

# Unique Places



An innovative development firm in the Triangle helps landowners find creative solutions to suburban sprawl.

WRITTEN BY T. EDWARD NICKENS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISSA GOTWALS

With the help of Unique Places, Harris Farm in Franklin County became the first parcel in a conserved tract of land that may one day grow into a regional park.

# The map is spread out on a farm kitchen table, corners held down with plates of pimento cheese and chicken salad sandwiches.

Clyde Harris lets his eyes roam over the aerial imagery, taking in the sweep of Franklin County's green woods, the sinuous line that marks the Tar River, the checkerboard of farm fields and cattle pasture. His gaze holds on the edge of the map, and it's easy to see what has kept Harris awake at night, fretting about the future of his family's rolling acreage.

"That," says Harris, "is what we don't want."

He shakes his head, eyes on a fist-sized grid of white lines, a cluster that denotes house lots set amid a green swath of open land. In 1779, Harris's great-great-grandfather bought 200 acres of woods along the Tar River, the first of many family tracts purchased throughout the next 200 years. From 1990 to 2003, Harris poured heart, soul, and wallet into reassembling more than 3,000 acres of family lands from various family members, with the promise that he would do his best to preserve their ancestral tracts. Harris's three children spent summers and weekends roaming the farm, as do his grandchildren.

"That," he says, jabbing his finger at the checkerboard of house lots in a corner of the map, "was just not an option."

Yet development is what the future holds for much of the open farm and forestlands on the borders of fast-growing Raleigh. Harris, however, is one of a growing number of landowners determined to ensure that driveways and drive-throughs aren't the fate of his family's lands. In 2007, Harris brought in an unusual team of real estate specialists, conservationists, land planners, and financial experts to help him figure out how to preserve one of the largest contiguous blocks of family farmland in the region. Called Unique Places, the Durham-based enterprise was keenly suited to the challenge. Options, says managing partner and founder Guenevere Abernathy, is what the company is about.

## Creative conservation

Unique Places is a bit of an anomaly. A real estate consulting and development firm, its purpose, curiously,

is to protect critical open lands and wildlife habitats from development. Formed in 2004, Unique Places guides landowners through the bewildering network of local, state, federal, and private conservation programs designed to help pay the cost of preserving undeveloped lands. In just a few short years, the company has helped assemble some of the largest, most visible conservation projects in the state (think: Chimney Rock State Park) while helping smaller landowners piece together a host of conservation and farmland preservation agreements that preserve woods, wetlands, and watersheds across North Carolina.

A slew of public programs help pay landowners for development rights and fund other conservation initiatives — among them idling agricultural fields, establishing wildlife habitat, and paying for water quality improvements. Under these completely voluntary agreements, called easements, landowners can utilize their land under certain limitations.

They may still be able to farm, harvest timber, and live on their lands. They may agree to restore wetlands or wildlife habitat or allow public agencies to rehabilitate pollution-trapping buffer zones along streams and waterways. But the rights to develop the land are held in trust by a local land trust or some other stewardship organization.

The state's 24 local land trusts are a driving force in the protection of North Carolina landscapes. For many landowners, working directly with a local land trust is a great way to preserve their lands. For other landowners, the growing number of ways to protect land, and the competition and complexity of the process, might lead them to Unique Places.

A land developer himself, Harris was no stranger to the complexities of real estate deal-making. But even he was daunted by the prospect of stitching together a conservation plan for the family farm. "It's getting more and more competitive to be awarded any of these easements," he says. "There are so many



Through Unique Places, Guenevere Abernathy and Jeff Fisher (above left) help landowners like Clyde Harris (top right) conserve family farms that have been passed down for generations, protecting North Carolina's countryside for all to enjoy.

processes, competitive cycles, deadlines, parameters for qualification. That's why we needed Unique Places to help guide us. We wouldn't be here — Harris Farm wouldn't still be here — without them."

### Coming Home

The lure of home brought Abernathy and Jeff Fisher together to form Unique Places. Both are Tar Heel natives with graduate degrees from North Carolina universities. Both left the state to work for The Nature Conservancy, Abernathy in Wisconsin and Fisher in Arkansas, and both returned home to work for local land conservancies. Abernathy was director of land

protection and stewardship for the Triangle Land Conservancy between 2002 and 2004, while Fisher directed the Tar River Land Conservancy from 2001 to 2006. During those years, both watched skyrocketing land prices deep-six potential conservation deals as landowners took advantage of soaring open-land values. Both chafed at what they considered the constraints of conservation's business-as-usual business plan.

Abernathy had seen how creative financing and strategic planning were reshaping human habitats. Her husband, Michael, founded Greenfire Development, which has raised millions of dollars of investment funding for urban renewal projects in

# Saved Spaces



## Chimney Rock

In the southern Blue Ridge Mountains, Unique Places bought critical land parcels that controlled access to other acreage where dense development was planned. The company then used the property to leverage the sale of important parts of what is now the world-class, 3,500-acre Chimney Rock State Park.



## Poole Farm

In northern Durham County, Unique Places worked with county planners to preserve 50 acres of heritage farmland and 32 acres of wetlands at the Poole Farm, part of a critical water-supply watershed for the municipality.



