



# eTown

## **Over 25 Years of Music, Ideas and a Global Community**

The Rocky Mountains prove that a small force, applied relentlessly over time, can produce big changes. Boulder, Colorado, in the foothills of those mountains, is home to eTown, an American institution that's been humbly relentless and effective in its own way for more than 25 years.

To call eTown a radio show/podcast reaching 300-plus stations every week is accurate but inadequate. Still, what does one call a non-profit broadcast that interviews and celebrates public figures as eminent as Jimmy Carter, Al Gore and anthropologist Dr. Jane Goodall? And what kind of show pairs pioneers like that with such diverse musical icons as James Taylor, Earl Scruggs, Buddy Guy, Loretta Lynn and Mavis Staples?

One can only call it eTown, a show built on some trusted and timeless ideas, but whose particular combination of and faithfulness to those concepts have made it unique in American culture.

Follow the eTown story and its ripples back to their source and you'd find the same two people who started it running it today. Nick and Helen Forster have been married to one another only a bit longer than they've been married to the show. Through 1,000 episodes and several thousand guests, they have been personally invested in every aspect of the show and its national and global impact. They've developed, fund-raised, marketed, rehearsed, written, performed, recorded, edited and distributed. They've never missed or canceled a show.

The aim was a show that invited people to "come for the music and stay for the message." And that message was pioneering and prescient when they began in 1991, drawing attention to global warming and sustainability years before they were topics of national concern. eTown's creation of the e-Chievement Award was a stroke of radio genius, combining crowd sourcing with great on-air storytelling to inspire all of us to try harder to improve the planet or the lives of others.

All the show lacked for 20 years was a permanent home and venue, but that changed in recent years. The Forsters raised funds to purchase and renovate a run-down church in a residential neighborhood a few blocks from downtown Boulder. Now it's eTown Hall, a 17,000 square-foot, solar-powered state-of-the-art facility with a theater, a recording studio and space for meetings, dances and community events. It's a tangible embodiment of the eTown's motto: Music, Ideas, Community.

## ***Two Tenacious Taurians***

Nick and Helen's lives intersected thanks to music, show business and service. Helen brought a professional background as an actress, vocalist, writer, and improv comedian to Colorado, settling into the community of Telluride, where she became a force in the arts community; she also honed her production skills for several years as co-owner/co-producer of the legendary Telluride Bluegrass Festival.

Nick arrived as a young pilgrim in the 1970s to join the repair staff at a guitar shop in Denver. That new life led to a relationship with guitarist Charles Sawtelle and the formation of Hot Rize, an era-defining, award winning bluegrass band that toured and recorded full time between 1978 and 1990; the group continues to tour and record even while Nick continues to host eTown, produce and tour with other artists.

About the time Hot Rize went on long-term hiatus, Nick and Helen met backstage at Telluride. They were, says Helen, "two tenacious Taurians born on the same day" and their instant chemistry has led to a long, happy marriage and the tight working relationship that has made eTown possible.

In 1990, Nick visited Turkey, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria on a State Department sponsored Bluegrass tour with Sam Bush and others. The environmental devastation he saw there – land, air and water – moved and concerned him. On the flight back, he sketched a vision for a novel radio show that would combine an environmental mission with the music he loved and the vibe of the great radio broadcasts he'd played on for years as a performer, including *A Prairie Home Companion* and the venerable *Grand Ole Opry*. He shared the idea with Helen, whose environmental passion was rooted in both her college studies plus a stint living off the grid outside of Telluride when she first arrived there; and the two got to work.

Although the concept was born on a plane back from Eastern Europe, the seeds had been planted years before. Nick grew up on the Hudson River in New York, and he was a first-hand witness to folk legend Pete Seeger's efforts to spotlight the waterway's pollution problems with his boat, *The Clearwater*.

"I was really inspired by Pete as a kid," says Forster. "He was the first person I ever saw play music live. I watched him raise money and awareness. He had a long view, and he found a way to capitalize on his strengths and skills as an artist to try to effect change and clean up the Hudson River."

## ***The Seeds Begin To Sprout***

Together, Nick and Helen planned a pilot, hired a band and rented out the Boulder Theater. On Earth Day of 1991, the first eTown took place featuring a rich musical mix with Sonny Landreth, The Subdudes, Maura O'Connell and David Wilcox. They edited down an eight-minute sampler version of the show for Nick to take to a radio conference. He wasn't sure if he'd caught anyone's attention until some days later when National Public Radio called to say it was interested. NPR picked up an initial season of 13 episodes and asked for more. The Forsters had to scramble for funding, and ended up using their own savings for the first season, but eTown was launched.

