

**The Harlan County Project Phase Ten
“Crawdad Meets Higher Ground”**

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Final Report Narrative

Name of Project: The Harlan County Project Phase Ten: “Crawdad Meets Higher Ground”

Grant Period: January 1, 2010 – June 30, 2010

Grantee Name: The Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College

Project Director: Robert Gipe

Description of Project

For the past decade our Appalachian Teaching Project work has systematically fought to give the statement “there is nothing to do here” the lie in our coalfield community by engaging a broad cross-section of community residents in creating public art for display and performance here in the county. From the work of ATP faculty and students at Southeast have come community theatrical productions grounded in locally played music and locally collected stories, a series of tile mosaic public art works, and the Crawdad series of youth-oriented and directed art and music events. During school year 2010-2011, Southeast classes in art and music worked with coalitions of community partners to create a new community play and evolve our work in the youth-led and youth-centered Crawdad art and music series. Southeast ATP faculty explored how to facilitate true sharing of project leadership, creative control, and management with community members and students (who are, in our case, also community members). This work was centered in Ann Schertz’s Music 222 course, History and Sociology of Rock Music and Robert Gipe’s Humanities 202 and 203, Survey of Appalachian Studies I and II.

Activities

Our activities during the grant period included the following:

- A community-engaged scripting process for the third Higher Ground play that incorporated the work of Carpetbag Theatre, Inc. of Knoxville, Tennessee.
- A series of student planning meetings in the fall and spring Crawdad student arts events

- The art and concert event *Crawdadoween 3: Night of the Living Crawdead* in late October 2010 which was attended by over 250 community residents and involved over forty people as support staff.
- A fourth spring *Crawdad* festival, *Crawzilla*, May 13th, 2011 which involved similar numbers of community members.
- Six community performances of *Higher Ground 3: Talking Dirt* in April and May, 2011, a community play which engaged seventy-five community members as cast and crew and was seen by over 1200 people.
- Completion of tile mosaic projects for Lynch and Cumberland, actively engaged over twenty community residents, including those at a local residential drug rehabilitation center.

Project Outcomes

In addition to the activities described above, our outcomes included the following:

- Four Southeast courses (two in fall, two in spring) in which students engaged in the above named work and in the process developed leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability; engaged as active learners and participants in community projects; engaged in active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development.
- Presentation of research at a conference in Washington, D.C., on December 2-4, 2010.
- Creation of a poster for presentation at the conference in Washington, D.C.
- Student participation in media coverage of *Higher Ground 3: Talking Dirt*, and in particular interviews with reporters from *The Harlan Daily Enterprise* and *The New York Times*.
- Scheduled presentation by students and community members from the *Higher Ground* cast at the Mountain Heritage Literary Festival at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee, June 24th, 2011.

Problems Encountered

It was somewhat stressful doing Crawzilla the week after we finished the play. ATP faculty and staff were not able to give Crawdad students the support they deserve. On the bright side, the students, once again, proved themselves capable of handling most of their business on their own. We are also having to hustle to get our tile mosaic project done for Lynch on time. But we will get it done.

Program Continuation and Sustainability

Crawdad is supported by the college, and is largely volunteer-run, and is relatively sustainable, at least financially. The biggest threat to its continuation is that the last couple events have been marked by more conspicuous mischief on a variety of the fronts generally associated with young people in their teens and early twenties. SKCTC Crawdad/ATP students are working with college staff to address these issues and thus sustain Crawdad. With the completion of the third Higher Ground play, The SKCTC Appalachian Program has finished the work funded by the Steele-Reese Foundation. Interest in continuing the Higher Ground work remains high in the community, particularly among the newest and youngest participants. The first three plays cost approximately \$60,000 a piece to produce, not counting SKCTC staff time. We are at a crossroads in the Higher Ground work. The work will continue, but for the last few years, the Higher Ground coalition has questioned the need for spending so much of our money on artists from outside the community. We will be looking to experiment with the model in hopes of making it more easily sustained in the coming years. We will also be proactive in looking for ways to transfer leadership skills in the Higher Ground work to the next generation of leadership.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This was truly the year when our Crawdad work merged with our Higher Ground work. Many of the young people who participated in the play this year are/were regular attendees at Crawdad events. Much of the play's storyline, which focused on the forces that hold young people in our community and the forces that push them out [see attachments for more information on the content of the play] came from stories collected among the young people in SKCTC classes and

