three hundred students have dedicated their time and talents to promoting

change in the region. Under the umbrella of four different issue-based teams—Health, Food, Economic Development, and Children and Youth—students have worked with local clients throughout the Delta region and provided valuable legal and policy research and analysis. While heavily sourced from Harvard Law School, the Mississippi Delta Project has engaged students all over the university who have an interest in this work. In addition to conducting long-distance research and sending down students from each of the four teams, each spring break a group of students comes to the Delta to complete a service-leadership trip,

working intensively with the Delta Fellow and a local client to create transformative change.

“Bringing student energy to bear in the Delta has been one of the biggest successes,” believes Emily Broad Leib, the first Delta Fellow, now a Harvard Law School professor. She founded the nation’s first food law and policy clinic at Harvard, based on her work in the Delta. “I’d like to see us bring in more young academic scholars to work in the Delta and have them feel this is their organization.” The project gives Harvard students and faculty hands-on meaningful fieldwork in one of the nation’s most challenging corners. “It is about taking young, bright, energetic students and giving them the chance to serve this needy community while learning more about law, policy, community development and the issues of poverty and rural America,” said Ms. Broad Leib.



EMILY BROAD LEIB

Over time, the Consortium has refined its health and development work to include food systems, children and youth issues, various areas of health and economic development, and the organizational, institutional and policy frameworks needs to address these issues.

Part of Delta Directions’ streamlined strategy is operating as a fiscal entity through the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, a Consortium partner. Delta Directions operates as one of the Hernando, Mississippi-based 501(c)(3) organization’s local funds to avoid the

“Bringing student energy to bear in the Delta has been one of the biggest successes.”

administrative costs of a stand-alone organization. The alliance with the Community Foundation confirms Delta Directions’ identity as an on-the-ground local community partner. The foundation has also acted as a partner with Delta Directions for change by awarding Delta Directions several grants for local projects, including pilot funding for Baby University, an early-childhood intervention program created by the current Fellow and a grant to assist in opening the region’s first Diaper Bank in 2016.

The Delta Directions Consortium

At this point, participating organizations in the Delta Consortium include the following:

- Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center
- University of Mississippi Center for Population Studies
- University of Mississippi School of Law
- Harvard Law School
- Harvard School of Public Health
- University of Tennessee Health Science Center
- Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi
- Winokur Family Foundation

In addition, numerous nonprofits and community-based organizations serve as partners and clients to the work of the Consortium.

PROJECTS

Delta Directions has focused on four issues:

- Food Systems
- Public Health
- Children and Youth
- Economic Empowerment

FOOD SYSTEMS

One of the world's most fertile agricultural belts, the Delta imports nearly all of its food. Food purchases from local farmers account for only .03 percent of Delta food purchases, according to 2012 research by Crossroads Resource Center. In fact, many Delta communities qualify as food deserts, defined as pockets with no nearby supermarket (over a mile away in urban environments, ten in rural ones). Delta locals without regular transportation often have no access to vegetables and fruits, increasing the likelihood of obesity and its associated health problems. Lacking access to stores, locals are often forced to grocery shop at nearby convenience stores and gas stations stocked with junk-calorie processed food items. Rural Delta counties average one supermarket per 190.5 square miles, according to a Southern Rural Development Center report. Statewide, over 70 percent of SNAP-eligible families live more than 30 miles from a grocery store, according to the same SRDC report.

From its inception, Delta Directions has taken a leading role in strengthening the supply of local healthy food and the network of food growers. Efforts hold promise not only in terms of better health but also in an improved community economy. Project research indicates

that boosting the purchase of locally grown produce to 15 percent of the average Delta resident's food budget — a matter of \$6.71 a week — would generate an extra \$269 million annually to the local economy. Delta Directions programming has supported the development of these local food systems in the Delta and its advocacy has brought about policy changes that have supported local, healthy, sustainable foods throughout the state.

HERE ARE SUCCESS STORIES FROM DELTA DIRECTIONS FOOD-SUPPLY WORK:

Mississippi Food Policy Council

One of the first and most elemental achievements of Delta Directions was organizing the Mississippi Food Policy Council (mississippifoodpolycouncil.com). In collaboration with the Mississippi Health Advocacy Program, Delta Directions founded the council in 2010. Council membership is made up of stakeholders that include farmers, farmers market managers, health educators and health professionals. The mission of the Mississippi Food Policy Council is to educate, advocate and propose enhanced food and farm policies to build healthy communities and strengthen local food systems. Delta Directions remains an active member of the organization, and the Mississippi Delta Fellow provides ongoing support through research projects, technical assistance and overall Council development. With the help of Delta Directions and the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic, the Mississippi Food Policy Council changed seven laws over four years, impacting local food and food production in the state.

These laws included eliminating sales tax at farmers markets, creating a Farm to School week, creating an interagency Farm to School task force, state authorization for city and county governments to fiscally support farmers markets and a state “cottage food” law allowing low-risk foods made in a home kitchen to be offered for sale. In addition to its policy successes, Delta Directions has partnered with the Council to host annual statewide Farm to School conferences and a variety of other meetings and events. (mississippifoodpolicycouncil.com/farm2cafeteriaconference/)

Farm to School Initiative

Delta Directions has made essential contributions to the Mississippi Farm to School Network. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm to School programs have expanded to 54 school districts in the state, including eight in the Delta. Farm to School programs encourage school cafeterias to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables, a practice that not only teaches better nutrition to students, but also offers an income stream to local growers. In the rural Delta, Farm to School programs offer the triple benefits of providing fresher, healthier food to students, giving small farmers a new market and strengthening the local economy. When Delta Directions began, there were no direct Farm to School programs operating in the state. There was, however, a hope among food advocates and non-profits to make Farm to School a working practice in Mississippi.

Mississippi Farm to School Network Co-Chair Sunny Baker credits

Delta Directions with conducting the legal and policy analyses that transformed Farm to School from an idea to a working reality in the state. “What Delta Directions did was take that interest and put it into policy change and programmatic change.”

Delta Directions partnered in the release of a 2011 report by Harvard Law School’s Mississippi Delta Project and its Health Law and Policy Clinic comprehensively examining the benefits of and barriers to Farm to School programs in Mississippi schools. The research determined that both small farmers and school food-service operators were unaware of the opportunity and unfamiliar with the purchasing procedure. Also, state regulations and equipment requirements potentially made participation impractical for small and mid-size farmers. Interest

grew in the Mississippi Food Policy Council and the state legislature, bringing about the creation of a legislative task force on the issue.

