

The Allen and Alice Stokes Nature Center in Logan Canyon The Beginnings

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Introduction

In the fall of 1995, Bridgerland Audubon Society and the First Presbyterian Church of Logan undertook a joint project to establish a nature center in Logan Canyon. Bridgerland Audubon Society was a small chapter of 350 members. The First Presbyterian Church, though one of the largest of several protestant congregations in the community, constituted only a small minority of the religious community, as most congregations in northern Utah are affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. A fundamental tenet of the Presbyterian faith is to be a responsible steward of the environment; in fact, many of its members were also BAS members.

The project involved transforming a seventy-year-old structure built by the American Legion into a community nature center, and dedicating it to non-political environmental education for the benefit of all citizens, young and old. In the late 1980s, the American Legion built a new facility in Logan and transferred the former buildings in Logan Canyon to the Boy Scouts. After finding the building did not really fit into its operations, the Boy Scouts left it vacant for over two years and it fell into very poor condition. There were holes in the old shingle roof through which rain and snow damaged the ceiling and left small ponds on the floor. The restrooms consisted of single stools located down narrow closet-like passages illuminated with bare bulbs. Live wires disappeared mysteriously into the walls with no apparent function. The oil furnace had holes in the combustion chamber and exhaust stack.

Since the building had been left unused and the gate in disrepair, vandals had apparently visited the building many times. They had driven up the road, forced open the door, and kicked holes in the walls. Nearly every pane of glass was broken. Light fixtures had been ripped from the ceiling. Fires had been built on the tile floor, covering the walls and ceilings with soot. Age had taken a toll on the building with trees growing into the sides of the roof and mice had the run of the place with nests built not only in the walls and ceilings, but even in the refrigerator and stove. Tiny desiccated cadavers from previous generations of mice were found snagged on nails amongst the rafters.

Nevertheless, a nature center was sorely needed in the community and the site was the right price (free) and appealing - a quaint log structure just one mile out of town in a scenic canyon next to a rushing stream. But how could a small environmental group and congregation find the necessary volunteers to rebuild the structure? How could they raise the funds for construction - not to mention for programs - and how to gain support for an "environmental" project in a community within a state known for its antipathy for environmental causes?

Yet, two years later, on November 1, 1997, the Allen and Alice Stokes Nature Center in Logan Canyon was dedicated and open for business. The renovation of the building had cost over \$55,000 and involved several hundred volunteers donating almost 5,000 hours of time. It was formally organized as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit corporation under the laws of the State of Utah and the Internal Revenue Service with formal by-laws and an active board of directors. A staff of two was in place and programs were under way to teach local school groups about nature, and our place in it. On opening day, funding for programs was secure for at least 6-8 months.

This project - building a nature center - succeeded against overwhelming odds. Yet, we all had a clear and concerted idea of where we were going, if not exactly how to get there. How could it have succeeded? A look at what happened offers some clues, and more importantly, some fundamental principles key to its success in the future. A review of the timeline of this project follows.

September 1995 - Jack Greene, a local 9th grade science teacher and Audubon member approaches the board of BAS with an idea. The Boy Scouts are looking for a new owner for the former American Legion Lodge and Jack proposes to make it into a nature center. Jack has been active in Audubon for many years, and is a visionary. He had organized previous efforts to establish a nature center in Logan Canyon, but these efforts had not been successful due to lack of a suitable structure or the funds needed to acquire such a facility.

October 1995 - BAS Board members try to kill the project. We invite the building inspector and health department inspector to the site, thinking they will tell us the structure is too unsound and the septic system too antiquated and close to a river to possibly serve as a educational facility for children. The furnace is a certain fire hazard.

This effort to abandon the project fails miserably. It turns out that both inspectors had children who attended the Teton Science School in Jackson, Wyoming, and those kids had come home changed in wonderful ways. Dang.

November 1995 - Jack doesn't give up. With winter coming on, he and his sons cover the roof with tarps to prevent further damage. His sons move into the building - without heat, light or water - to prevent further vandalism. It's cold in the building, there's not even sunshine during the winter days to liven the place. But, the building sits across the river from a highway and drivers can see that someone is actually doing something with this old building.

Jack's efforts are confounded by the U.S. Forest Service, which doesn't think that BAS is stable and secure enough to be granted a special use permit for such a structure. Jack involves a local Presbyterian Church, whose minister had been looking at the building as a possible retreat site, but whose congregation had no funds for such a project. The minister agrees to a joint effort.

January 1996 - Oh, all right. If the building and health inspectors won't kill the project, we'll impose a requirement for paperwork they can't possibly overcome - a business plan!

