

BROADCASTING FROM BOULDER TO THE WORLD

Love story launches
eTown radio show's
30 years on the air

by LEAH M. CHARNEY

A GUITAR TWANGS OUT a bluesy chord progression before drums and piano kick in, creating a jazzier medley. Then, Helen Forster's soothing voice says, "From the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, it's eTown with this week's guests ..." before dropping the names of two musical acts. Performers like Willie Nelson, Cyndi Lauper, Flaco Jimenez and the Blind Boys of Alabama have all graced their stage, backed up by the eTones house band and shepherded by musician and emcee – and Helen's husband – Nick Forster.

This scene has unfolded nearly a thousand times on eTown, a music-meets-talk show recorded before a live audience in downtown Boulder and then broadcast weekly on 300 radio stations worldwide. The show is now celebrating its 30th anniversary.

Each eTown episode begins with a musical performance. An "eChievement Award" is presented to a person making a difference in their local community. Awardees are listener-nominated and include contributions like building homes for low-income families or bringing oysters back to waterways. Songs are interspersed with interview questions for the



Sam Silkworth

Nick Forster, who co-founded eTown with his wife, Helen, plays guitar during a live performance of the long-running radio show. Attendees of an eTown taping enter the show's Boulder venue, eTown Hall, a former church that was remodeled in 2012.

musicians. The event builds to crescendo when the evening's two performers, who likely met mere hours earlier, play the final song of the evening together.

THE SHOW'S MANTRA of "think globally, act locally" extends to eTown Hall, the church at 16th and Spruce streets in Boulder that became eTown's permanent home in 2012. Beyond eTown productions, the building also hosts events staged by schools and other nonprofits and has a rentable recording studio. eTown Hall was "willed into existence," Nick said of the four-year process of buying, remodeling and reopening the building. He even got ordained as a minister to convince the city of Boulder that eTown's desire to open the concert venue and community center fit the former church's existing zoning code.

"For almost 100 years, this space has been doing what we are continuing to do, which is to define a set of values, to invite people to understand what those values are, and see if they feel a connection or kinship," Nick said.

The building is decked out in solar panels, beetle-kill pine and carpet laid down in individual squares that can be easily cleaned (or replaced) to limit waste.

Though major demolition and reconstruction was required, materials were reused whenever possible; recycled, sustainable or local products were chosen when new construction was necessary.

Quality sound was the other guiding principle. Inside the walls, sheetrock hangs on springs to create a buffer between dry-wall and studs so there's no vibration. The ductwork is completely silent, and the main stage is built on rubber isolators.

The impact of eTown is known throughout Boulder, but how the show came to be a global phenomenon is closely entwined with the love story of its founders.

HELEN MOVED TO Telluride as it was transforming from mining into a ski and festival town; the main street had just been paved and wooden boardwalks were being replaced with concrete sidewalks. Within a few years, she was a co-owner and co-producer of the now venerable Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Building the nascent event into a blockbuster celebration was grueling work.

She'd heard of Hot Rize, the Grammy-nominated Boulder-based bluegrass band Nick began playing bass with in

1978. But it wasn't until she sold her stake and attended her first show as a regular festivalgoer that Helen finally saw Hot Rize perform. They looked dashing in vintage suits and ties, crowded around an old-fashioned microphone.

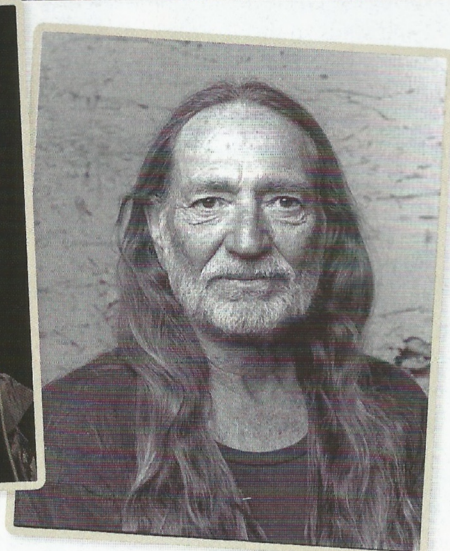
"I loved the choreography," Helen said. "The banjo would go over here, and the bass would go over there, so they wouldn't crash into each other. Being a stage person I was just like, 'Wow! This is like performance art.'" Nick introduced songs and engaged in witty banter. "He was just so funny and charming."

The rest of the story is relatively textbook: Boy meets girl backstage, boy and girl fall in love, boy brings his kids on their second date. Well, right up until that last part.

When Helen opened the station wagon's door and saw Nick's three children in the backseat, he'd made it clear that as a single dad he was a package deal. He also thought Helen was "the one." She got in the car that day and never looked back. Their love story is sweet, but it's also the foundation supporting all that happened after. Nick's kids were 4, 7, and 9 when Helen entered his world. The youngest is now eTown's marketing director.



Tim Reese (all)



Steve Stone

Chris Engleman, Nick Forster, Dallas Green and Helen Forster perform at a show. eTown guests have included Taj Mahal and Lyle Lovett, Coloradan Judy Collins and country legend Willie Nelson.

IF BLUEGRASS IS to thank for their romance, Bulgaria gets credit for what happened next. Nick went on tour in the Eastern Bloc as the Soviet Union was dissolving. By day, he wandered cities choked in pollution. At night, he noted how the performances brought people of all different backgrounds together. Nick came back with an idea for a show that would blend music with environmental and humanitarian causes, and he and Helen got to work creating eTown.

Nick wanted a name that captured this idea of a global village and kept coming back to environment, entertainment, education, energy and earth. The name eTown could represent all those and more.

Though the Forsters share a lot, including the same birthday, their working relationship is more divide and conquer. Beyond the festival, Helen had a background as an actor, writer, radio DJ and singer. She also had a keen interest in environmental work. Those skills, Nick's musicianship and talent booking, and their shared interest in saving the world made for a solid recipe.

The very first eTown was recorded on Earth Day 1991, a mere month before Nick and Helen's wedding. It was syndicated by National Public Radio for several years until the show fell victim to budget cuts. Nick and Helen turned to the eTown community to accept donations and get a new distribution method up and running. In the original incarnation, only NPR-affiliate stations had been able to broadcast the show. Once they became an independent entity, any station – public or commercial, independent or otherwise – can now carry eTown.

The Forsters haven't stopped at radio, though. eTown is constantly developing new ways to connect with their audience, such as through podcasts, social media, and creating specialty video content. Their YouTube channel alone has more than 85,000 subscribers.

As Nick and Helen tell it, eTown is based on two simple premises: music brings people together, and people everywhere can take better care of one another and the planet. eTown aims to get people informed, inspired and involved.

Across decades, the Forsters have partnered to make beautiful music on stage and off, seeking to help Boulder and beyond become a better place. 🌱