Delta Directions assisted the task force and helped to pass two pieces of Farm to School legislation. State legislation recognizing Farm to School initiatives was signed into Mississippi law in May 2012. The bill encouraged schools to begin initiatives and serve at least one locally grown food in school meals. Another bill established an interagency Farm to School council. Previously, the Farm to School concept overlapped the agency turfs of the state departments of agriculture and education, as well as of the Cooperative Extension Service, according to Ms. Baker. “All these agencies were involved with Farm to School, but no one was talking to one another,” said Ms. Baker.

Two publications, *Expanding Farm to School in Mississippi:*

“What Delta Directions did was take that interest and put it into policy change and programmatic change.”

Analysis and Recommendations and *A Step by Step Guide to Purchasing Mississippi Products*, were produced through Harvard Law School and made available by Delta Directions. For several years, Delta Directions partnered with two other local organizations to fund a Farm to School coordinator specifically for the Delta. The strong participation of Delta school districts in Farm to School points in part to the local work of Delta Directions, said Ms. Baker, who spoke on Mississippi Farm to School work at TEDxManhattan 2014 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4LYn4mIP18).

This past year the Harvard Mississippi Delta Project has partnered with the Mississippi Farm to School network to create new policy recommendations for the state that would intensify the impact of the Farm to School movement. The network will use these recommendations to mobilize its members, meet with legislators and advocate further positive policy changes in the support of Farm to School. The report will present best practices used elsewhere that fit the state culture to further enhance the effort.

The growth and enthusiasm for Delta Farm to School purchasing indicate promise for a related health and economic track: promoting Farm to Institution food purchasing. Farm to Institution programs include community entities beyond its schools, such as hospital and prison food services. In 2013, Delta Directions worked with the Mississippi Food Policy Council to host a Farm to Institution conference, drawing 150 farmers, institutional purchasers, food advocates and other stakeholders.



Farmers Market Expansion

Delta Directions has partnered with farmers markets in the region to address policy, programming, and networking while also conducting legal research to support the local groups' development efforts. Both the Cleveland and Clarksdale markets were strengthened and stabilized through the efforts of Delta Directions. Delta Directions worked with the Cleveland and Clarksdale markets and five others in the region to launch the Delta Regional Farmers Market Alliance, which shared best practices, training, and networking.

Delta Directions, with the assistance of the Harvard Law School's Mississippi Delta Project, produced a manual on state regulations for farmers market operations, as well as outlined legislative proposals and innovations to encourage new markets, many now adopted by the state. Changes have included eliminating the sales tax at farmers markets, allowing for city and county funding to be used to support farmers markets, helping adjust state policy to allow farmers markets to receive EBT machines to process SNAP (federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) payments and better support for food access.

PUBLIC HEALTH

wwwthe future of the Delta and to Delta Directions. All aspects of improved quality of life, including food systems and economic development, are connected to issues of health. Delta Directions has researched and developed reports on critical aspects of public health

in the Delta and in Mississippi overall, including HIV/AIDS, infant mortality and perinatal care, public mental health services and the benefits of infant breastfeeding. These reports and their accompanying efforts have led to tangible change, including the passage of laws, the development of a more youth-friendly court system and more business and state support of breastfeeding. In addition, Delta Directions took the lead in producing a study on the financial challenges facing rural hospitals, a crucial health-policy issue in Mississippi, where 41 of its now-91 hospitals are in rural counties (three closed during and after the 2015 Delta Directions study).

Mississippi leads the nation in economically challenged hospitals, with a projected 49 percent of its rural hospitals at financial risk of shutting their doors. The study *The Economic Impact of Potential Closures of Rural Hospitals in Mississippi: A Focus on the Economic and Policy Implications and Alternative Models for Rural Hospitals in Mississippi* examined the viability of the state's 41 rural hospitals. Delta Directions Public Health Fellow Dr. Maya McDoom-Echebiri, the study's lead author, identified 31 financially troubled hospitals, as well as outlined potential remedies. Nine hospitals were identified as being at high risk of potential closure. The timeliness of the study was underscored by the shutdown of two Mississippi hospitals before the study's completion and another small hospital's closure soon after. Dr. McDoom-Echebiri is now at Johns Hopkins University, where her continued interest in Delta health

demonstrates the capacity-building impact of the work that Delta Directions is spurring.

Since delivery of mental health services has a tremendous impact on economics, education, unemployment rates, crime, drug use and public assistance, a number of Delta Directions health-related reports have addressed mental health delivery in the Delta. In partnership with the Harvard Mississippi Delta Project, the research has outlined the benefits of increasing community-based services over institutionalization, notably in releasing two policy papers: *Legislative Recommendations for Strengthening Community Based Care of Mental Illness in Mississippi* and *Mental Health in Mississippi: Analysis and Recommendations*.

A 2011 U.S. Department of Justice investigation showed that Mississippi had a higher number of institutional psychiatric beds per capita than any other state. The state has allotted 55 percent of its mental health budget to institutional care in recent years, while other states allocate an average of 27 percent of mental health budgets to institutional services. Those institutional services are overwhelmed by demand, operating with patient waiting lists. This year, Mississippi spending on mental services was further reduced, intensifying the imbalance in need versus availability of treatment.

Due to the limited capacity of community services and to waiting lists for institutional admission, citizens with mental illness frequently end up in county jails in the interim.



At this time, 144 mentally ill individuals are in Mississippi county jails awaiting one of the 35 forensic-unit beds at the state hospital. The average delay is 11 months for admission to the unit, staffed by one psychiatrist and one psychologist to treat mentally ill defendants from the state's 82 counties. The National Association for the Mentally Ill reports that due to the very small range of services offered in Mississippi, it is one of the nation's least successful states in dealing with residents' mental illnesses.

In August 2016 the Department of Justice sued Mississippi over the lack of community-based services for individuals with mental illness, the point raised in Delta Directions research. The state has been in discussion with the Department of Justice since the 2011 investigation into Mississippi's mental health system. The institutional orientation of care in Mississippi is a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the federal department maintains.

YOUTH AND CHILDREN

Mississippi children continue to rank last in child well-being, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2016 Kids Count survey. Nationally, the number of children under 18 living in poverty is 22 percent. The overall Mississippi share of children in poverty is 29 percent. In the Delta, however, children in poverty account for 40 percent of the population below 18. Growing up in poverty can

impede cognitive development and the ability to learn, as well lead to behavioral, social and emotional problems and diminished health. Delta Directions has worked on the ground and at the research level to improve youth well-being.

Baby University

The program, launched in 2014, offers expectant and new mothers in Clarksdale a nine-week course in nurturing parent-child bonds, early development and information on breastfeeding, potty training, discipline, nutrition and early learning. In addition, the program provides new mothers a chance to form stronger parental-child as well as peer bonds. Baby University also provides monthly community play dates to provide continued support for participating families and engage the

community at large. The program has been an overwhelming success for families in the participating communities. Parents report increased satisfaction and knowledge about their child, as well as increased use of positive parenting behaviors such as alternative discipline use, praise and increased time spent reading to their child. Several children who have participated have also shown improvement in developmental delays. In two years, the program has gone from pilot to full-time and expanded to two

other communities. So far 12 sessions of the nine-week course have been conducted, with over 100 parents graduating.



