



Main Street Matters

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A Tribute to Kelly Franks, San Marcos Main Street Manager A Well-Deserved Retirement!

Author's Note: This is the first time that a special one-topic edition of Main Street Matters has ever been published. The issue is about Kelly Franks, who is retiring after 25 years as the San Marcos Main Street manager. Kelly's influence has been so profound that this single edition won't begin to touch on the many ways the Texas Main Street network has benefited from her involvement, but at least it gives us the opportunity to say 'thank you' before she officially retires at the end of June. — Debra Drescher Farst, state coordinator, Texas Main Street Program



Kelly Franks
(photo credit: San Marcos Mercury Newspaper, Bill Peterson)

San Marcos was designated as a full Main Street program in 1986, just five years after both the state and national programs were begun. The San Marcos effort actually had its initial beginnings two years earlier as a self-initiated program under the helm of a man named Terry Colley, who took the fledgling local program and helped get it off the ground. Terry's career would then take him to Main Street positions in Muskogee, OK and Grapevine in 1988. He came to the Texas Historical Commission (THC) in 1991 as the Urban Main Street State Coordinator and today serves as the agency's Deputy Executive Director. With that background, Terry has had the opportunity to know Kelly Franks, the current San Marcos Main Street manager, for many years. He says

that, while he may have been responsible for getting the program designated by the THC: "Kelly literally took the program and ran. She was able to garner the support the program needed to take it to

and college there, and I still consider it home."

Kelly Franks has helped guide the downtown through a major transitional period over the past quarter century. She has initiated wonderful special projects, aided building owners in the preservation of historic buildings, and been a strong advocate for local businesses."

Matthew Lewis, Director of Planning and Development for the city of San Marcos which houses the Main Street Program as quoted in local media

the next level and make Main Street San Marcos what it is today. I'm thankful for Kelly's many years of service to San Marcos, especially since I graduated both high school

She just happened to be in the right place at the right time...

About the time San Marcos was becoming a Main Street program, a group of five women in San Marcos that included Kelly were working as volunteers to spruce up a Christmas event downtown. Up until that time, the 'holiday experience' in San Marcos had mostly consisted of Santa Claus sitting on a folding chair on the square handing out candy canes. The small new event they were planning, with a \$200 production budget, became the renowned Sights & Sounds of Christmas in San Marcos, a multi-day event now in its 26th year that 50,000-75,000 people attend annually and in which Kelly is still involved. Long-

time community volunteer Ronald Jager recalls that the event name was Kelly's winning choice among several suggestions, and that Kelly has been "a guiding light for the Christmas event ever since." He remembers that even before the initiation of that event, Kelly had already been involved in San Marcos' participation in the state's Sesquicentennial extravaganza; she was a director of the high school's Junior Miss program; and was also a founding member of the San Marcos Performing Arts Association which initiated "Summer in the Park" in June of 1987, followed by the "Sights & Sounds of Christmas" in early December.

Through that early community activism, Kelly learned about the vacancy in the Main Street program and thought it was something she'd do temporarily "until they found the right person." She was initially hired as a part-time employee and worked out of her home. With her degree in physical therapy and 15 years experience in that field, Kelly didn't envision the Main Street position would be a long-time gig for her.

The San Marcos Main Street board has a now-legendary biscuit-making operation during Sights & Sounds



Dutch oven biscuit making by the San Marcos Main Street Board funds their retreat.

that they have led for the past decade. People stand in line an hour or more for a biscuit, which are made in Dutch ovens over an open fire. Last year, 6,600 biscuits were served, cooked over 14 fires with 8 Dutch ovens going at a time! With the 'biscuit proceeds', the Main Street board travels every other year to a sister Main Street community for their annual planning retreat. They spend time not only in teambuilding exercises for their own program, but the sister Main Street city becomes an on-site learning laboratory for them as well.

Downtown San Marcos, the early years

So, what was downtown San Marcos like in the 1980s? San Marcos had been a designated Main Street community for only a few years. The state program was relatively new, as was the national roll-out of the Main Street approach. In essence, everyone was growing up together. Kelly recalls that at that time, there were 15 vacant buildings around the square and five "scary and seedy" tattoo parlors. Many buildings were slipcovered, and in other places, windows were boarded up. Several years would still go by before the 1996 restoration of the Hays County Courthouse, now the square's centerpiece. Kelly recalls one property owner in particular at that time, a multi-building property owner named Lupe Carbajal, who was "the first one to take a chance on downtown in a significant way and then it snowballed after that. When he started, and others saw the results, they began to work on their buildings, too." Kelly points out that all of these years later, Mr. Carbajal still owns downtown property.



The San Marcos Main Street "Brain Trust": Main Street manager Kelly Franks and assistant Barb Payne.

Downtown San Marcos, now

Anyone who knows Main Street knows that the national 'mantra' is incremental progress over time. In 1999, the National Main Street Center rolled out a recognition program nationwide that looked at ten different elements a Main Street program needed to be truly successful. This Ten Criteria annual report, as it is called in Texas, is completed by each local Main Street manager to show measurable annual progress in implementing the Main Street Four Point Approach™. Only three long-time Texas Main Street communities -- Elgin, Seguin and San Marcos -- have been Nationally Accredited every year. Kelly has been the San Marcos Main Street manager during this entire time.