We hammer out a two page joint venture agreement between BAS and the church that creates a new organization with a one year life, and charges it with developing a business plan with mission, program description and three-year budgets in six months. A small (\$1,000) stipend is set aside for this purpose, but otherwise, no funds are to be spent on the building until the initial plan is formally approved by the founding organizations.

Spring 1996 - Jack and his nature center people disappear (thank goodness).

Summer 1996 - They're back! With a document articulating mission, long term goals, program outlines, draft articles of incorporation and bylaws, and a three-year budget. After just one or two iterations on the document, both BAS and the FPC approve it. The Church is to take title of the structure, BAS is to contribute cash, and there is to be a separate non-profit corporation for the nature center, which insulates the parent organizations from bankruptcy.

Estimates for the project vary wildly. Jack had originally estimated that \$12,000-\$15,000 would do it. The budget proposes \$43,000 over three years (much more reasonable). BAS officers

informally estimate more like \$45-60,000. Nevertheless, we commit to funding. BAS agrees to release approximately \$8,000 from its treasury, which had been raised previously for a nature center. We plan on receiving another \$4,800 from an insurance settlement from the Boy Scouts covering the vandalism. An Audubon member who is also a member of the church organizes a food booth at the county fair to raise funds for the nature center, and comes up with \$2,500.

The Boy Scouts prove to be slow in completing paperwork to transfer title, and we're reluctant to invest any hard cash until we have legal title. However, we organize several weekends of work climbing trees with chainsaws to drop huge cottonwoods threatening the structure. Amazingly, no one dies in the process.

July 1996 - Allen Stokes, our mentor and guiding light, stricken by a heart attack the previous November and a crippling stroke that December, closes his eyes for the last time. His passing, though not unexpected, strikes to our core.

We had pledged to name the center in honor of Allen and his wife, Alice - if we could finish it. Now there is even greater resolve to make it happen.

At Allen's memorial service, the director of the Teton Science School invites us to hold a retreat at the School that fall to let us see that operation.

August 1996 - Glen Gantz, member of BAS board and one of the authors of the nature center plan, agrees to serve as general contractor for the construction phase - without compensation. Within a short period of time, it's apparent that Glen doesn't understand the word, "can't". He makes things happen, insisting on measurable progress each and every week.

Before we actually take title, we want to resolve the matter of an underground oil storage tank for the furnace. It lies 50 feet from a clear flowing stream, was installed 25 years ago, and almost certainly has leaked. We have it pumped and neutralized. We remove it. No leaks. Yet another miracle.

We obtain title to the building and receive the funds from the insurance company.

Labor Day, September 1996 - Our first capital investment - \$3,500. We cover the shingle roof with a new metal one. We do this without the benefit of Glen, who, hours before volunteers were to show up on Saturday, gets called to Salt Lake City to help a friend, recently widowed by her 38 year old husband's heart attack, give birth to her second child. His prior planning enables us to get most of the pieces in the right place. Once more, amazingly, none of the twenty volunteers is injured, despite clambering around on steep, slick metal roofing.

October 1996 - We enter destruction phase, putting to shame the work of prior vandals. All wiring is ripped out. Stained and crumbling ceilings are torn down. Concrete walls are hammered to bits. We fill two dumpsters a week for 10 weeks.

November 1996 - With the project underway, we convene a retreat at the Teton Science School. Over thirty people including both BAS and FPC members, teachers, and school principals drive 4 hours to spend a weekend in meetings discussing the details of our mission and programs. We approach it as a business plan. What is the product? Who are the customers and how much will they pay? How will we manage it? What will it cost? Just as important as deciding what we will do is deciding what we won't. We create committees and assign tasks. The staff at the TSS shows us how their center works which helps us to understand our effort. We drive home in a snowstorm, re-focused on our purpose and our enthusiasm renewed.

December 1996 - The building is in shade from November through March. It's cold. A new propane furnace goes in. We decide we can't use the old plumbing system, because we pour water down the pipes and can't find where it comes out. Details, details. We get a commitment from Ben's Plumbing, a local plumbing supply business. "Yes. We'll help. Just take whatever plumbing supplies you need. We'll cover it." We decide we've got to cut through the concrete floor to remove the old sewer pipes and install new ones. We get a concrete saw donated, but only for Sunday. So, beginning at 5 p.m. on a Saturday, a dozen fellows cut a 2 foot wide trench 100' long in a 4-6" thick concrete floor. They dig a trench four feet deep. The job is finished by 4 p.m. on Sunday. Two weeks later we have the sewer lines installed, and in an hour and a half on a Monday afternoon, we pour a new floor over the ditch.

January-March 1997 - We continue to work every weekend and some evenings. Glen continues to keep us organized. A local architect donates the plans. Our ski time goes to zero. Gradually, the DE-struction tapers off and CON-struction begins. Walls go back up. Wiring goes in and lights come on.

