

**The Harlan County Project: Phase 15  
Final Report**

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**February 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016**

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## Final Report Narrative

Title of Project: The Harlan County Project: Phase 15

Grant Period: February 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016

Grantee Name: Southeast Education Foundation

Project Director: Robert Gipe

### Description of Project:

Students working with the Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College Appalachian Program will conduct a student-led regional youth conference called **It's Good To Be Young In The Mountains** (IG2BYITM) in Harlan, Kentucky August 13-16, 2015 as part of a program to develop youth leadership and promote tourism/visitors to Harlan County, Kentucky and the surrounding counties.

### Activities:

#### **June-July 2015**

**AAD 200: Fundamentals of Arts Administration** is the name of our ATP class for 2015-2016. Students in the class were a wide age-range, from 18 to well into their 60s. The class was a collaboration with a local foundation, the Robert E. Frazier Foundation, and included the creation of public art, the creation of the "Futuretown" façade for a vacant building in downtown Cumberland, and led to a lively community debate about the future of downtown Cumberland. Students in AAD 200, also worked on art and other aspects of preparation for the It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains conference. In particular, students learned silkscreening and linoleum cut skills which they applied in workshops at IG2BYITM and thereafter. Students worked with resident artists Chris Dockery from the University of North Georgia and Lacy Hale from Whitesburg on their printmaking.

#### **August 2015**

##### **It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains**

ATP students worked with the SKCTC Appalachian Program to provide coordination of a regional conference, It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains, which took place in Harlan, Kentucky in August 2015, and involved over 250 people from throughout the Appalachian region. ATP students also coordinated emerging and professional artists who created an original piece of musical drama entitled *Higher Ground 5: Find A Way. Find A Way*, which was seen by over 2000 people in Harlan County, dealt directly with how coalfield Kentucky communities think about their young people, shifting economic realities, and the importance of talking straight with one another about how to move forward culturally and economically. *Find A Way* was presented at IG2BYITM.

SKCTC students and the younger members of the SKCTC Appalachian Program staff worked with emerging leaders throughout the region, including staff at Appalshop, the STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC), and graduate students at various Appalachian college and universities to create a conference program for IG2BYITM that combined basic survival workshops on topics such as sex education, mental health, and personal finance

with workshops in the arts (including creative writing, linoleum block printing, and storytelling theater); plenary sessions focusing on an analysis of power within the region and individual communities; structured networking sessions for all conference participants; performances by Higher Ground, Roots & Wings (a Louisville-based performance group using poetry and music to examine issues such as police brutality, housing discrimination, and black-on-black violence in the West End of Louisville), and a variety of musicians. IG2BYITM also included networking sessions for those involved in the local food movement, discussions of the utility and pitfalls of college attendance, caucuses for LGBTQ participants and persons of color, and film screenings by the Appalachian Media Institute and other regional filmmakers.

The conference was promoted by one of the most innovative social media campaigns ever seen in the region. Conference coordinator and ATP student Carrie Billett designed a card with the conference logo. These cards were distributed via the Internet, and throughout the region interested parties posted pictures on Facebook, Instagram, and the IG2BYITM website depicting both why it is and isn't good to be young in the mountains. Hundreds of these images circulated online in advance of the conference with the hashtag #ig2byitm and the STAY hashtag #appalachianlovestory and helped to create both awareness of the conference and conversation about the truth of the conference's name.

The conference was full of opportunities for "backtalk." Tables were covered with craft paper, crayons, pencils, and pens, and participants were encouraged to give feedback to what was going on around them. A closing wrap-up session surfaced issues about representation at the conference and the relative safety of conference participants coming from communities experiencing police misconduct given that the Harlan Civic Center (the conference location) was directly across the street from the Harlan Police headquarters. There were concerns from some that the conference as a whole was not enough about direct action and calling out the impediments to just transition in the region, and concerns from others that the conference was too direct, too radical. But the overwhelming majority of the feedback was that IG2BYITM marked an important moment for young people in the region, and was remarkable in how it created a space for young people to articulate their concerns, display their talents and accomplishments, and lead—all on their own terms.