## Whitehurst Farm

Outside New Bern, the 1,600-acre Whitehurst Farm is a mosaic of wetlands, forests, and fields, including an intact Carolina Bay, one of the most ancient and ecologically rich landforms in the state, and the birthplace of the “Latham Grape,” a heritage cultivar of wild scuppernong. Unique Places shepherded the owners through negotiations that resulted in a proposed county park, a Forest Legacy tract, 6,000 feet of protected riparian borders, and a potential new addition to the state’s public lands managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

Durham. Toward the end of 2004, Abernathy founded Unique Places to take an entrepreneurial approach to conservation planning. Fisher was thinking along the same lines, looking to private investment to help fund land conservation projects. They started comparing notes as each was analyzing the complicated arrangements to save Chimney Rock Park from development.

“With Guenevere’s background in investment capital and my scrappiness in dealing with poor landscapes and low funding levels and endangered species,” Fisher says, “it seemed that we came to the same place from different directions. We both realized that private enterprise and market-based solutions were an unconventional approach to saving land, but there was a way to make it work.”

Fisher and Abernathy joined forces in late 2006. “Our ideas were so complementary,” Abernathy says. “It made sense to collaborate instead of compete.”

To date, Unique Places has helped landowners preserve more than 5,000 acres of land and raise more than \$6 million in private capital for conservation. “Much of that is money going into conservation that just wasn’t there before,” says Fisher. “I can’t tell you how exciting it is to be a part of it.”

## Enduring investments

In addition to acting as a consultant for landowners, Unique Places also serves as a “conservation buyer,” purchasing properties with important natural or cultural attributes, and working to put together conservation-oriented real estate investment programs. On the investments side, “we basically approach development backwards,” Fisher says. “We look at how we can preserve as much as possible, then work in the profits from there.”

Investing in such conservation initiatives has been a tougher sell as the recession is roiling all real estate niches, and the company has been criticized for hybridizing conservation and development in some cases. “But this is one reason Unique Places exists,” Abernathy says. “If you just see conservation as black and white — something you are either for or against — you will miss opportunities to preserve lands in ways that might differ from conventional approaches.”

Few places have functioned as such a vital laboratory for such strategic thinking as the Harris Farm. To help Clyde Harris and his family hold onto their land, Unique Places first performed an ecological assessment of the farm, evaluating assets from working agricultural areas to intact wetlands, stream corridors to forest resources.

“We spend a lot of time talking with the landowners, walking their land, trying to dream their dreams for what the future could be,” Fisher says. “Our goal is to help them achieve the future they envision for their land, not what an outside governmental agency tells them it should be. So often, those final visions are very similar, we just use different tools and a different language to get to that place.”

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Now, on the far side of untold numbers of tall stacks of grant applications, 1,382 acres of the Harris Farm are protected by forest and farmland conservation easements. Riparian buffers preserve the water quality of Jumping Run Creek and the Tar River, home to federally endangered Tar River spiny mussels and an aquatic salamander called the Neuse River waterdog, found only in the Neuse and Tar basins.

Hundreds of acres of degraded cattle pastures are being rehabilitated with native warm season grasses that hide quail nests under the tall reeds of big bluestem. The North Carolina Department of Transportation is restoring hardwood groves along

the banks of Jumping Run Creek, part of mitigation efforts required for the construction of Raleigh’s Interstate 540 Outer Loop. More fields are enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Plan.

Working through the technical and legal aspects of such complex layering of protection plans is not simple, and it’s not free. Most of these programs are cost-share based, meaning the landowner is on the hook for some of the funding. But for many landowners, it’s just enough to help to keep the bulldozers at bay.

“This is the kind of story we hear,” Fisher says. “A landowner who is caught in the middle. They tell us: ‘I’ve got six heirs I want to be able to take care of, but I want to take care of my land. I’ve got to think about my estate taxes, and I promised my neighbor 20 years ago that he’d always be able to farm that field down there by his barns. He’s counting on me. They’re all counting on me.’”

Fisher continues, “We bring clarity to what is a bewildering process. Our clients are struggling with real-life issues — family and farm — and we are right in the middle of dealing with the things that are most precious to them.”

#### Franklin County jewel

What was most precious to the Harrises became clear one day in the spring of 2004. There was a moment — actually, there was *the* moment, they like to say — when Harris and his children made the monumental decision to save their land forever. They had earlier concluded that the best way to keep the landscape marginally intact was to bring in a small number of partners — essentially, sell eight homesites to other buyers who shared their desire to preserve large portions of the farm. Harris and his son, “CP,” spent a day walking the farm, pounding tall pieces of PVC pipe into

potential homesites, so they could see each site from a distance.

“When we got to the eighth pipe,” Harris says, that day’s weariness still heavy in his voice, “I said to CP: ‘If we have to do it this way, I’d rather sell it all.’ Cutting it up meant giving up all that heritage, and I couldn’t do it.”

CP chimes in: “We went back to the house and asked ourselves: If we sell it, what are we going to do with the money? We’d just take it and go somewhere else and

try to buy what we already had. That's when we knew there had to be a Plan B. There had to be a way to save the land we'd shared for 250 years."

Now the future looks just as inviting as all that history and heritage. Conservation begets conservation, and as the Harris family moved to protect their ancestral lands, two adjoining landowners followed suit and have placed several thousand acres under conservation easement. Others are exploring the option. It's entirely possible that up to 10,000 contiguous acres of Franklin County might be forever protected.

There are dreams of a paddle trail along the Tar River, a potential regional park around the secluded shores of Jackson's Millpond. What began as one man's dream to save his family farm might one day be realized as a regional treasure.

These days, Clyde Harris looks out over his fields and ponds and running streams and woods that will always be woods. From where he stands, he can already see it. 🌿

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## to know more

### Unique Places

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