We show the plans to Jim Laub, owner of Cache Valley Electric, and he opens an account for us to take whatever we need – no charge. Cache Valley Builders Supply donates the drywall. B&B Drywall donates the work to put up the ceiling.

We become worried about money to finish the project. Fundraising is going slow, and grants are in process, but this is a new effort – unknown. At a monthly meeting, Bryan Dixon, new acting President of BAS, proposes out of the blue that BAS give the nature center \$5,000. The board is stunned. Item tabled. The next month, he proposes liquidating half of BAS' assets to put \$15,000 toward the effort. There is almost mutiny on the part of several members. "We thought the nature center was to be self-sufficient." "Yeah, well, this is a great project - what better way to spend our resources?" Harsh words cut through what used to be calm monthly meetings. One of the board members proposes hiring a mediator. "For what?" others reply. Nonetheless, a special meeting is called. The board deals with the issue. A secret ballot vote is taken. 11 for, 2 against giving the nature center another \$13,000. One of the board members resigns within days.

Spring 1997 - Construction continues. Days warm up. Bikers appear on the trail next to the building and stick their heads in to ask what's going on. New volunteers show up to frame walls, paint inside, and clean up the place each week after the weekend maelstrom of activity. After lengthy (and frustrating because they have to contact "headquarters") negotiations with WeatherShield, they come through by donating all the windows and charging only wholesale prices for doors. We put them up, and the building takes on a new look with fresh windows.

June and July 1997 - Work continues. Details grow like mushrooms, but we find individuals to take on smaller projects like making shutters for the windows, re-capping the chimney, installing the interior trim. We advertise for volunteers to paint the exterior on a weekend. It rains, but what the heck, it's water-based paint! Light fixtures go up. Bathroom fixtures go in. Then one day, there are signs on the restrooms - "Men" "Women". Small things, but the end is in sight, the place looks like it's really going to open!

August 1997 - We hire Dr. Sharon Ohlhorst as director, and she promptly starts to schedule events. The first one is a teacher workshop scheduled for September 26. "You said it'd be finished by September." "Yeah, well, the toilets don't work, yet." "Well, these teachers aren't going to use the woods." "Right. Well, we'll do it somehow."

September 1997 - We did it. The teacher workshop is well attended and they had flush toilets. As a bonus, the sinks actually worked!

October 1997 - Building inspectors sign off on construction. We schedule the dedication and invite dignitaries, volunteers, members, etc.

November 1, 1997 - The Allen and Alice Stokes Nature Center in Logan Canyon is dedicated.

Critical Success Factors

Critical success factors are those attributes, abilities, or processes without which a project will probably fail. There can always be improvement in the way things are done, but without the critical success factors, it will not happen.

I believe the key success factors that contributed to the success of this project were:

- Vision
- Demand
- Key Individuals
- Ownership
- Focus
- Visibility
- In Honor of...
- Luck

Let me explain.

Vision

We had a vision shared by all, which we could articulate to anyone. Jack really drove the vision at the start. He had established and worked in nature centers in the past. His enthusiasm made the rest of us willing to accept the concept even while we didn't fully understand what it meant. Listening to him talk about it convinced us it would be a "good thing." As we articulated what it would be in various planning meetings and narrowed our concept of the vision, we were able to tell others what it was in a few simple words that resonated with them. "This nature center at this building will provide nature education for all ages in the Logan community."

Demand

There was a demand for the product, and we understood why. Sharon Ohlhorst (who later became the director) explained very simply that the public school curricula were revised every few years and the latest revisions to the science curricula were much more process-oriented. For example, instruction objectives moved from memorizing the names of trees to understanding how trees affect the soil and air, provide habitat, use water, stabilize the soil, etc. These principles were harder to teach in the classroom, and required that teachers move out of doors and guide their students in the process of discovering. This was not the way teachers had learned to teach. They needed help with programs, logistics, and working with collections of nature objects. They needed lessons with a hands-on approach. A nature center staff could assemble these programs and make them available - with or without help - to any teacher who wanted them. The availability of such programs would ease teachers' anxiety about teaching to these new objectives.

Key Individuals

The project was a big one, with some big components. We found key individuals for some key responsibilities, and wrapped in many and diverse volunteers, building a broad base of involvement. Perhaps the most critical individual was Glen Gantz, who agreed to provide direction as a “general contractor” coordinating the work, and finding subcontractors. However, while Glen ended up putting in over 1,500 hours himself, he couldn’t always be there. He was, however, able to organize the work and leave directions. He delegated tasks to individuals who could carry on when he couldn’t be there. He and others would call others each week to arrange for help, and tried to involve whoever showed up, patiently teaching new skills again and again.

Key responsibilities were taken on and carried out by individuals, including public relations, interior design, landscape design, furnishings, as well as smaller components of the project (like painting the interior).