## **September 2016**

### **Futuretown: The paint job**

During September, ATP students completed a design project they began in the summer of 2016—a paint job for a vacant building in downtown Cumberland owned by the Southeast Education Foundation. The students chose the colors and worked with ATP faculty Robert Gipe to design window treatments and a color scheme. Students then worked with inmates from the Harlan County Detention Center to paint the building. Students also rearranged large wooden letters spelling out "Rowlett Furniture" that were on the building's façade when the project began, to spell "Futuretown," and mounted those letters on the building's façade.

## **November – December 2016**

### **Futuretown: The fallout and resultant planning process**

When community members, many of them older, had a negative reaction to the colors chosen for the Futuretown façade, ATP students worked with the Cumberland Main Street/Tourism office to organize a community meeting to listen to concerns. The meeting drew both residents of Cumberland, and community development professionals working with Appalachia and elsewhere. A peaceful and productive conversation ensued, resulting in plans to hold a downtown event, a street festival in front of Futuretown, in the spring of 2016. The event was christened "The Futuretown Throwdown."

## **December 2016**

### **Appalachian Teaching Project presentation**

Ten ATP students and community members traveled to Washington DC and presented on Higher Ground 5, IG2BYITM, and the Futuretown process. Students also created a poster and shared it with ATP conference participants.

## **December 2016**

### **IG2BYITM in DC**

SKCTC ATP students worked with other ATP students to organize a follow-up meeting to It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains while at the Washington conference. This meeting took place at a local restaurant during the December gathering.

## **February 2016-present**

### **Shewbuddy: Higher Ground Radio**

During the winter and spring of 2016, ATP students, some now working in other classes, some working as Americorps VISTAs, some as community members, began planning and production of an hour-long radio magazine called Shewbuddy. Shewbuddy is a monthly broadcast which can be heard on WMMT-FM 88.7 in Whitesburg. It is also a podcast available on iTunes. ATP students and community members record dramatizations of scenes from Higher Ground plays and then explore the themes raised by those scenes in interviews with community members, through music, poetry readings, and other regional happenings. So far, ATP students and others have collaborated to create three hours of programming. Shows have focused on young people's decision to stay or leave the mountains, wisdom of the elders, youth entrepreneurship, and stories of people who have left.

## **February 2016 –present**

### **Collaboration with Cowan**

ATP students worked with SKCTC Appalachian Program staff and a community group in Cowan, Kentucky to help the Cowan group with the development of their community performance play, The Homecoming. ATP students traveled multiple times to work with the group in Cowan, sharing with the folks in Cowan Higher Ground's various production experiences, consulting with them on how we organize our productions, and sharing with them other aspects of Higher Ground's experience with producing community performance.

## **February-March 2016**

### **SEAL Forums**

ATP students Shaylan Clark & Devyn Creech participated in community forums organized by Highlander, Appalshop, and STAY about the future of Appalachia and Appalachian youth. The forums are part of SEAL (Supporting Emerging Appalachian Leadership), which is "a network of organizations across central Appalachia committed to emerging leadership as a driving force towards a new, creative, and sustainable economy" (SEAL).

## **April 30, 2016**

### **The George Ellabration: A celebration of the life and work of Kentucky poet laureate and Harlan County native George Ella Lyon**

ATP students and SKCTC Appalachian Program staff worked in partnership with The Harlan County Arts Council, The Harlan County Historical Network, Harlan Tourism and Convention Commission, Harlan County Community Foundation, and Harlan County Public Library to produce a celebration of the life

and work of Kentucky poet laureate and Harlan County native George Ella Lyon at the Harlan Extension Depot on Saturday April 30, 2016 in Harlan, Kentucky. The “George Ellabration,” included testimonials, readings from Lyon’s work by friends and colleagues, live music, an art exhibit, a dramatic enactment of one of Lyon’s books for children, a presentation of poems by local students inspired by Lyon’s work, words from Lyon herself, and more. The event included a potluck dinner at 6pm, with the ceremony concluding at 8pm. Following the event, there was a concert at the Portal in downtown Harlan by the Kudzu Killers, Karly Dawn and the Hillfolk, and the Woodsheep. ATP students were involved in all aspects of producing the event, in which over 200 people participated, over half of whom came from outside Harlan County.

### **March 2016 – present**

#### **The Silk Sisters**

As an extension of their work during the ATP class in the summer of 2016 and their work on the George Ellabration, several young female ATP students formed a group called the Silk Sisters, based on their work silkscreening t-shirts for our various events. The group continues to work on silkscreening projects, exploring a variety of models for financing their work.