associated with Crawdad. Also, after the completion of production of Higher Ground 3, many of the cast attended Crawzilla, our Spring 2011 event and participated as Crawdad staff. In a community like ours, it is important to look for ways for work to merge, overlap, and feed other work. It does so in many cases naturally, but it never hurts to be proactive about finding ways to connect people and parts of the work. It should also be noted that online social networks, and Facebook in particular, play a large role in helping us do this work—and also in sustaining the friendships that have been created within the community as part of the work.

Attachments

- *New York Times* article on *Higher Ground 3: Talking Dirt*, which can also be found [here](#).
- *Harlan Daily Enterprise* article on *Higher Ground 3*, which can also be found [here](#).
- Review of Higher Ground 3 by Gwenda Huff-Johnson, County Extension Agent for Family and Consumer Sciences in Sandy Hook, Kentucky
- Essay on the Higher Ground 3 experience by cast member and ATP student Tyler Meister.

Tackling the Problems of Appalachia, Theatrically



Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

A cast of 75 performed in “Talking Dirt,” part of a series of plays about life in the heart of Kentucky coal country.

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

Published: May 14, 2011

CUMBERLAND, Ky. — Robert Gipe, an expert on Appalachia, had grown weary of watching flip-chart presentations about the region’s problems. Their remedies were too sweeping, and their language, full of terms like “sustainable development,” were too lofty.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Harlan County has lost nearly half of its under-35 population since 1980.

“I was interested in addressing issues, rather than endlessly naming them,” Mr. Gipe said.

So with two colleagues from Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, where he teaches, Mr. Gipe did the one thing he thought might help lift Harlan County — or at least its spirits.

He staged a series of plays.

The series, “Higher Ground,” describes in nuanced tones and local accents the hard realities of life here in Harlan, the heart of Kentucky [coal](#) country, which has been battered by decades of decline.

The title “Higher Ground” comes from the places communities flock to escape rising flood waters and is a metaphor for the monumental problems facing the area — drug abuse, strip mining, dwindling populations of young people.

The plays — the first of which was staged in 2005 and the third and most recent, “Talking Dirt,” over two weekends in late April and early May — take on those issues through characters that are part fiction, part real.

“Talking Dirt” tells the story of James and Beth, young people torn between the slim prospects in their hometown and the specter of having to leave. An environmental twist comes when a mining company wants to buy James’s land.

Mr. Gipe, a self-effacing 47-year-old from Tennessee, went to graduate school in Massachusetts but has spent most of his career in Appalachia, first in nonprofit work and later as a professor of Appalachian studies. He said he wanted to involve the entire county in the productions.

He and his colleagues, Ann Schertz, a music professor, and Theresa Osborne, a folklorist, recruited performers in schools, churches, civic organizations, even the grocery store and the post office. “Talking Dirt” has a cast of 75, including several families with children.

In the old days, rural culture came from getting together, telling stories and making music, and Mr. Gipe wanted to replicate that. Bluegrass melodies anchor many of the scenes and are played by local musicians, including two father-and-son duos.

“We need entertainment,” Mr. Gipe said. “We need something of our own. And we have these hard things that we should talk about.”

Harlan has lost three-fifths of its population since its peak in 1940, according to census data, and has lost nearly half of its under-35 population since 1980.

A character named Roger describes what that is like: “My high school graduation was my mother crying like I was dead, because she was so sure I was leaving and she would never see me again.”

That line and others in the play are drawn from real stories collected by Southeast Kentucky Community students in a long-running oral history project.

Harlan is also among the country's poorest counties. (Last week, phone and Internet service in the area was cut when copper thieves ripped out lines.)

