How Colleen is Preserving the Past for the Next Generation

For Colleen Cooper, One Room Schoolhouse Number 3 is more than an old building sitting along a rural road.

It is a memory.

Long before she and her husband purchased the surrounding farmland, before the nonprofit existed, and before restoration plans began taking shape, Colleen first stepped inside the schoolhouse as a fourth grader on a field trip.

She still remembers sitting at the desks, writing with feather pens and ink, and experiencing what school looked like more than a century ago.

Years later, that memory never left her.

An Old Soul with a Vision

Colleen describes herself as someone with “an old soul” and a deep appreciation for history. Over time, that appreciation only grew stronger.

Trips with her grandfather introduced her to places rooted in history and preservation. Later, a trip to Poland deepened that appreciation, giving her a firsthand look at historic structures that had endured for centuries.

“It really gives you an appreciation for the craftsmanship that went into some of these spaces,” she shared.

Saving Something Worth Keeping

After Colleen and her husband purchased the nearby home and farmland connected to the property, the schoolhouse remained the missing piece.

“I love that schoolhouse,” Colleen remembers thinking. “I gotta know what’s happening with that.”

Eventually, she wrote letters to members of the family who owned the building, sharing both her passion for the schoolhouse and her vision for its future.

The idea was simple: preserve the building and bring back the educational field trips that had once introduced local fourth graders to the experience of early 1900s school life.

But the vision quickly became bigger.

Colleen began imagining community workshops, literacy programs, artist collaborations, speakers, and hands-on experiences that could reconnect people with history in a way that feels increasingly rare.

“Kids don’t even have pencils,” she said with a laugh while describing her own children visiting the schoolhouse for the first time. “They don’t even write in cursive anymore.”

Watching her children react to the outhouse, chalkboards, and old wooden desks reminded her exactly why preservation matters.

“If they can go spend two hours at this schoolhouse and just kind of have an eye-opening experience about, like, people really did this…” she said, “I think it’s important to instill those things.”

Turning Passion Into Action

While Colleen and her husband were no strangers to building businesses, starting a nonprofit came with an entirely different learning curve.

"We've created three businesses," she said. "What's one more?"

Still, forming a nonprofit required research, planning, legal guidance, and a completely new understanding of how nonprofit organizations operate.

That's when Colleen reached out to Nonprofit Support Network.

"Jena's the expert," she said. "If anybody knows about nonprofits, it's her."

Through conversations with Jena Ashby, Relationship and Resource Director at Nonprofit Support Network, Colleen was connected to resources and community partners who helped bring structure to the vision she had carried for years.

One of those connections was with Marcy Minton at The Community Foundation of Muncie and Delaware County, who helped Colleen think through nonprofit formation, organizational structure, and long-term planning.

"They kind of walked through all the options," Colleen explained. "Just being proactive."

Jena also connected Colleen with additional legal resources, helping her better understand the responsibilities and risks that come with nonprofit ownership and property preservation.

While One Room Schoolhouse Number 3 is still in its early stages, Colleen says the guidance and encouragement she received made the process feel far less overwhelming.

"I just felt like they had really good hearts in wanting us to do well," she shared.

A Full-Circle Moment

Today, One Room Schoolhouse Number 3 is still in the early stages of restoration and development, but Colleen already sees the potential for what it can become.

Not just a preserved building, but a place where people can reconnect with history, creativity, literacy, and community.

And for Colleen, there is something especially meaningful about knowing it all started with a childhood field trip she never forgot.

“Fourth grade Colleen would have had no idea that this was a possibility,” she said.

Now, she hopes future generations will walk through those same doors, sit at those same desks, and leave with the same sense of wonder she carried with her all these years later.