



JON LEVINGSTON / SPECIAL TO THE CLARKSDALE PRESS REGISTER

Jon Levingston, executive director of the Clarksdale/Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce observes work being done at the Rural Shores center in Jawlwal, India, on his recent trip to the country. At right is Muralli Vullaganti, the founder and CEO of People Shores and a co-founder of Rural Shores. The employees were performing work for the large corporation Vodafone.

India, Clarksdale share similar issues

Michael Banks
The Press Register

There are a lot of similarities when comparing where Rural Shoes first planted roots on the Asian continent to where its American cousin plans to build its second center in the United States.

The day after Thanksgiving, Jon Levingston was traveling from the Mississippi Delta to rural India on a fact-finding and information-gathering session as he prepared to welcome People Shores to Clarksdale and Coahoma County in less than a month's time.

Levingston, who serves as the executive director of the Clarksdale/Coahoma Chamber of Commerce, wasn't quite sure what he would find when he finally landed in a foreign land 12 time zones from home.

The revelations would prove to be eye-opening and only confirm Levingston's belief that People Shores and Coahoma County are a good fit for each other.

"The amount of impact they had on the communities in which they located a center was so great and so positive that it reaffirmed the value of bringing them to Clarksdale," Levingston said. "It really reenergized me in my commitment to doing whatever I could possibly do to help them succeed in our community."

Clarksdale will be the second People Shores center in America when they begin operations here in January.

In May, People Shores opened its first U.S. location in San Jose, Calif.

"We'll be the second center in the United States. It's a big, big deal," said Levingston, who was on hand for the San Jose ceremony and also toured several Rural Shores centers dur-

ing his weeklong trip to India.

He said one thing that struck him the most during his trip was the "industry of the people."

"Their commitment to hard work, to doing whatever it takes to get something done. That same ethic forms these people," Levingston said. "There is a certain work ethic that I witnessed in the Rural Shores centers in India that formed everything they do. It's so impressive."

Rural Shores formed in October 2008 with the objective to provide sustainable employment to 1 million rural youth by establishing Rural Shores centers in each of the 500 rural districts in India. Currently, there are 16 centers in eight Indian states.

The company's vision is to transform rural youth into confident and caring knowledgeable professionals through impact sourcing.

The People Shores charter fits with what needs to happen in Clarksdale, Levingston said.

He pointed out that when he first moved here in 1983, there were four automobile dealerships. Now, there is one.

"Those are retail stores. Retail follows industry. The primary economic foundation of a community is the type of business that brings new money into the community. Typically, that is an industry," Levingston said.

With People Shores coming here and bringing new jobs, he believes that will create a base for retail businesses, such as furniture stores, restaurants, automobile dealerships and clothing stores.

"All of these things come about as a result of having a velocity of jobs," Levingston said.

And Clarksdale is an example of what happens when industry closes. The community starts losing population and retail businesses close.

He says People Shores will help stem that flow of people leaving the county to look for other jobs, while also providing educational tech training and jobs.

He said the community he visited in India that has a Rural Shores center now has a motorcycle dealership (which he said is a "huge deal in India") as well as another new business.

"When you have something like this happen, you're going to create an opportunity for retail to come into a community and that creates more jobs and more financial stability," Levingston said.

The social commitment is a big part of the People Shores mission and it's something Levingston also embraces.

"It's a big deal and it moves me," he said. "It rocks my soul and the reason it does is that what they're trying to do is something that our community needs."

"We need educational opportunity here. We need the opportunity to train people and not send them off to work in Memphis, Jackson or somewhere. Let's put them to work, right here in Clarksdale."

Levingston hopes the People Shores announcement and the connections through its leadership team will help attract additional tech companies to Clarksdale and Coahoma County.

"Without any question, our question is to continue to build bridges to the tech industry," he said. "And with the generosity of the people from People Shores, we must assuredly have that opportunity."

Questions and Answers

Just what is People Shores?

It's a for-profit, social enterprise with a charter to bring technology-driven jobs to economically challenged communities in the United States through impact sourcing.

And impact sourcing is?