"Talking Dirt" offers an empathetic twist to its otherwise gloomy view of strip mining. While Beth, who has been offered a scholarship, opposes strip mining, Roger, a young miner, shows her that her privileged status gives her the luxury to choose.

"There wasn't anybody standing there offering me a scholarship when I graduated high school," he tells her.

Harlan County's fortunes are still tied to coal, so mining is a sensitive subject. Coal jobs represent just 14 percent of employment in Harlan, down from more than 60 percent in 1940. But according to Roy Silver, a sociology professor at Southeast, they generate about a third of the income.

While Mr. Gipe would not use the phrase "community building" to refer to the play — though he admitted he would in a grant proposal — that has clearly been its effect.

Carlton Hughes, a professor at Southeast, said the play had changed the attitude of his 15-year-old son, Noah, who for some time had been chafing at life in Harlan County.

"With every breath, he would say, 'I can't wait to get out of here,' " Mr. Hughes said.

But Noah agreed to take a role in the play, and during a recent performance, Mr. Hughes was pleased to see him laughing and cavorting with a retired coal miner many times his age.

Despite the unconventional subject matter, the play has a fairly standard happy ending. Mr. Gipe makes no apologies for it.

"Somewhere along the line, artistic validity became associated with everything ending in a mess," he said. "But if you articulate what's best in us and put characters in front of people who don't resort to their basest instincts, that's real, too."

Robert Gebeloff contributed reporting from New York.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/us/15appalachia.html>

Higher Ground 3 'Talking Dirt' begins Friday at SKCTC

by NOLA SIZEMORE

published in The Harlan Daily Enterprise April 28, 2011



NOLA SIZEMORE/Harlan Daily Enterprise

Higher Ground 3 "Talking Dirt" will begin Friday at 7 p.m. at the Godbey Appalachian Center on the Cumberland Campus of SKCTC. The cast will perform an original musical drama about the "stories we tell and the stories we don't."

Higher Ground 3 "Talking Dirt," an original community musical drama, will begin Friday at 7 p.m. at the Godbey Appalachian Center on the Cumberland campus of Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College. Other performances will be Saturday, May 5 and May 7 at 7 p.m. There will also be a 2:30 p.m. performance on May 1 and May 8.

"The primary reason we continue to do Higher Ground each year is because the cast members and the community keep asking us for it," said Robert Gipe, executive producer of Higher Ground Talking Dirt. "Higher Ground has been a way for the community to talk about things that may or may not be comfortable to talk about, but do talk about those things in a way that is comfortable," said Gipe. "Higher Ground is finding new ways to have those conversations. If you live in the county, we're all in it together at some level. It's easy to get divided. So, we look for ways to show there are two sides to every story. If you live in this community, we all have something in common by virtue of our zip code beginning with 408. Through Higher Ground, we've tried to create some space where we can talk and have some fun doing it. We've never been interested in being preachy. We're interested in celebrating what's going on in the community — it's important and everybody should do that."

Natasha Painter, of Wallins Creek, said this is her first year participating in Higher Ground. She said she plays the part of Beth.

"Beth is a really strong character," said Painter. "She's confused about whether to leave Harlan

County or not. She loves the area and asks questions throughout the play trying to help her make her decision. I fell in love with the character because she is so much like me.”

Austin Ruthford, of Benham, is also a first-timer with Higher Ground. He is assistant stage manager and plays the part of Carlton.

“I’m currently a senior at Harlan County High School and when I graduate I intend to enroll at SKCTC,” said Ruthford. “I’m excited to be a part of Higher Ground this year. After my college graduation, I’m hoping to pursue a career in theatre and film directing.”

Robert Martin, of Clear Creek and director of Talking Dirt, said this year’s play is his first involvement with Higher Ground.

“I’m thrilled to be a part of this year’s Higher Ground,” said Martin. “I think the work is beautiful, compelling. It’s not just stories — it’s song and dance — movement. It feels like it goes along with that belief ‘everybody has a story to tell and deserves to tell it.’ People are doing it with such pride and grace. I think it’s going to be a really powerful sentiment that echoes throughout the community for years to come.”