Coahoma County Diaper Bank

The first diaper bank in the region provides families in need with emergency baby supplies such as diapers, formula and wipes. The Diaper Bank serves as a centralized donation and distribution point for other early childhood supplies as well, such as clothes, books and toys. The Diaper Bank is also a resource and referral center, connecting participating families with parenting, education and health care resources in the area.

Kids Count

Delta Directions worked closely with Mississippi Kids Count to assess indicators of well-being in Mississippi children and translate findings into policy recommendations from 2009 until 2012. A national program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count provides annual statistics on the educational, social, economic and physical well-being of children at the national, state and local level. The database includes figures that examine the effects of poverty and race on child outcomes. Through Delta Directions, Fellows have worked in partnership with Kids Count, supervising students of the Harvard Mississippi Delta Project in the translation of statistics into policy recommendations. Reports have examined public pre-kindergarten (Mississippi is one of the few states, and the only one in the South, without a public pre-kindergarten program), child abuse and the implementation of positive behavior systems in the policies of rural schools to reduce the “school to prison” pipeline while managing the challenges of student discipline. Kids Count operates in Mississippi



through the Social Science Research Center of Mississippi State University.

Condom Access Research

Recognizing the widespread social and economic impact of both sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancy (Mississippi ranked second nationally in the latest statistics), Delta Directions, with the assistance of Harvard’s Mississippi Delta Project, is producing a research report on access to condoms and effective training materials for businesses, schools and other groups to use in promoting condom use.

Breastfeeding Advocacy

Due to its documented capacity to reduce the likelihood of obesity, Type II diabetes, asthma and allergies, breastfeeding is a particularly important practice in improving Mississippi’s poor health outcomes. Yet the state ranks last nationally in rates of breastfeeding. Benefits are not solely to child health. Breastfeeding saves a family an annual \$2,000 in formula costs. In addition, Mississippi’s economy benefits because improved child health leads to increased job productivity and decreased absenteeism among working parents. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, an increase in Mississippi breastfeeding rates could lead to a savings of between \$36 million to \$130 million a year in health-care costs.

Delta Directions has taken a leadership role in promoting and educating on the benefits of breastfeeding, both in launching an on-the-ground project (Baby University) and by producing policy research

and proposed model legislation to increase the rate of breastfeeding in the state.

“The impact of being involved with Delta Directions and the breadth that it offers to smaller individual projects with limited resources is difficult to pin down,” said Sannie Snell, project director for “Right! From the Start,” a W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded project that promotes breastfeeding and improved health outcomes. Delta Directions partnered with Ms. Snell’s group in outreach to churches on the importance of breastfeeding, producing criteria for “baby-friendly” churches to support mothers who want to breastfeed.

Delta Directions has released a breastfeeding-focused policy brief in partnership with the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic: *Building a Healthier Future for Our Children and Our State: Increasing Breastfeeding Rates in Mississippi*. The research found that common misinformation and a lack of community and family support for breastfeeding influence new mothers to bottle feed rather than attempt nursing.

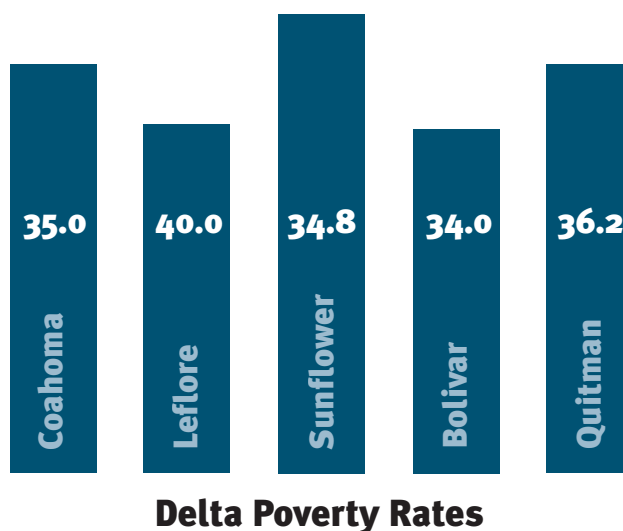
A major success in breastfeeding advocacy came in 2016 when Delta Directions was instrumental in passage of a new state law acknowledging the benefits of breastfeeding and authorizing hospitals to have breastfeeding-supportive policies, health facilities to display breastfeeding guidelines and the state Department of Health to produce an educational video on breastfeeding’s importance.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Delta unemployment is some of the nation’s most staggering, which leads residents in Delta counties to face poverty rates double and triple the national average: (Coahoma, 35 percent; Leflore, 40 percent; Sunflower, 34.8; Bolivar, 34 and Quitman, 36.2, according to American Community Survey Estimates 2010-2014). In the Delta, 14 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 are neither in school nor employed, double the national number.

In its advocacy of local economic empowerment, Delta Directions has offered practical guidance on small business ownership and

to consumers, including on consumer financial services and the costs of payday lending. With the assistance of the Harvard Mississippi Delta Project, Delta Directions has partnered to work toward strengthened financial lives for individuals, small businesses and small Delta municipal governments, producing guidebooks and policy-change proposals. Other Delta Directions work has examined the potential for micro loans and access to consumer financial services.



A Delta Directions ally in supporting economic empowerment has been the University of Mississippi, both through the Transactional Law Clinic of the University of Mississippi Law School and through the School of Business Administration. The law clinic at the University of Mississippi was launched with support and shared resources of Harvard

Law faculty and Delta Directions. Modeled after Harvard's transactional law clinic, the University of Mississippi clinic provides legal services to small businesses and nonprofits. Today the University of Mississippi clinic dedicates about 25 percent of its caseload to assisting small farmers at regular monthly field days around the region that attract 45 to 50 participants. Mississippi law students offer information on tax preparation, commercial leasing, insurance and LLC formation. A co-partner in the field days, the Alliance for Sustainable Agricultural Production, received organizational assistance from the clinic. In the field of consumer education, the clinic also produced *Moving In: A Guide to Landlord-Tenant Law* as a consumer guide to renter rights and responsibilities.

Through the Ole Miss School of Business Administration, Delta Directions partnered to launch the GrowDelta Initiative in partnership with Harvard Law School from 2009 until 2011. The initiative provided free small business development services, helping over 50 Delta entrepreneurs deepen their business and legal knowledge through free workshops featuring visiting speakers and Harvard Law School volunteers. In connection with the GrowDelta Initiative, *A Legal Guide for Small Businesses in Mississippi* was produced by Delta Directions and the Harvard Mississippi Delta Project in 2010. It remains a legal fundamentals tool available statewide.

