

PROFILE: SUSAN WITT by Gail M. Burns

Berkshire | December 2006

Telling Our Stories

Schumacher Society director reimagines community and economy

Susan Witt is a born storyteller. “I am fundamentally interested in stories and the work of the active imagination,” she says. The stories she tells as executive director of the E. F. Schumacher Society in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, are stories of community, land and people. They are, she hopes, heroic stories.

Witt, 60, holds both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English literature, and studied Waldorf education at Emerson College in England. From 1972 to 1977, she taught literature at the High Mowing School in Wilton, New Hampshire, the oldest Waldorf high school in North America. “My students weren’t satisfied reading tales of ancient heroes,” Witt recalls. “They kept asking me where in modern life they could find heroic activity.”

She took their questions to heart. “I asked myself, where is our new story? What is our modern frontier? We knew what we were supposed to do—those avenues had been explored by the civil rights and women’s movements—but the answers hadn’t been acted on or digested fully by society.” Witt thought she might find new answers in the fields of psychology or physics, but a friend insisted the new frontier was in the realm of business and economics.

In 1977, an inheritance from her grandfather enabled Witt to take two years off from teaching. She decided to seek out volunteer opportunities at organizations whose work she found inspiring. “I wanted to find people who were dealing with important, cutting edge economic issues in social, spiritual and ecological ways,” she says. One day she tuned into the Cambridge Forum on the radio and heard Bob Swann, then director of the Institute for Community Economics in Cambridge, Mass. She’d heard Swann, a lifelong pacifist and advocate of decentralism, some years before. His message of community empowerment and economic mechanisms rooted in local needs and cultures was consistent—and deeply inspiring. “I decided that his was one of the organizations I would volunteer for.”

Witt went to Cambridge and offered to alphabetize the Institute’s card file. “It turned out that my writing and storytell-

ing skills were more important than my ability to alphabetize,” Witt says with one of her infectious laughs. “I was able to bring valuable skills to their work.”

Those skills were first developed during a bookish childhood. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Witt grew up in Greenwich, Conn., a community that invested heavily in its public schools and public library. “I spent a lot of time in the library and read, read, read. School was the prime place for me, not home,” says Witt. “I loved school and learned easily. I really thrived in that environment.” Witt was raised up by a single working mother who had experienced great success setting up Red Cross clubs for GIs across Europe during World War II. “She taught Latin and French in spike heels all day, then went golfing, and then put on her army fatigues and renovated whatever house we were living in,” recalls Witt. “From my mother’s example I grew up believing that women could do anything they wanted.”

Witt found the success, nurturing and approval she needed at school rather than at home, however, and so was drawn to a career in education. “My real influence was Beulah Emmet, the founder of High Mowing School,” she says. “It wasn’t that I wanted to be a teacher; I wanted to teach at High Mowing. I wanted to learn the extraordinary ideals and aesthetics and connection to living on the land that she brought to the educational experience. So it was Mrs. Emmet and my childhood school experiences that drew me into education, but it was literature that brought me to my current career.”

And it was at Swann’s Institute, she says, that she finally found the story she was destined to tell. Destiny figured in other ways, too. Witt and Swann soon fell in love and became partners in life as in work. By 1979, they wanted to leave the urban confines of Cambridge for a more rural area where they could establish and live in a Community Land Trust (CLT). After considering many options, a letter from the DeRis family of Egremont, Mass., brought them the opportunity they had been seeking.

“I moved to the Berkshires kicking and screaming,” Witt recalls. “I loved Cambridge, I loved the diversity, I loved the

intellectuality, and I thought I would miss all that out here, but I found that I was wrong.” She and Swann quickly grew to love the area. In 1980, with the help of many local residents and members of the DeRis family, a CLT with an initial holding of 10 acres was established off of Jug End Road. That same year, Swann and colleagues founded the E. F. Schumacher Society, named after Ernst Friedrich “Fritz” Schumacher, the heterodox British economist whose book, *Small Is Beautiful*, was one of the most influential of the last century. Witt became the executive director of the Society, a position she’s held ever since.

Today, she still lives on the CLT land in a home she and Swann created by remodeling a garage. The Society’s 8,000 volume library of books, pamphlets, tapes and specialized bibliographies, including the personal library of Schumacher, is housed in a building Swann designed and built on the same land.

“I love this community very much. Its roots go very deep,” says Witt, whose involvement extends far beyond the Schumacher Society. She is a board member of the Great Barrington Land Conservancy, which she helped found, and serves on the advisory boards of public radio station WAMC, the Orion Society and the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies based in San Francisco. “I am glad to help tell the story of this community. I really see myself in service to the community. I just let the story unfold.”