### **May 21, 2016**

#### **The Futuretown Throwdown**

As a result to the community-based planning process that began in the wake of the painting of the Futuretown building in downtown Cumberland, ATP students and the SKCTC Appalachian Program collaborated with businesses in downtown Cumberland to organize a street concert, art show, and general celebration in front of the Futuretown building in downtown Cumberland. The street was blocked, bands were hired, coupons for local restaurants were designed, but when the day came, a thunderstorm forced the event back to the college. But the Throwdown helped create new partnerships with the downtown business community and has paved the way for future events designed to create street traffic in our downtowns.

### **April – July 2016**

#### **Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute**

Since April 2016, ATP students have been working with SKCTC Appalachian Program staff and a coalition of community-based theater artists to plan a get-together for community groups who use community music and story to explore community issues in a vein similar to Higher Ground. A mini-conference will take place July 19-24 in Harlan and Letcher counties and will be called the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute. HGCTI will allow community performance groups to share work, learn from each other, and hold workshops designed to build community-based capacity for doing this kind of theater. There will be workshops in the basic skills of community performance making: acting, directing, music directing, lighting, choreography, and stage management. There will be time for workshops on the community organizing, planning, asset mapping, and administrative side of the work. There will also be a performance showcase where five communities present some part of their work to each other and the public. ATP students will work alongside community members and SKCTC Appalachian Program staff to produce this event. ATP students will also help produce a new, short Higher Ground play, **Life is Like a Vapor**, as part of HGCTI.

### **May 30, 2016**

#### **Higher Ground planning and community meeting**

As part of preparing a new piece of Higher Ground theater work for the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute, ATP students helped organize a community meeting to discuss the script for the new play and hold a community dinner. These events took place on Memorial Day Monday.

### **May 2016 – Present**

#### **Planning Cowan Creek Mountain Music School Workshop**

ATP students and other Higher Ground team members will lead a weeklong storytelling and theater development workshop as part of the Cowan Creek Mountain Music School in Letcher County, Kentucky June 20-24, 2016. Students and staff are planning the week out during this grant period.

#### **Project Outcomes:**

Two ATP students have already parleyed their leadership development experience into jobs. One is working as a production assistant for a Hollywood film shooting in Harlan. Another is working for Roadside Theater in Harlan.

Turning over principal responsibility for the production of Higher Ground, a ten-year project that involves residents from a wide range of ages, socioeconomic strata, and home communities in Harlan County was a source of great trepidation for many of the older community members involved. By successfully creating and presenting a new play to the community, we changed the dynamic of expectation between the generations, an important symbolic transition for our community. But our greatest success in the past year is probably the production of the It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains (IG2BYITM) conference.

An explicit part of the conference's intention was to demonstrate to the community a different way to bring visitors in. Harlan County has made some progress in tourism development with an ATV park, horse and hiking trails, and a coal mine tour and mining museum. But over the past few years, progressive groups such as KFTC and the Network of Ensemble Theaters have brought regional and national conferences to Harlan. IG2BYITM had considerable impact on downtown Harlan and the surrounding area. Local restaurants posted record one-day sales. Local B&Bs, motels, and campgrounds saw increased occupancy. The downtown was filled with young people from out of town, talking about change, and the sky did not fall.

Our overarching goals for the work we did this year were two-fold: 1) to develop the capacity of the community's next generation leadership and 2) continue to establish Harlan County as a place where people come to celebrate regional capacity and plan how to build on that capacity. Higher Ground 5 was a major success in raising the capacity of our young people. And with the IG2BYITM conference, we hope to continue our efforts to mark Harlan as a place where people engaged in sustainable development come to meet—building on the Network of Ensemble Theaters Microfest in 2012, and the Appalachia's Bright Future conference in 2013. Since IG2BYITM, ATP students past and present have participated in the creation of other events that have brought new people to the community, the George Ellabration, for example.

#### **Problems Encountered:**

One of our greatest challenges in producing the IG2BYITM conference was finding the right balance between creating a "big tent" that a wide variety of groups and individuals could be a part of and making room to talk about the real impediments to systemic change in the coalfields. We struggled with

how radical to be in our discussion of the political and economic realities of life here. We grappled with how hard and fast the conference itself should push for change. With this first conference, there was a great deal of excitement about just pulling it off, and a spirit of compromise prevailed, communication lines stayed fairly open, and a focus on the common good carried the day. But this kind of coalition building is hard, particularly when many of the people involved are underemployed, and the logistics of creating time and space to get together is limited.