Another topic studied was the economics of establishing paid work leave in Mississippi. Mississippi, along with six other states, voted in 2013 to prohibit local governments from enacting paid-leave mandates (or a living minimum-wage requirement) on local businesses. The Harvard Mississippi Delta Project examined the issue in *Paid Leave in*

Mississippi: Analysis and Recommendations. The report found that repealing the restriction on local governments to address paid leave locally or, as an alternative, passage of a state law setting out minimum specifics for paid leave would benefit low-income employees. They are disproportionately impacted by the lack of paid leave in the workplace, often working while sick to avoid losing pay. The practice spreads illness to other employees and to customers, increases the chance of accidents and limits a sick employee from receiving daytime primary care, increasing the likelihood of an avoidable potential emergency room visit.

Another issue examined for potential policy change has been the negative impact of Mississippi's inheritance laws on the ownership of farmlands by black farmers and landowners. Despite a growing awareness that these laws make estate succession difficult for many black landowners — and the emergence of estate law reform movements in other Southern states — no organization in Mississippi has addressed land loss in a comprehensive way. Building on research conducted by Harvard and University of Mississippi law students, Delta Directions plans to release a guide to property law issues aimed at historically disadvantaged farmers.

In the area of municipal government, a number of small Delta towns are crippled by tax liens due to unpaid payroll taxes. Delta Directions and the Mississippi Delta Project developed a manual to guide town leaders on legal, administrative and organizational practices to meet IRS obligations including opportunities for free tax assistance and information on promoting historic preservation.

The Case for Delta Directions

In its eight years of operation, has Delta Directions made a difference in the region? Has its strategic attempt to be a catalyst for change and strengthening the work of partner organizations and institutions led to innovative, verifiable results?

Stakeholders say yes.



ART COSBY, Ph.D.

“There is something here that wasn’t here before,” said Art Cosby, director of the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University. “It’s had an impact.”

Clarksdale mayor Bill Luckett has supported Delta Directions since its birth eight years ago. “It’s a very unique structure. It’s not a single-drive entity.

It draws on all kinds of resources. How many organizations can draw from such highly diverse, talented partners? That’s what’s fresh. It can pull from all these resources.”

Tom Pittman of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi said, “I view it as a quiver of arrows, and they’re able to pull one out when it’s appropriate. You can’t lift the whole tide, but you can try to create some bright spots that are examples to other places.”

Delta Directions’ unique coalition framework is a particularly good fit for the Delta, with its long reliance on personal connection and willingness to improvise. Mr. Pittman noted that Delta

Directions is “not overly institutional. It’s almost free form. Coming in with a top-heavy program doesn’t work well in the Delta.”

Current Delta Fellow Desta Reff noted that the intention has never been to promote the initiative’s brand or develop a top-heavy administration. In fact, the initiative is surprisingly unknown outside its target territory. “We’re not planting Delta Directions flags. That doesn’t help anybody. We intentionally facilitate community work.”

Harvard Law School faculty member Ms. Broad Leib, the initial Delta Fellow, said, “It’s less about getting credit and more about providing help. I do think it’s been a very organic strategy. It was more an experiment that has continued to work out.”

The Mississippi Food Policy Council, created with Delta Direction leadership, has gone on to take a leadership role in advancing food supply work in the state. Other important food policy work has brought about increased consumption of local produce in the Delta through school-purchase programs and the strengthening and expansion

of farmers markets. An additional resource through Delta Directions: Harvard faculty support when the University of Mississippi Law School moved to establish its own Transactional Law Clinic modeled after Harvard’s clinic. University of Mississippi associate law professor Desirée Hensley said, “The Consortium is not just a superficial connection. It’s being able to discover who is going to be generous in their expertise and resources and work selflessly.”

As mentioned earlier, the University of Mississippi law project has become deeply involved in supporting small farmers. A quarter of the

“There is something here that wasn’t here before. It’s had an impact.”

clinic's caseload is with small-scale Mississippi growers receiving help to navigate the legal requirements of their operations. Delta Directions' limited bottom-up structure is a particularly good fit for the Delta's history of the grass-roots civil rights activism and of the Delta town of Mound Bayou itself, founded by former slaves in 1887, said John Green. "We have these Delta examples of great success, but in fits and starts,"



JOHN GREEN, Ph. D.

said Dr. Green. "What if you created a structure to facilitate the contribution of outside resources? Delta Directions is a way to connect community workers to outside resources. It works on both ends. It also gives faculty and students applied work to do."

Dr. Green also said, "The prestige of Harvard's participation helps all the Consortium members. It gives us a different level of legitimacy to say 'I'm collaborating with Harvard Law.'"

Population Center researcher Lynn Woo said, "Bringing in people from Harvard and other areas has been wonderful, to be able to interact and get their opinion. It's been great for me as an academic to get exposure to these connections."

The Consortium network prevents the surprisingly frequent reality of individual organizations operating in a vacuum, sometimes on parallel tracks. "Delta Directions is collaborative. You're able to leverage to use everyone's expertise. It's a great forum to share ideas. You're creating capacity within the organization," said Ms. Woo.

Future projects

After eight years in the Delta, what are the next steps? That's a crucial question for a project committed to a smart, strategic use of resources and the benefits of institutional collaboration. Delta Directions hopes to build on its success by welcoming new partners and resources into this iconic corner of the U.S. "We need to communicate a tangible package to show the value and necessity of the work we do," said current Delta Fellow Desta Reff.

The Consortium is seeking to raise \$1.2 million—\$200,000 per year—to support its activities for the next six years.

General Proposed Budget for the Delta Directions Consortium and Related Programs

DELTA DIRECTIONS CONSORTIUM	
COORDINATION AND ADMINISTRATION	\$30,000

Stipend and travel for Executive Committee Chair, support for Executive Committee meetings, contribution to the Delta Regional Consortium Conference, etc.

DELTA FELLOW	\$100,000
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Salary and benefits for Fellow, travel, conferences, etc.

HARVARD DELTA PROJECT	\$60,000
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Delta Project, continued participation with Fellows program, engagement with the Delta Scholars programs, annual Delta Celebration, travel for students to the Delta, etc.