More than \$56.5 million has been reinvested into the Main Street district, according to the program's reinvestment reports. More than 1,000 jobs have been created and 231 businesses have been created, relocated or expanded into the district during that time. Just as impressive is that local stakeholders have contributed almost 16,000 volunteer hours in support of San Marcos Main Street in the past 14 years!



Downtown San Marcos has gone from needy (above) in the 1980s to America's Most Beautiful Town Square in 2013 as named by Travel+Leisure magazine (below). (www.travelandleisure.com/articles/americas-most-beautiful-town-squares.html/14) Photo credit for center night scene on Hopkins Street below: Don Anders



Current activities show just how far San Marcos has come. Matthew Lewis, who directs the city's Planning and Development Services Department where Main Street is housed, points out that San Marcos is the fastest growing mid-sized city in the United States, according to the U.S. Census. Over the last few years, he says, the department has taken a proactive community approach to updating its plans and protecting the appeal of the downtown. "In 2010 the city extracted the DNA of the courthouse square and the buildings that bound it and recoded it into the San Marcos SmartCode. The SmartCode was a deliberately chosen tool to spur reinvestment in the downtown area. We meticulously studied the elements of the building blocks that make up our square and used those parameters to write the new code," he states. That was followed by a "synoptic survey" to study sidewalk widths, building heights, the height and construction of the arcade, galleries and awnings, the lot di-

mensions, and placement of structures on the lots. The process also included enhancing SmartCode with a set of architectural standards to allow flexibility for new design while preserving the existing makeup of the current built environment. This part of the process, which included public input, passed all boards, commissions and council unanimously.

After the mandatory SmartCode was in place for the downtown area, staff worked with Hays County

and the City Council to establish a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ). Both entities agreed to a 70% Assessed Valuation (AV) capture rate. This is a much larger allocation than any TIRZ the city or the county have committed to, says Lewis. In fact, most TIRZ in the state capture around 25%- 30% AV, he adds. "The SmartCode partnered with the TIRZ has created a predictable environment for the community and the development community. Within one year of the SmartCode adoption there



Kelly visiting with a property owner during the program's early years and leading a group during a summer Main Street manager training session on downtown safety.

has been a substantial \$23 million dollars of improvements into the district. The years before the SmartCode and TIRZ were in place, totaled about \$2 million dollars of improvements in the district". The city's commitment to downtown also includes a range of traffic calming, infrastructure and aesthetics projects underway to increase the district's pedestrian friendliness.

San Marcos received the First Lady's Texas Treasures Award from the Texas Historical Commission in 2010 and just this year, Travel+Leisure magazine named San Marcos as having one of America's Most Beautiful Town Squares. Certainly, Kelly's 25 years of working hard for the San Marcos Main Street Program helped make that award possible.



Kelly is a regular presence in downtown. She knows everyone and everyone knows her. Here, she strolls with assistant Barb Payne and San Marcos Development Services Director Matthew Lewis in April 2013.

Stories to tell

So, with a 25-year Main Street career under her belt, there's no shortage of stories people have to tell about Kelly...

Melissa Millecam, the city's communications director, recalled several of those stories in her intro-

duction of Kelly at an awards ceremony several years ago.

In the early 1990s, Millecam remembers patrolling the courthouse square and vendor booths as 'security detail' all night long, prior to a Sights & Sounds event because of a mix-up that resulted in official security not showing up. There were several inebriated 'visitors' downtown that wanted to sleep in the empty booths for the night.

Although the walkie talkies the pair was using only transmitted between the two of them, they bluffed the 'visitors' into thinking they had a direct line to the police and encouraged their departure by making them think police were on their way. Ever faithful, the two circled



Kyle Maysel, one of Kelly's many admirers and Main Street volunteers



Board members and friends accepting the 2004 Texas Downtown Association award from TDA President Keith Parkhurst (third from left) for the H.Y Price Senior Center, San Marcos. (Photo courtesy of Ronald B. Jager)

the square all night long until relief finally came at 5 a.m.

Kelly can also take credit for breaking up a gang attack on the square and saving Frosty the Snowman. In 1993, some purported gang members from out of town beat up a costumed Frosty the Snowman entertaining kids on the square. Kelly followed them around the Courthouse in the dark calling after them until they finally ran away.

Then, there was 'The Great Egret Caper In Which Kelly Broke Up A Police Sting Operation'. During this great adventure, as the story goes, Kelly was preparing for the annual Texas Natural and Western Swing Hall of Fame Show when a flock of egrets descended on the pecan trees at the courthouse. It is recalled that there were hundreds of squawking, messy egrets. To try to spur their departure, Kelly and a county employee first hung out noisy bells, which didn't work. Then they put up plastic owls as a scare tactic. That didn't work either. By this time (again, as the story goes), 'it was raining egret poo all

over the courthouse grounds'. The next step, spraying the egrets with cannonades of water from a fire truck, annoyed the birds enough that they flew away. Yeah! Problem solved! Pretty soon, much to the annoyance of Kelly and the county employee, the birds returned. The duo decided that firing blanks from a birding gun into the air might do the trick.