Tickets are \$4 for adults, \$2 for anyone under the age of 12. To reserve tickets or for more information, you may call (606) 589-3148 or contact Mary Jo Brashears at maryjo.brashears@kctcs.edu.

Read more: [The Harlan Daily Enterprise - Higher Ground 3 ‘Talking Dirt’ begins Friday at SKCTC](#)

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The props were few, just some stools to sit on, a table, some pots and pans, dishes and other items lying around home. The costumes certainly were not fancy or elaborate just clothes from the closet. The simplicity of props and costumes was lost in the talent of local people telling their stories through word, song and dance. The larger than life images that lit the stage put you in a place forgotten by much of the outside world, the beautiful mountains of Eastern Kentucky. As the scenes changed, so did the digital images projected on the massive screen.

Volunteers in Harlan County created a community theatre group and brought their mountain heritage to the stage. And they did it with style and unending talent. They captured stories that told about life and love in the Mountains of Harlan County. A group of volunteers wanting to preserve a culture that is rapidly fading turned these stories into a play titled "Higher Ground, Talking Dirt".

It is a long drive to Cumberland from Sandy Hook but I knew if Pam Holcomb had her little finger in a project, it would be the best. Higher Ground is a community written and produced play about subjects that are hard to talk about like drug abuse and coal mining. "Higher Ground has been a way for the community to talk about things that may or may not be comfortable to talk about, but do talk about those things in a way that is comfortable", said Robert Gipe, executive producer of ***Higher Ground Talking Dirt***.

My friend Pam Holcomb was a volunteer who helped develop the series of plays that have gained national attention. "Talking Dirt" is the third in the series of Higher Ground plays that are home grown in every way. They have attacked difficult topics such as drug abuse and mountain top removal. In "Talking Dirt", my friend played a community philanthropist who used her wealth from making "shine" to sponsor local students to college. A true character from Harlan County.

The stories moved me from tears of laughter to tears of emotion. The imagination and acting of three volunteers took me on an amazing ride from Cincinnati in a make believe car that wasn't built for the trip. With every vroom vroom vroom as the car made its way on stage, I knew another incident would put me on the highway near a town on route from Ohio. From a flat tire, to losing the drive shaft to running out of gas, the story of determination to get home for a reunion depicted the deep rooted love for place and family. The amazing thing is it happened to someone one from Harlan County because the script for the play came from real events in the lives of real people, local people. The automobile

appeared at just the right time to change the mood of the play. From new love to birth to death, ***Higher Ground, Talking Dirt*** touched on family issues that are sometimes left unsaid because no one knows how to ask the right questions or express their feelings.

Although many stories were told, the one that captured my heart was the death of a grandfather who loved the land that he left to his grandson who he raised. However, the grandson didn't have the same connection to the land as did his grandfather. When the mining company approached him to sell his grandfather's mountain for the coal underneath the ground, the relationship between him and his environmentalist girlfriend was compromised. Although each had many friends, neither could find anyone who would talk to them about their concerns. The young man planned to leave Harlan County to find another lifestyle. His girlfriend had all expenses paid to med school but wanted to stay in Harlan County because of the love she had for place and family.

The play talked about touchy subjects but also depicted people in a truthful light. As did the road trip, A group of women gossipers, who liked to talk about everyone except themselves, lightened the mood. Traditional dancing and singing lifted the spirits of the actors and the audience that filled the seats. From the old time hymns sang at the grandfather's funeral to a traditional hoe down, the play was truly about mountain life and the controversies that can arise causing conflict between the members of a tight knit community.

Live music by a local band entertained the audience before the opening act and at intermission. But they also played during the play. The music fit the scene. Being live made the music an integral part of the play.

It was a long drive home from Cumberland. Gene and I pulled into the drive way about 1:30 am but the three hour drive didn't seem that long because the whole way home we talked about Higher Ground.