DELTA DIRECTIONS PUBLICATIONS	\$10,000
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Editorial advising, copy editing, production, dissemination (to include Delta Directions web presence, social media, and the Delta Directions Publications Series)

TOTAL ANNUAL COSTS	\$200,000
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The proposed funding framework would make possible:

Continued Strengthening of the Consortium Model

With new resources, the role of the Delta Directions Consortium as a crucial network would grow. The goal is to build a collective identity and governance structure to solidify the Consortium and the sustainable partnerships among participating organizations. Part of the effort to solidify the Consortium would be the creation of a more formal governance structure, including a steering committee and an executive committee whose members approve an executive chair. The chair would provide continuity of leadership, serving as a resource during the transition of new and departing Delta Fellows and as a source of support during the Fellow's tenure. Funding would be provided for a stipend for the Consortium leader as well as for administrative support.

A Biennial Delta Regional Forum

The Delta Directions Consortium would sponsor a regular biennial Delta-dedicated conference. The event would raise awareness of opportunities for engaging in Delta work and increase inter-organization cooperation. Delta Regional forums took place in 2006, 2008, 2013 and 2015, bringing together researchers, faculty, students, other practitioners and those interested in Delta development. Attendees engaged in panels, informational sessions and network building.

In past forums, participants learned of work in progress, visiting projects around Clarksdale and, in some instances, traveling to Mississippi State University to become familiar with the Social Science Research Center. A commitment to making the Delta Regional Forum a

biennial event would provide a way to share knowledge and facilitate coordination among Consortium members.

Continuing Support of the Delta Fellowship

The presence of a Delta Fellow is crucial to the vitality and energy of the Delta Directions initiative. The next step would ensure funding for the next three Fellows.

Production of Policy Briefs

In addition to the dozens of valuable policy papers produced by Delta Fellows over the past eight years, other Consortium members could contribute Delta-focused policy papers as well, hopefully connecting research data with potential legal and policy reforms to enhance the region's well-being. New papers would be released on a regular schedule to tell the story of the Delta at present and in its bright future.

Providing More Training and Research Opportunities

This effort involves engaging more students in Mississippi universities as well as through Harvard. In fact, Delta Directions values the potential in bringing young people together from inside and outside the region as a worthwhile investment in long-term change in and of itself. The benefits of the collaboration are both short and long-range, enriching current Delta work as well as being a formative experience for Mississippi and Harvard students to carry forward into their adult lives.

Society and Health Undergraduate Studies

The opportunity to engage in critical thinking on health issues is the focus of a new University of Mississippi undergraduate program housed at the university's Center for Population Studies. Delta Directions will give Society and Health students access to observe and conduct Delta projects in their coursework, along with offering the opportunity for field trips, speaker series and other events.

Additional Engagement of Harvard Students

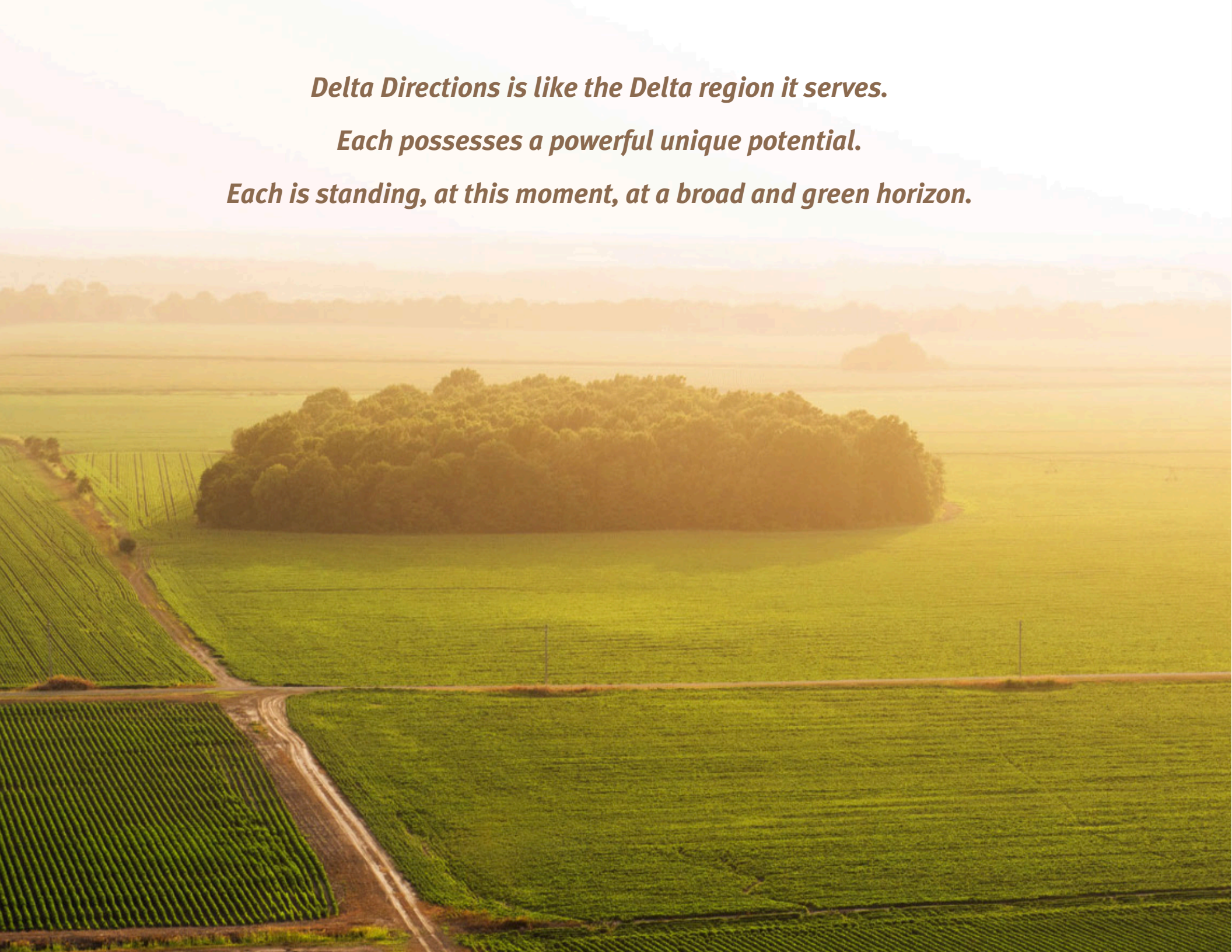
While continuing the valuable work of Harvard Law School's Mississippi Delta Project, there is great opportunity in expanding Delta engagement with other parts of the Harvard community. The benefits would be reciprocal. Harvard students would contribute ideas and develop awareness of rural health and economic issues through hands-on opportunities. Students from Mississippi and Harvard would have the chance to connect with each other for potentially lifelong networking and partnerships. The future budget proposes funding to continue the annual Harvard Mississippi Delta Celebration. For seven years, the celebration has brought the project to life for students and faculty of Harvard Law School, as well as encouraged connections with other Harvard students, faculty and programs working in the region.