It's "going into a community that lacks financial opportunity and some kinds of educational training and provides that and creates jobs so that children do not have to leave the area seeking jobs in other places," said Jon Levingston, executive director of the Clarksdale/Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce.

"Impact sourcing is having an impact educationally and financially in the life of a community," he said.

And while People Shores is a for-profit business, Levingston adds, "It's more than just a business. They are moved by having a profound and effective social impact on the lives of people."

How does Clarksdale and Coahoma County benefit?

The impact to this area will be immense, Levingston says.

"It helps to arrest the depopulation. It provides educational tech training. It provides jobs," he said.

And what do those jobs do?

"It provides income and financial sustainability in our community," Levingston said.

Who are some of the top leaders at People Shores?

Murali Vullaganti is the founder and CEO of People Shores. David Moxam is a co-founder of People Shores and sits on the board of directors.

They are among the "most impressive, accomplished people in the world," Levingston said.

"They represent people who have been with major industry around the world in the tech sector. But they are moved not by just making another dollar, but by the size of the social impact that they on communities and the lives they affect for the better."

He points out that Vullaganti and Moxam both got their start at Electronic Data Systems (which is now Hewlett Packard) working with Ross Perot.

"They go back to really the beginning of high-tech in the United States," Levingston said. "It's a small world. They know everyone. They could easily retire and count their bond coupons, but instead, they committed themselves to creating this impact-sourcing company. It speaks to their sense of humanity and their commitment to creating opportunity here in the United States for rural youth."

"They are among the most impressive people I've had the privilege of knowing and I'm proud to count them as my friends, as well as clients," he said.

What kind of services does People Shores provide?

The immediate response would be to call their operation a "call center." While Levingston said "that's certainly part of what they do," he quickly added there is much, much more to their company.

People Shores also provides image processing and data services for tech firms. For insurance companies, they provide lead generation, new policy support and premium postings, policy renewals and claim processing. In retail, they provide customer segmentation, campaign management, order processing, rebate and inventory tracking. They provide services for travel and banking industries.

"They do any type of back-office data analytics that a company doesn't want to do on their own," Levingston said.

Who are some of the clients People Shores will be providing services for?

Both Vullaganti and Levingston said the company is still in the process of finalizing contracts, but Rural Shores and People Shores work for major corporations such as Accenture, Oracle, American Express, the Fed Ex subsidiary TNT Express, Vodafone and the Bayer Corporation. They also recently agreed to a multi-center contract with Amazon.

During visits here, People Shores executives have reportedly met with top leaders of companies such as C-Spire, Federal Express, Humana and St. Jude.

Where will the People Shores Clarksdale center be located?

The center will be at 1540 Desoto Ave. in Clarksdale, the current home of the Clarksdale/Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce.

Where do those tenants relocate to?

The Clarksdale/Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Authority will be leasing office space at the corner of Delta Avenue and Third Street in downtown Clarksdale in the old Wells Fargo financial advisors building. Levingston said they'll begin the moving process in January.

Sweet Bay Magnolia, which was working out of the chamber location as part of a business incubator project, will also be moving.

How many people will People Shores employ?

The company is looking at approximately 20 to start. They will train for two months before coming on board as an employee. The goal is to hire 200 within the next two years.

What will be the average amount of pay?

Vullaganti said, once trained, employees will receive a "living wage" for this area. Estimates are that the jobs would pay between \$10 and \$15 per hour. Management positions will be at a higher pay scale. There will also be full benefits, such as medical insurance and paid leave.

How can people apply for these positions and when will hiring begin?

Ashley Bowen, a graduate of the University of Mississippi, will be moving back to the Delta from Chicago to take over as the assistant center manager at the Clarksdale center.

"I feel incredibly lucky to be part of People Shores," Bowen said. The Clarksdale center will be working through both the Win Job Center in Clarksdale, as well as the Coahoma Community College Workforce Training Center.

A Job Fair will be held on Thursday, Jan. 3 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Clarksdale center at 1540 Desoto Ave. More details will be available in the coming week.

-- Compiled by Michael Banks / The Clarksdale Press Register