



by Mark Beese

Near the west end of Canyon Boulevard in Boulder, Colorado, under the rock cliffs called the flatirons, sits the Town Hall of a community of thousands called etown.

etown is a nationally syndicated radio show heard every week on more than 200 stations across the United States. Every etown show is taped in front of a live audience and features performances from many top musical artists, thought-provoking interviews, and the presentation of the e-chievement award recognizing everyday people who have made a difference in their community. Most of the tapings take place at the historic Boulder Theater, but the show is on the road several times each year.



Nick and Helen presenting the e-chievement award to actress and environmental advocate, Daryl Hannah

The show has featured live performances by artists such as Ani DiFranco, Bela Fleck, Crosby & Nash, Julian Lennon, Natalie Merchant, Los Lobos, Nancy Griffith, James Taylor and Willie Nelson. Each week the hosts interview an author, scientist, poet, or citizen about some aspect of the world and community. Interviews have included Jane Goodall, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Jimmy Carter, Dave Barry, and Daryl Hannah.

The mission of etown is "to produce high quality programs of diverse music and conversation in order to entertain, educate and engage a wide audience in appreciating and protecting our cultural and natural resources." By featuring diverse music and interviews, etown creates a constantly expanding "community on the air." The high point of every broadcast is the presentation of the "e-chievement award", reminding listeners that individual efforts really do make a difference and that respect for each other and our natural environment go hand in hand. Award winners are nominated by listeners and include people like Chad Pregracke, age 25 of Illinois, who personally cleaned up 1,500 miles of shoreline of the Mississippi River; Mack Stewart, a retired newspaper publisher who founded a non-profit organization that has provided warm clothing to more than 85,000 children across the United States; and Sean Downs, a successful businessman and amateur surfer who started the Sumba Foundation which provides clean water, supplies and schools benefiting more than 18,000 people living on the Indonesian island of Sumba.

The co-founders of etown are Nick and Helen Forster, who started the radio show in 1991. "Etown is not really about the music," said Nick, "The music is what makes it work, but we don't do this just so we can have a music show on the radio. We don't do this so we can hang around with artists. It's not about the entertainment industry. It's not about commerce or being the most popular



Helen and Nick Forster
(co-founders of etown)

radio show in the world. It's not about celebrity. In fact, it's about the anti-celebrity. It's about anonymous heroes around the country. The show is a vehicle for stories of hometown heroes who do such great work."

Prior to launching etown, Nick Forster was a founding member of the popular bluegrass band Hot Rize, as well as a sideman with artists such as David Wilcox and Michelle Shocked. Hot Rize released ten albums and appeared on Austin City Limits, The Grand Old Opry, and Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion. While on a State Department tour in Eastern Europe, Nick conceived the idea of the weekly radio show. NPR originally turned Nick down for funding and broadcast support, but after the Forsters funded the program on a shoestring themselves, NPR changed their mind. Now, etown is broadcast on more than 200 stations coast-to-coast.

Co-host and co-founder Helen Forster has a background in theater and improvisational comedy, and is producer of the massive Telluride Bluegrass Festival as well as various other on air programs. As etown's co-host, Helen lends her golden-toned voice to both the spoken work and the musical portions of the show. She has provided harmony vocals for guest artists Bruce Cockburn, Beth Orton, Keb'Mo', Patty Larkin, James Taylor, David Crosby, John Gorka and more. Outside of etown, she has performed as a vocalist on Prairie Home Companion and in concert across the country. She is also an established commercial voice-over talent. Both Nick and Helen perform in the etown band, the e-tones.



Says performing artist Shawn Colvin, who has played with the e-tones and appeared several times on the show, "I like where etown is coming from. I really appreciate the ecological overview, and the e-tones are one of the best bands I've ever played with." Roseanne Cash calls etown, "a superb refuge in the vast wasteland of radio." Michelle Shocked said it all, "You know what they say about etown... location, location, location!"

What's next for etown? "My hope is that we'll create a virtual community. We really do think about etown as a place. Etown is the hometown for these kinds of great music and core values that we have been presenting for so many years. We want to create a literal community of people who are etown participants. As a non-profit organization, we're about something that is not particularly market-driven. The great label support and the great station support is really how we've been able to stay around and grow," says Nick Forster.

To hear etown on the air: check out the etown website (www.etown.org) for stations, times and days of airing; OR go to <http://www.etown.org/listen.live.shtml>. Membership in etown is free, and gives you access to years of archived shows. You will also find a list of various stations that stream the show, so you can listen to the show as it is broadcast.