Another potentially important program is being explored: The Delta Scholars Program. The proposed Mississippi State University program would recruit twenty of Mississippi's best and brightest college sophomores to become engaged in Delta social change. No funding is yet being sought.

Delta Directions is like the Delta region it serves.

Each possesses a powerful unique potential.

Each is standing, at this moment, at a broad and green horizon.



DELTA FELLOWS: “THEY’RE PART OF THE COMMUNITY”

Since 2008, four Harvard-trained Delta advocates have settled into the small town of Clarksdale in a succession of typically two-year residencies. As a Delta Fellow, each took on the challenge of working as a one-person think tank in the interest of Delta progress. The new law graduates arrive charged to study Delta concerns from the stance of public policy, researching and proposing potential legal and regulatory change that would enhance Delta well-being. Besides their research efforts, fellows initiate specific projects. Through the tenures of the four fellows, particular concerns have become the focus, ranging from food-supply issues to Farm-to-School programs to early-childhood development and infant nutrition.

“We have the ability to be on the ground and to start local institutions and bring to bear research policy capacity,” said Emily Broad Leib, the first Delta Fellow from 2008 until 2010, who now teaches at Harvard Law School. “Once started, we can have students research questions. It’s all

about supporting local groups.”

The current Fellow, Desta Reff, does just that.

“The fellow is boots on the ground,” said Ms. Reff. Interested in early-childhood development, she has steered the passage of state legislation supporting breast feeding and launched Baby University, a course for new and expectant mothers



servicing three Delta communities. Ms. Reff extended her two-year tenure to a third year to bring Baby University into full operation.

Tom Pittman, director of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, believes the post of Delta Fellow has proven a useful innovation in Delta development. “They’re able to come here and bring their research and their personal interest and bring their perspective and fresh ideas.”

Clarksdale Mayor Bill Luckett has had the opportunity to observe the Delta Directions representatives at close range; he opens his law office to the Fellows to use as their workspace. “Fresh eyes can be a good resource,” said the mayor. The Fellows have had an impact while remaining low-key, respectful presences, he noted. “They’re part of the community. They are down here to be gentle and help without embarrassing anybody.”

Delta Fellows become locals who experience the rewards and challenges of living in the region. Mr. Pittman said, “The Fellows get the rhythm of life. They identify with the people.”

Ms. Broad Leib had no expertise in food supply before she settled into Clarksdale in 2008. “The issue became a priority for me because of community members coming to me and asking for help with these issues.” During her residency, Ms. Broad Leib helped found the Mississippi Food Policy Council, a statewide group of food-supply stakeholders. The council went on to push the Mississippi Legislature to pass seven bills in four years to widen the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables and to ease



DESTA REFF

DELTA FELLOWS: “THEY’RE PART OF THE COMMUNITY”

sales procedures for small farmers.

Today, by drawing on her Delta work, Ms. Broad Leib is considered a national authority on food law. She founded and now directs the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic, the first of its kind in the nation. The clinic researches legal and policy solutions to the health, economic, and environmental challenges to the nation’s food system.

Nathan Rosenberg took on the Clarksdale post after being Ms. Broad Leib’s student at Harvard. The Harvard connection is strong and ongoing. Each year, the Delta Fellow supervises about fifty Harvard Law students who do pro-bono legal and policy research for local Mississippi clients. The Mississippi Delta Project also includes an annual spring break service trip to the Delta for a handful of students to provide assistance on a variety of issues, from community food access to small business development, to legal needs of artists and musicians. Students do field research and interviews toward producing policy papers in four fields: economic development, children and youth, health, and food supply.

During Mr. Rosenberg’s Clarksdale years he focused on expanding Farm to School programs in the Delta as well as statewide. His work involved three avenues. There was, of course, the legal research into applicable laws in Mississippi and other states involving Farm to School operations. Following the research came formulating proposed legislation changes to foster Farm to School programs in the state. In addition, the Fellow extended a hand to “give people support on anything related to Farm to School” as the need arose. As a result, Mr. Rosenberg organized the first two statewide conferences for Farm to School programs.

As a Delta resident, Ms. Reff has been moved to witness how issues of public policy are represented in the lives of people she has come to know. “I’ve come in contact with poverty in a way I never would have ever expected or experienced, have such a better understanding of the daily struggles of individuals in the Delta and the systems and systemic deficits that often fail to address their needs.”

Besides Baby University, Ms. Reff also helped start a diaper bank, the first Mississippi member of the National Diaper Bank Network. The projects have allowed Ms. Reff to see growth close up. “They’re ways I get to see individual change.”

“In the case of Baby University, Ms. Reff has watched over 100 local families complete the course, some returning a second time. “To see the babies that have risen up through the program and watch them hit all their developmental milestones, and surpass them, it’s amazing,” she said. “And to see the parents interact with their kids in ways that we’ve taught them, to see them fostering their child’s development in ways that they would have never thought to do is heartwarming.”

As Ms. Reff engages in child-development issues, she has also been raising her two daughters, now ages two and three, in Clarksdale. Being a mother in the Delta has been a heart-warming experience, Ms. Reff said. “People here are so child-oriented. I’ll go to the state Capitol on an issue, and the legislators I know will ask me why I didn’t bring my daughters with me.”

“The warmth of people in the Delta, they are literally the most welcoming, hospitable people I’ve ever met,” said Ms. Reff.

RURAL HOSPITALS AT RISK: “WE WANTED TO LAY IT ALL OUT”

Rural hospitals are under a health threat—an economic one—that puts at risk the locals they serve. In fact, Mississippi leads the nation in endangered hospitals with a projected 49 percent of its rural hospitals at financial risk of shutting their doors.

How to respond? That’s a harder issue. In fact, it’s difficult to get specific data to study the viability of Mississippi’s 41 rural hospitals because management is mindful of discouraging new staff and patients by airing the struggle.

It took an engaged persistent academic, Delta Directions Public Health Fellow Dr. Maya McDoom-Echebiri, to produce an August 2015 study examining the potential risk ahead as well as potential remedies. The report is entitled “The Economic Impact of Potential Closures of Rural Hospitals in Mississippi: A Focus on the Economic and Policy Implications and Alternative Models for Rural Hospitals in Mississippi.”

Dr. McDoom-Echebiri identified nine Mississippi hospitals at risk. The timeliness of the study was underscored by the closure of two Mississippi hospitals before the study’s completion, while another small Mississippi hospital has shut its doors since.

Dr. McDoom-Echebiri was the principal investigator for the study, commissioned by the Mississippi Center for Health Policy. She collaborated with health and labor economists from the University of Memphis to examine the economic outcomes of Mississippi’s rural hospitals as well.