One issue that arose with the IG2BYITM process is that we need as a collective to take care to support the stability and prosperity of our member organizations. Youth-led organizations are scarce and generally fragile. As we move forward in thinking about how to support a region-wide network, we need to look at funding strategies that also support fundraising for member organizations.

On the Higher Ground side of the project, we learned more about what it will take to train a next generation cadre of leadership. Higher Ground has in the past relied on contract professional directors, choreographers, lighting designers, and had a music director on faculty at SKCTC. In the production of *Higher Ground 5: Find A Way*, we used these professional artists as mentors, but only in a small way, with limited contact between the mentors and mentees. We learned about how much next generation artists can figure out on their own, and learned that we need to be more thoughtful and deliberate about how we deliver training for locally-based Higher Ground artists.

### **Program Continuation and Sustainability:**

#### **Short-term impact**

In the community, people in Harlan County are beginning to recover from the shock of the coal economy's collapse. Tourism efforts are gaining momentum. Leadership around a different kind of economy is still coalescing. But the SKCTC Appalachian Program's efforts have established in the minds of many that its programming contributes significantly to the "livability" of the community. State budget issues make it difficult to be completely optimistic about what comes next here, but with the help of ATP/ARC, many young people have found a platform and a launching pad for putting their energy into the mix about defining the future here. And there are many in the community who recognize the importance of that to figuring out our next steps. We are positioned to build on that energy and the community's recognition of its importance.

#### **Long-term impact**

Our ongoing challenge is creating real employment for the youth whose capacity we are building. The SKCTC Appalachian Program's goal is to establish/sustain several positions within the college that would have the kind of arts/culture-based community development as at least part of their job description, positions that would anchor the work we have begun and provide potential career tracks for some of the youth we are training.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

Over the past year, we have doubled-down on our investment in young people in our community. We have placed trust in them to lead and produce and represent the work of our program to an extent we never have in the past. And they have repaid that trust in full. The work we have done in the past year

has been exciting, vital, true, and inspiring—to senior program staff, to our visiting artists/mentors, to our community.

We have also pushed (and acted on) the idea that Harlan County is a place where people want to come from other places—because of its historic reputation, because of its beauty, and for some constituencies, because of the work we have been doing for the past fifteen years as part of our participation in ATP. Nationally, those interested in how community-driven, culturally specific, participatory arts programs can help make places better have come to see what we are doing. It is a very different kind of tourism. It is more of a partnership between likeminded spirits.

Many of those likeminded spirits are involved in higher education. We have been exploring how colleges and universities outside Harlan County might come here not just to do charity work, or to witness what is going on here, or to teach their own students—but to offer courses here, so that young people here can see people working creative fields, and understand first hand how people make a living in fields that don't exist here.

We are making progress in changing expectations of young people—their expectations of this place, and their expectations of themselves. But things are dire here. We may not have time. People are leaving rapidly. Young people are abandoning ship. Our ideas may take too long to enact.

These are our fears. But still, it seems appropriate to stay focused on educational opportunity and attainment in our community, since as Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College education and community are central to our mission. And at the Appalachian Program, it seems appropriate to stay open about how work connects to other sectors—sustainable/healthy food production, the fledgling tech sector, tourism, etc.—while staying focused on the core skills we have always tried to transmit—listening, articulating, celebrating, critiquing, acting, community organizing, and perhaps most essentially, artmaking.

The idea has been that even if jobs are created, that they need to occur in a place where people want to be. The jobs need to be located in a place where there is to borrow a buzzword from ArtPlace, “vibrancy,” a place where bright, creative, hardworking people can have their lifestyle needs met. Creating the kinds of programming that make this a good place to live and/or visit has been our focus. But what if the vibrancy cart is before the job creation horse?

We don't know. We don't know quite what we recommend here at the close of our recommendations section. But we hope we are asking the right questions. We hope we stay open to the collaborations and the opportunities both inside and outside our community that will allow to become a place where people are both willing and able to be.

### **Attachments/Links:**

Link to SKCTC 2015 DC presentation Powerpoint

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/08nmmft0riewlj1/SKCTC-%20ATPDC2015.pptx?dl=0>

It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains conference website:

<http://www.ig2byitm.com>