What Kelly and her helper didn't know was that, at that exact time, the police department had a sting operation underway downtown.

Kelly and her cohort began firing blanks from the bird guns into the pecan trees at the courthouse. The egrets began flying away in great alarm. The police department, hearing gunshots, thought their sting operation had been compromised and swarmed into downtown with many police cars, sirens wailing.

The sting operation was over—compromised by a colony of egrets and Kelly Franks. The small ray of good news in the whole story is that the egrets did fly away, never to return!

Kyle Maysel, a San Marcos attorney who has had a downtown presence for 30 years, recalls a number of years ago when a well-known trail-riding group came through downtown San Marcos heading from Austin to the San Antonio Livestock Show and Rodeo. As the

horses and riders were heading out of downtown Kyle looked to the end of the line and saw Kelly there, broom and dustpan in hand picking up the horses' 'left-behinds.' That's commitment to a clean downtown! Kyle also fondly remembers an antique car race that happened in downtown San Marcos about a decade ago. He showed up to volunteer for the event and found

from the Texas Downtown Association in 2004. The renovation of this important downtown structure had been undertaken by the Greater San Marcos Area Seniors Association. At the awards banquet, Jager remembers Kelly jumping to her feet when the award was announced ("A very undignified thing for this low-keyed lady to do," he says.) It was quite a treat

that Kelly later took the official awards photograph with the Senior Center board as she is widely known for her distaste of being in photographs. (see photo)

Volunteers Valerie Creveling and Jon Agee similarly have fond memories of the hard work they were led

by Kelly to do, including a 1987 initiative by Kelly to upgrade downtown's worn-out Christmas decorations and prepare for Sights & Sounds—with no budget, of course. "I don't know where she got the supplies, but we ended up with miles of garland to be fluffed, and lights to wrap around the trees on the lawn of the courthouse," recalls Valerie. "For several weeks... a group of volunteers Kelly had gathered met after work to fluff garland. We sat on the floor of the courthouse and worked until we were goofy with exhaustion. We recruited family and friends to help erect the concession stands and other buildings, and to wrap lights in the trees. We then begged for the

Kelly was presented the 2006 Anice B. Read award from the THC by then-Commissioner Jane Barnhill and former THC Executive Director Larry Oaks.



Kelly at a barricade waiting for her police back-up to manage that part of the race security. Kelly had to run off to take care of some other business and told him to guard this section for a little while until she got back. Unfortunately, Kelly got tied up with other business and did not come back for the better part of the day. When asked why he stayed so long without any real business to attend to at the barricade, Kyle simply replied: "Because Kelly told me to."

Jager, the community volunteer, also remembers when Kelly nominated the renovation of the Old First Christian Church for a statewide adaptive reuse award

loan of a few animals for the nativity. My husband, Jon, was volunteered to demo blacksmithing, and other people were recruited to show the kids how to make butter from milk, how to make paper chains, and anything else we could think of. We had Santa, and someone with a Polaroid camera taking pictures. Sights & Sounds of Christmas was a success, the kids LOVED it. Downtown was beautiful with all the lights, and we felt like we had done something nice for the town. At the time I was blissfully unaware that I had signed on for 15 years of volunteer work! One thing about Kelly, she is so generous with her own time and effort, you can't turn her down."

Accolades

Kelly is, of course, well known and well respected by San Marcos Main Street business and property owners. But she's also been honored



Terry Colley of the THC presented Kelly with an Award of Merit at a June 13 retirement reception in San Marcos

for her dedication with several awards, including the Texas Historical Commission's 2006 Anice B. Read Award of Excellence in Community Heritage Development. This award is named after the founder of the Texas Main Street Program, so it's fitting that Kelly is one of the recipients.

In 2011, Kelly was locally named a San Marcos Living Legend. This prestigious award was presented to her by Melissa Millecam, director of the city's communications department, who described herself as not only one of the Kelly's greatest admirers but also one of her "much abused volunteers!"

On June 13, 2013, her peers, colleagues and admirers celebrated Kelly's tenure and accomplishments with a special retirement reception held in her honor at a downtown restaurant (see photo). At this event, THC Deputy Executive Director Colley presented her with an Award of Merit from the THC for her 25 years of service.

Kelly's memories

"There are many things I'm very grateful for," says Kelly. "I've made many good friends. There's been involvement of downtown businesses over a long period of time. Over the years, the attitude of our citizens toward downtown has

changed for the better. They see the value of an active downtown. It was then and has always been about changing attitudes about downtown for the better and creating opportunity from that."

Why did Kelly stay so long?

The same reason why many managers stay in their positions so long—the work is rewarding, volunteers become treasured friends and "there's always one more thing you want to get done," she says. Kelly's advice to new managers (and a good reminder for existing managers): "Communicate regularly with your downtown businesses. Listen to them and be as responsive as you can to their needs."



Here's looking at you, kid! Have a happy retirement, Kelly!

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