DR. MAYA McDOOM-ECHEBIRI

In this project, McDoom-Echebiri and her research team tracked down economic health data from the Census Bureau, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and American Hospital Association from 2008 until 2012 to categorize the potential closing risk levels of hospitals in Mississippi. The project found that 31 of Mississippi’s 94 hospitals were at risk, 20 of which were rural hospitals.

The report outlined proposed adaptations that rural hospitals could make, including integrating health services, adopting alternative service-delivery models, and finding new federal and state funding. It noted the tension within hospitals between launching new income-producing services (such as cardiology or sleep labs) and providing more pressing but less lucrative health services to their communities.

The study sets out the Mississippi specifics in the debate over health-care economics, according to the head of the Mississippi Center for Health Policy, which commissioned the study. There are two competing arguments on rural hospitals nationwide. Some advocate for more public funding to preserve the continued operation of the hospitals as always. Others argue that closure of a number of smaller hospitals is inevitable as the health-industry, particularly its reimbursement methods, transforms overall.

“We wanted to lay it all out. Some communities are in denial about what’s happening,” said Dr. Therese Hanna of the Health Policy Center. She noted that several hospitals have brought in consultants and are

RURAL HOSPITALS AT RISK: “WE WANTED TO LAY IT ALL OUT”

evolving their operations to adapt to financial reality.

Dr. McDoom-Echebiri’s study makes clear that closing a hospital frequently means the loss of a rural community’s biggest employer. Closure of each “most at risk” hospital would lead to an average loss in its town of 269 jobs, \$14.1 million in earnings and \$32.1 million in economic output. The closure of all nine would eliminate an estimated 2,600 jobs, approximately \$8.6 million in state and local tax revenue, and a total economic impact of \$289.2 million. Along with the obvious disadvantage of making patients travel longer distances to reach health

care, communities that lose hospitals would also become less attractive in recruiting new businesses, she noted.

As a Delta Public Health Fellow, Dr. McDoom-Echebiri was based at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center. She is now at Johns Hopkins University, where she expects to continue work she began in Mississippi. “I hope to increase and sustain collaborations,” she said.



The Taborian Hospital opened in Mound Bayou in 1942 but began its financial struggle in the 1960s and finally closed in 1983. Work to restore the hospital began in 2011, and it reopened in 2014 as a much-needed asset to meet medical needs in the community.

BABY UNIVERSITY: “I WANTED TO LEARN EVERYTHING”

When Artidra Hubbard noticed the Facebook post on the upcoming Baby University course in Clarksdale, she knew instantly that she wanted to register. “I was a first-time mom, and I wanted to learn everything,” said Ms. Hubbard, now a 24-year-old teacher at Sherrard Elementary School.

On the first night of class, held at a local church, she remembers feeling reserved. So did most of the other participants. Surprisingly for the small town of Clarksdale, Ms. Hubbard hadn’t known any of the other mothers, some younger than she, others older. Everyone was overwhelmed and reluctant to talk, Ms. Hubbard recalled. As the nine-week course moved along, however, everyone let down their guard. “By the third time we were talking more freely,” she said.

What she learned about mother-baby bonding was her most valuable takeaway from the class. “Bonding with the baby is so important,” she said. “Skin-to-skin contact. Reading. Singing. Making the baby feel loved.” She is mindful of the statistics she learned on the importance of talking and reading for a child’s healthy development and future school readiness. Fathers-to-be came to Tuesday sessions to cover bonding as well, particularly time spent reading, talking and singing.



The class covered the advantages of breastfeeding in enhancing a baby’s immune system and cognitive development. Ms. Hubbard was won over on the benefits of breastfeeding, a choice she believes only 10 or 15 percent of local mothers make, unsurprising in a state with one of the nation’s lowest rates of breastfeeding. The small number of local nursing mothers comes from negative hearsay about the difficulty and pain involved with breastfeeding, along with a previous lack of local support and instruction, she believed. While her mother and grandmother hadn’t breastfed, they encouraged Ms. Hubbard to try.

Ms. Hubbard’s pregnancy took an unforeseen turn. Aiden was born two months early and spent his first month three hours away from Clarksdale at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. Despite his extended hospitalization, Ms. Hubbard stuck by her determination to breastfeed. She pumped breast milk on schedule in Clarksdale and made the six-hour roundtrip to the Jackson hospital every three days, driven by her fiancé. Her Baby University allies were a support network. “I was sad about the situation, but they gave me encouraging words. If you ever have a problem, they’re willing to help.”

Baby University is the sole available source locally for its type of

BABY UNIVERSITY: “I WANTED TO LEARN EVERYTHING”

in-depth instruction, Ms. Hubbard said. “Without it, there’d be nothing else at all.” Ms. Hubbard and Aiden now go to Baby U’s community play dates.

Baby University was the creation of current Delta Fellow Desta Reff. In fact, Baby University is the proudest accomplishment of her Delta tenure. Piloted in October 2014 with a small class of just 10 parents, Baby University has offered 12 cycles of nine-week courses to date with over 100 parents graduating. The course has expanded into a full-time program in three communities. The sessions end with a graduation ceremony in which the students receive Baby University diplomas.

“I’ve seen the impact it makes on individual children and individual families,” said Ms. Reff. “Early intervention is such a missed opportunity in Mississippi. Eighty-five percent of brain development happens by age three. Working with families, starting from day one, helps us optimize this window and gives our parents a rare opportunity to give their children a head start that can carry them through life.”

Ms. Reff is proud of the peer bonding among the new mothers. “Baby U has become a safe haven for many of our participants. They

come there not just for the knowledge, but also for the community, for the acceptance, a place where they can be listened to. Many of them don’t have that. Some of them never have.”



THE DELTA REGIONAL FORUM: IN THE NAME OF SYNERGY

One of Delta Directions' most successful projects is straightforward: partnering in a regular conference dedicated to Delta development. Holding a biennial symposium brings focus to the Delta and its challenges, providing an opportunity for those engaged in Delta work to network and create synergy. The next forum is set for summer 2017.

Several success stories grew out of connections made at the most recent Delta Regional Forum in July 2015. The three-day event in Clarksdale presented five panels featuring approximately 40 people involved in Delta work. About 80 participants attended, including not only academics and development professionals, but also the interested public. Besides listening to panel discussions, participants visited the nearby towns of Sumner and Jonestown and toured the Clarksdale Farmers Market. Organizers and sponsors of the last forum included the University of Mississippi Center for Population Studies, the Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center, the Coahoma County Higher Education Center, the Mississippi State Department of Health, the University of Mississippi McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement and the University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis.