## ***Music & Mission***

“We wanted to create a community, through media, based on two basic ideas,” says Nick. “One, music is the great connector and attractor that cuts across every boundary and border at a time when we really need that kind of connection. And two, we all can do something to improve how we treat each other and the planet, particularly in light of climate change.”

It took insight to see that these missions weren’t only compatible but complimentary. eTown was becoming a place where artists *and* activists wanted to be.

On the music side, eTown has become renowned as a musical taste-maker and a vital national platform for intelligent, independent music. One of Nick’s key advantages in launching the show was an address book full of friends and colleagues from more than a decade of touring with Hot Rize. He tapped his network and launched eTown with a roster of remarkable talent for a new program, bringing Shawn Colvin, Lyle Lovett, Jerry Douglas, Edgar Meyer, the Fairfield Four and James Taylor – among others – in for the very first season.

With a killer house band, most artists arrived with just their instruments and worked up a few songs with the band, sometimes even collaborating with the other guests. Another carefully cultivated musical feature of the show is its finale, a collaborative performance of a song chosen and arranged by the week’s featured guests. Nick, who guides the finale, says, “This is physical proof that people who don’t know each other, didn’t grow up near each other, come from different cultures, in some cases speak different languages, can come together, work up, arrange, rehearse and perform a song together that is joyous and remarkable and amazing.”

The show opens and closes with music but its heart and soul is its conversation, with the interview guests and the weekly winner of the eTown eChievement Award, one of the most inspiring segments on public radio. Winners are problem-solvers and entrepreneurial public servants from the U.S. and overseas who take initiative on a wide range of issues including wildlife poaching, homelessness, education and climate change. It’s rooted in story – accessible narratives of individuals who’ve made measurable progress on a big problem with resourcefulness and heart.

“And those winners are nominated by listeners, enhancing the notion that we all take inspiration from change makers.” Says Helen: “It’s so important to the human spirit to feel that we can solve problems and that we can at least make a dent, and that we each have the power to make some sort of positive contribution, and that’s kind of what we’re demonstrating to our listeners.”

Nick notes that the focus of the eChievement Award stories is the epiphany – when concern turns to action: “There’s always a moment when somebody looks at a problem and says, ‘you know what? I think I have an idea, I can maybe do something about that.’ And that’s the part that’s the most compelling, the most critical.” And Helen adds: “We hear from a lot of our winners that there’s been a significant impact from them being on the show. People report getting more hits on their website, more volunteers and funding all from eTown listeners.

## ***A New Home / Building Global Community***

The long time home of eTown, the 860-seat Boulder Theater, began to feel constraining, but not in the way most people might assume. “We realized we were programming our radio show to accommodate the venue,” says Helen. “Every show had to have an artist who would help sell those tickets. That made booking more challenging and less adventurous.” Overhead and rental fees became unsustainable as well, and it became clear a change was needed to keep the program viable and ongoing.

So eTown, the non-profit organization, purchased a dilapidated 17,000 square foot church in downtown Boulder and began raising funds to renovate it. At one point, Nick even went online and became ordained in order to convince the city that the zoning requirement that the building continue as a church could be met – if needed. They got a variance after all, but Nick used his credentials to perform the wedding service for Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson, but that’s another story.

After a massive fundraising effort, the plans were in place and the team of experts was assembled. It was a complex and uncompromising process, steered by Nick. But when it opened in 2012, it could claim to be the greenest performing arts / media making facility in Colorado – if not the world. The state-of-the-art building includes a 220-seat theater, a recording studio and a public space for events and meetings.

“It’s a scene,” says Nick of the busy eTown Hall. “The other day, Elephant Revival was in our recording studio making a record. The Hard Working Americas were on the stage rehearsing for their upcoming tour. We’ve got salsa dances and square dances and eTown tapings all under one roof. Lots of people are in the building all the time. It’s becoming not just a place for eTown but sort of a community hub – the kind of community we were hoping to create when we started eTown. It’s a non-profit, solar powered clubhouse for music and media and arts and film. It’s really coming into its own in a beautiful way.”

The Forsters have some experience making beautiful visions come true, but they’re far from done. eTown, in these tricky times, is a place where more and more people feel right at home.