The unfolding story took Witt through difficult years caring for an ailing Swann until his death, at age 84, in 2003. “I don’t regret the years I spent taking care of Bob, but now that that job has ended, I can pour my energy back into the Schumacher Society and the local, national and international community with which it deals.”

Recently, her energy has been directed to launching BerkShares, a local currency which began trading in southern Berkshire County on September 29 as part of a year-long pilot project. “BerkShares is really Susan’s baby. She has been talking about this local scrip for years,” says Louann Harvey, an AVP/mortgage loan officer at Berkshire Bank and president of the Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce. Harvey, who serves as vice president of the BerkShares board, met Witt when they were among the first five women to join the Great Barrington Rotary Club.

Widely used in the United States in the early 1900s, local currencies are a legal but underutilized tool for citizens to support local economies. “The currency in the pocket becomes a teaching tool,” Witt explains. “If you have BerkShares in your pocket, you will go to the Berk-



Photo by Jason Houston, www.jasonhouston.com

Susan Witt

Shares directory and find businesses that accept them. This encourages business to source more local goods and consumers to shop locally. It’s about knowing the story of the products you use daily.”

A large and diverse crowd showed up for the launch party at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in September. Seventy-five thousand BerkShares went into circulation at the launch, and within a month that amount had doubled. “The launch at the Mahaiwe was really the community’s show of love for Susan. She is such a remarkable person with a tremendous wealth of knowledge. She’s a star!” Harvey says. “It is really exciting when you pursue a dream and follow it for years and then get to watch it unfold. This is Susan’s dream and I think she is just ecstatic it has come to fruition.”

Witt credits the southern Berkshire community with making the BerkShares pilot possible. “The community really timed this project,” she says. “We already had a culture of supporting locally grown food through the work of Berkshire Grown. From the outset, this project had extraordinary support from the Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce and the local banks. The branch managers at the banks were the most enthusiastic, and they’re the people most closely in touch with the southern Berkshire consumer.”

“I probably spend four BerkShares to every federal dollar in my [personal] daily business. I didn’t realize how much I shopped locally,” says Art Ames, general manager of the Berkshire Co-op Market and a member of the BerkShares board. “The program really taught me something about my own spending habits.” Ames reports that the Co-op is taking in a large number of BerkShares. “But it transcends the whole money issue. We have gotten the most joy out of the conversations the currency generates, and nothing builds community like discussion.”

For Witt, the community’s engagement is precisely the point. “As soon as BerkShares was launched, I had a whole

different relationship with the project. Before the launch, the Schumacher Society was the focal point. Afterwards, the focus is on the public’s relationship to the reality and not on us. Now it belongs to the community, which is really rather extraordinary and beautiful.” She adds that the project is a potential model for others around the country and world. “The BerkShares project is being watched closely by groups across the globe. Ultimately our chamber and banks and businesses will become models and contacts for other communities who want to launch similar efforts.”

Witt claims she is at a high point in her life. “I’m seeing a fruition of much of my work coming together right now. I’m receiving the grace one learns from sticking with one thing over many years.” She recalls how her role model, High Mowing School’s Beulah Emmet, rallied after a major fire destroyed many buildings on campus, including the chapel, one Friday night. “When I got there she’d been running that school for 30 years. After the fire, she found a statue of a lamb that had always been in the chapel...and on Sunday she conducted a chapel service wearing borrowed clothing, using that statue as a symbol of continuity.”

Witt says she feels a new engagement with the work that she, too, has been doing for nearly that long. “Right now, I am deeply concerned with the loss of productive skills in the United States. When I first moved to the Berkshires, the old timers would hunker down in hard times and chop their own wood, grow their own food. Everyone had multiple skills of production and could fend for themselves when they needed to. But those skills aren’t being passed on. We’re losing the skills necessary for self-sufficiency. How do we catch them before they disappear altogether?”

It sounds as if Witt has already embarked on the next chapter of her story.

Gail M. Burns is a mild-mannered church secretary by day and a crazed freelance writer and theater critic by night.

BerkShares in Brief:

The BerkShares program intends to create a more vibrant southern Berkshire economy by stimulating local spending. Since one BerkShare is equal to 90 cents in U.S. currency, consumers who use BerkShares at participating local businesses get an effective 10 percent discount. Those businesses, in turn, stand to gain from potentially greater sales volume (if consumers spend more on local goods and services), and may seek, where possible, to source goods locally from vendors who likewise accept BerkShares. For nonprofits, exchanging the local currency with dollars can function as a fundraising tool. If all goes well this year, the one-year pilot will be extended. Learn more at www.berkshares.org.