One success story from the 2015 conference is how it generated national attention to work being done to close the Delta's digital divide. Author Ralph Eubanks attended the forum and wrote a November 2015 story for *Wired* magazine about the efforts of Mississippi State academic

Roberto Gallardo to widen Internet access in the state.

"I know that the piece gave him an increased profile in the rural development community," said Mr. Eubanks, who himself met with a White House tech policy advisor after the *Wired* article's publication.

New awareness of Dr. Gallardo's work after the *Wired* article also led to his being recruited to do a TEDx talk, being featured on the digital series *The Movement* and covered in other national publications.

"The Delta Forum was definitely critical for me to meet Mr. Eubanks, who would write the *Wired* article," Dr. Gallardo said. "Ultimately I hope this exposure will bring some grant funding to the much needed project of reducing the digital divide."

Another connection prompted by the 2015 conference was between breastfeeding advocates working to change the Delta's low rate of infant breastfeeding. Sannie Snell, director of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation-funded "Right! from the Start" program learned about the overlapping work of Delta Fellow Desta Reff, as well as related projects of Dr. John Green, the director of the University of Mississippi Center for Population Studies. The contacts created "synergy for components of my projects," said Ms. Snell.

Said Dr. Green: "The Delta Regional Forum provides one of the few opportunities for diverse people from community organizations, foundations, colleges and universities, and agencies to come together and share ideas."

Links featuring Dr. Gallardo's work: **TEDx** - tedxtalks.ted.com/video/The-Rural-Digital-Divide-Roberto

Episode of The Movement: mic.com/articles/142436/accessing-the-internet-is-a-right-not-a-privilege#.9cY1UZURn

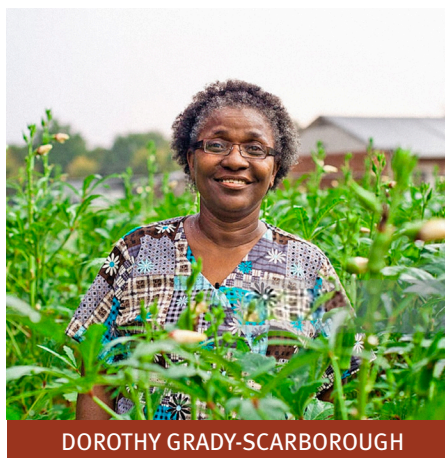
DOROTHY GRADY-SCARBOROUGH: “I CAN TEACH YOU TO EAT”

Combine years of experience as a Delta emergency-room nurse with a family legacy of vegetable gardening, and the logical result is Dorothy Grady-Scarborough. Mrs. Grady-Scarborough is a pioneer of the region’s sustainable agriculture and food-supply movement. As a Bolivar County nurse appalled by the consequences of the staggering local rate of diabetes and high-blood pressure, she began advocating in 1994 for an increased availability of fresh produce to improve the local diet.

Mrs. Grady-Scarborough’s efforts—educating through area school gardens and founding the nonprofit Mississippians Engaged in Greener Agriculture—predated the concepts of food deserts and food insecurity coming into wide awareness. “I felt like I was talking in a silo.” These days MEGA takes up seven former Head Start trailers, a compound that serves as an educational and demonstration center in her hometown of Shelby. A Food Corps volunteer is based at the complex to help support the work. Mrs. Grady-Scarborough has trained through Tufts University and has participated in a W. K. Kellogg Foundation grant.

It is also logical that Mrs. Grady-Scarborough and Delta Directions found themselves allies soon after the first Delta Fellow arrived in 2008. The initial fellow, Emily Broad Leib, realized that engaging in food-supply issues was a crucial part of the equation to improve Delta well being. Delta Directions began investing time and resources into the

region’s food-supply challenge. Ms. Broad Leib spearheaded organizing a statewide food-policy stakeholders group. Using legal research by Ms. Broad Leib and the Harvard Mississippi Delta Project, the Mississippi Food Policy Council successfully pushed the Mississippi Legislature for seven state law changes that fostered farmers markets and streamlined their operation from a state regulatory standpoint.



DOROTHY GRADY-SCARBOROUGH

Although fresh-food awareness has increased, the challenge of a sufficient produce supply continues in many Delta communities. An impromptu Saturday produce sale has begun taking place in Shelby, in the form of three or four farmers meeting to sell produce from their parked trucks. Buyer demand routinely surpasses the Saturday supply, Mrs. Grady-Scarborough said.

In addition, the small grocery store in Shelby stocks no produce. The closest full-scale supermarket is a 15-mile drive south in Cleveland. Shelby residents without cars sometimes pool funds to pay a car owner to drive them to the Cleveland supermarket, she said. “Every five to ten miles, there should be a farmers market.”

Delta Directions’ relationship with the work of Mrs. Grady-Scarborough continued through the work of another Delta Fellow, Nathan Rosenberg, who was instrumental in strengthening the Farm to School movement in the state. Farm to School initiatives now operate in 54 school districts in Mississippi, eight in the Delta. The initiatives vary

DOROTHY GRADY-SCARBOROUGH: “I CAN TEACH YOU TO EAT”

from district to district, but feature components including nutritional instruction, school gardens and purchasing locally grown fruits and vegetables for cafeteria meals.

Since 2014, Mrs. Grady-Scarborough and Sunny Baker of Oxford have served as co-chairs of the Mississippi Farm to School Network “Sunny works more on procurement. I have the gardening-experience component.”

Educating children through Farm to School programs fits with her own passion for developing early healthy food habits. Positive experiences with fresh vegetables and fruits in childhood stand to improve the health of the Delta in the future. “If I can teach you to eat right now, I don’t have to correct these things later,” the nurse said.

In the North Bolivar Consolidated School District, children sample locally grown vegetables, including kale and chard, for example. “Tell your mom how you enjoyed it and include it on your list to buy at the grocery,” Mrs. Grady-Scarborough will suggest. Children grow tomatoes in the

school garden and sometimes are sent home with a cup of four or five sprouted plants. “That’s how you have your own tomatoes at home.” Living in an apartment complex? “You can put it in a five-gallon bucket on the terrace,” she explains.

Fifty years ago, most Delta families kept gardens, a tradition that disappeared along with the number of locals who worked as farm laborers. In one of the world’s most fertile agricultural belts, the scarcity of fruits and vegetables is frustrating. “We’re not desperate for land, but we grow less food than any other part of the U.S.”

Her own family never abandoned the garden tradition, and her aging father never suffered from diabetes or high blood pressure. She believes continuing to keep a garden and the health benefits of the family produce helped explain his fortunate outcome. Her father remained an active vegetable grower well into his seventies, buying a new tiller a few months before his death in 1977. “Even in his dying days, he had a field of produce and fresh fruit.”





**DELTA
DIRECTIONS**

Health & Economic Renewal in the Mississippi Delta