The ***Harlan Daily Enterprise*** quotes director Robert Gipe as saying, "The primary reason we continue to do Higher Ground each year is because the cast members and the community keep asking us for it". If you live in the county, we're all in it together at some level. It's easy to get divided. So, we look for ways to show there are two sides to every story. If you live in this community, we all have something in common by virtue of our zip code beginning with 408. Through Higher Ground, we've tried to create some space where we can talk and have some fun doing it. We've never been interested in being preachy. We're interested in celebrating what's going on in the community — it's important and everybody should do that."

I almost backed out of going to Harlan County. I'm so glad we went. Watching ***Higher Ground, Talking Dirt*** made me feel connected to the place and people. It made me realize, more than ever, that we all have concerns and issues that we must talk about. Harlan County has made it easier to talk. My belief that story telling is the greatest form of communication and education was strengthened. I believe in stories. I admire good storytellers. There were over 50 involved in producing the story telling event called ***Higher Ground, Talking Dirt***.

Higher Ground: What it has Meant for me

Higher Ground was a very unique experience—I had the opportunity to meet new people and hear their stories. Before this process began, I had wondered if it was worth the effort and time, and I decided to jump into it because some of my friends had been in it—Sean Greene and Forrest Hollins. While they were mainly involved with the band in previous productions, they convinced me to do it. I went into the Harlan Campus and met BobbyB, and he greeted me—I felt the “welcoming” feeling of Higher Ground from that moment on.

The auditions were a little long, and I had no idea where I would be put. This was uncharted waters for me, so it was a little intimidating. BobbyB had me act out James’ monologue, and it was difficult to hit the emotions that the character really would have felt. A few days later, I was informed that I would be Roger, one of the main characters in the play. I was a bit skeptical of my capability, but I accepted the challenge with open arms. The initial read throughs with everyone sitting in the chairs was a bit challenging to get through. I was beginning to find my voice as Roger, yet it was frustrating because I had no acting experience prior to Higher Ground Three.

The cast constantly kept providing words of encouragement to not only me but all of their fellow cast members. It was not a play built on a script and actors—this play had love at its foundation. The intimidation I had lessened as time went on because I was meeting new people, new friends who were there to support me. I have never done anything where I get to meet and become familiar with such a large group of people. I got to meet people that did not even live in Harlan county—for example, BobbyB, Pam, and Iega.

Among the acting required in Higher Ground, I had to learn dances for almost each song. One in particular, *I be your Water*, was a duet dance. I had never acted before, and I certainly had never danced either. I was shocked when Iega, a professional dancer, gave me the opportunity to do this dance. I agreed to do it, and after two days of work, I had learned the dance. The dance was not too complex, yet it felt like it for me. Acting and dancing pushed me out of my comfort zone, but my self-confidence was increasing. Eventually, acting and dancing went from being something sort of scary to a lot of fun.

Higher Ground has changed me—I am a different person now. I feel more sociable, and I have developed new interests because of it. For example, I really enjoyed dancing in the play, and I plan to take dance lessons soon under Heather Adams. Higher Ground gave me the opportunity to experience new things that I would have otherwise not done. Being in Higher Ground felt right, and it’s something I would do all over again if I had the opportunity. Among the interests I have developed, I have gained another family. This group of people may not be biologically related, yet I consider them family in every respect—the love and support from each other is outstanding.

I had heard of a few Appalachian stories prior to Higher Ground, yet I really was oblivious to life in Appalachia. Reading about Appalachia is one thing, but experiencing it puts a lot into perspective. While acting out some of these stories, such as the Itching to make Money scene, I felt like I was really there. This was Cindy Brock's story, and I felt like I had experienced this story with her. It's hard to explain, but the stage came to life for me. Higher Ground let me experience life in Appalachia and not just read about it—each scene represented a different aspect of Appalachia.

Higher Ground brought so much to the table for the community and the cast. Every bit of what Higher Ground stands for is represented by the community, and that's what I love about it. Higher Ground became a part of me, and even though it is over, the memory will stick with me forever. I was really skeptical of getting into Higher Ground at first, and I was scared of some of the things it required. I was challenged to do things I had never done, but the love and support from fellow cast members helped me through it. The friends I made, the story I experienced, and the process of it all made my involvement with Higher Ground one of the best choices I had ever made.