Ownership

The individuals who were involved owned the project - they did the work. Board members swung hammers, made decisions about light fixtures, chose paint colors, arranged for signs, and picked up construction materials. They participated in the actual work, saw first hand the progress, and took pride in the effort. This was “their” project, so they could easily communicate it to others and talk about it among themselves.

Focus

Even a project seemingly so straightforward can be nebulous when you get to the details. We knew from past experience that we had to be specific. It’s said that, “You can be thinking clearly and not writing clearly, but never the reverse.” So, from the start of the project we put in writing what was going to happen. We had a written agreement between the founding parties that outlined responsibilities and deadlines. We required a written business plan before investing any funds in the project. After it was underway, we convened a retreat to articulate the details of the operations side of the nature center, and communicate it to a broader group, including some that represented our prospective “customers.” A formal board of directors was established which met on a regular schedule. We created a new 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation which formalized the structure and decision making process. We engaged an architect to create drawings. These kinds of documents were invaluable in persuading contributors that we knew our purpose and could carry off such a large project.

Visibility

We were fortunate that the building was visible from the road. People driving up Logan Canyon on Saturdays and Sundays saw pickup trucks and workers busy on the building. Lights were on late at night with people working inside. We put up a sign on the building to say what it was (though we didn’t check with the Forest Service first, so had to repaint it to meet their requirements - oops!). One of the board members, Tim Henney, had been director of corporate public relations for AT&T - *THE AT&T* - in New York City, and used his skills to get articles printed in the local paper almost weekly. We got on radio talk shows, put items in newsletters, and invited one and all to help. Those who were members of the First Presbyterian Church made regular announcements at Sunday meetings about the progress. They used the food booth at the County Fair as a vehicle to raise money and awareness of the center. We put out a simple newsletter to track the progress and request donations of specific items. If you asked anyone on the street about the nature center, a substantial percentage had heard of it. As the time for

dedication drew near, we adopted a logo and printed letterhead and made up a new sign, preparing for the “programs” phase. We kept “in their face.”

In Honor of...

There was a man and his wife - Allen and Alice Stokes - who had given much of themselves to causes in the community. Not just Audubon, but lots of community causes. They were Quakers and lived their beliefs. Their lessons were plain to see, and inspired so many of us in the Logan community. Everyone respected them. We decided early on that we wanted to name this new nature center for them. Allen had a heart attack, followed by a paralyzing stroke, before we could ask. Several months later, while visiting him, Alice told me in front of him that she had been asked about putting their name on the nature center. They were reluctant - it wasn't a very Quaker-esque thing to do to have one's name on an edifice. What did I think? I thought about it awhile and then explained what their lives and examples had meant for our community, they couldn't change that. Putting their name on the structure would help us keep their principles alive and focus our energies. I asked them to consider saying “yes”, but only if we actually finished it. When they did say “yes”, it meant we had no choice, we had to finish it. When Allen passed away part way through the project, our commitment only deepened.

There is a higher cause than any particular project. If we can find that purpose, it will sustain us through the hard times, help to refocus our energies, and cause us to rise above the discontent and frustrations that inevitably accompany any big effort.

Luck

Everyone needs luck and we had more than our share. To begin with, no one died cutting down trees, falling off of the roof, electrocuting oneself hooking up wires, contracting Hantavirus. We tried to be careful, but volunteers are, after all, volunteers and they're typically unskilled. Nevertheless the worst injury we sustained was probably a gash which has long since healed.

We stumbled onto the principles above, and found thoughtful, caring, and committed people on the project. We had money; much of it from earlier donations to Bridgerland Audubon Society by Allen and Alice Stokes themselves. We had a solid and committed partner in the Presbyterian Church, and many of their leaders supported the efforts. We had a Forest Service office with an open mind, and personnel who ended up deeply involved and committed to the project.

We had a lot of luck.

Despite Our Success, There Are Still Challenges

As successful as we were, we could have done better. A couple of the contractors didn't provide the quality we wanted and feuds within the family of one of the donor businesses meant we had to pay for some of the materials we thought were donated. Had we written down those commitments when they were made, perhaps we wouldn't have to do pay for them, but then, if it had been too formal, perhaps we wouldn't have gotten anything.

We succeeded at establishing this nature center. But keeping it running is another matter. Had we involved more diverse members of the larger community - other churches, other environmental groups, other businesses, our fundraising for programs would have been easier. We should have been more aggressive writing long term grants earlier (if only we had believed we'd actually pull it off). Now, we're discovering the critical success factors to keep it going. We're going to have

to keep learning. We are, however, moving forward, with a sound building, no debt and minimal fixed costs. That gives us precious time. We'll figure it out and there will be good things that come of the effort.