

ATP Final Report Cover Page

**The Harlan County Project: Phase Nine
Crawdad Meets Higher Ground**

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February 2009 – June 30, 2010

May 31, 2010

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Final Report Narrative

Project Name: The Harlan County Project, Phase Nine: Crawdad Meets Higher Ground

Grant Period: February 1, 2009 – June 30, 2010

Grantee Name: Southeast KY Community & Technical College Project Director: Robert Gipe

Description of Project: The Harlan County Project is an ongoing series of college/community collaborations coordinated by Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College designed to use the tools of art to increase our community's capacity to compete in the global economy by addressing head-on suspicions that our people's capacity and creativity have been broken by generations of economic hard times. The project seeks to increase our community's mental health and capacity to thrive by supporting community members—particularly the youth of the community—as they develop their own indigenous outlets for creative expression. In our 2009-2010 Appalachian Teaching Project (ATP) work, we focused on two college-community collaborations: The Higher Ground community theater project, and the Crawdad series of youth arts events.

Project Activities: **Fall 2009: Listening Project** ATP Students in Survey of Appalachian Studies I (HUM 202) taught by Robert Gipe were trained in interviewing methods and made audio recordings of their interviews with community members and one another. These interviews were added to other stories collected for use in a third Higher Ground community drama, which is scheduled to be presented to the public in Spring 2011. Student work in this area was shared with the community at a potluck dinner organized by the ATP students in collaboration with a local citizen effort dedicated to sustainable development of Harlan County called Harlan County 2020 and the Higher Ground community theater coalition. Over two hundred county residents attended the dinner at which ATP students also collected stories for the next Higher Ground play.

Fall 2009 and Spring 2010: Crawdad-o-ween and Crawdad 6.0 Students in History and Sociology of Rock Music (MUS 222) taught by Ann Schertz worked with community members to

organize and carry out two music and arts festivals at the Godbey Appalachian Center in Cumberland—one in October 2009 and one in late April 2010. The two events were attended by over five hundred community members, most of them youth. In this work, ATP students have responded to one of the central crises of community health and well-being in our community: the lack of meaningful social creative outlets for the community's youth. ATP and other Southeast students and community youth met weekly outside of class for the entire school year to plan Crawdad activities. In addition to contacting and booking twenty student bands to play at the events, ATP students coordinated t-shirt design, outreach to the local high school students to participate in a student art exhibit, design of a haunted house for Crawdad-o-ween, work with a local sound engineer to provide sound at the event, serving of free pizza and beverages to all attending

Spring 2010: Higher Ground at ASA Fifty members of the **Higher Ground** coalition worked with ATP students to present a two-hour performance at the March 2010 conference of the Appalachian Studies Association in Dahlonega, Georgia. The performance combined stories and songs from two community dramas that grew out of earlier ATP projects: **Higher Ground** and the second play, **Playing With Fire**. The Dahlonega performance was attended by 150 conferees, and exposed the Harlan County productions to a large number of well-networked people in the region.

After the performance, we received an unprecedented number of long, heartfelt, unsolicited responses. Here are excerpts from those reviews:

[The performance] was an astounding series of skits, storytelling, singing, and soul-searching performed by an incredibly diverse and large cast. There was an astounding mix of race, gender, and age among the more than 50 performers who were excellent as real down-home folks playing real down-home folks. The play highlighted both the strengths of the community and the devastation caused by prescription drugs, natural disasters, and mining accidents. The combination of heavy issues confronted by the hope and resilience of the community was powerful and emotional. –Tammy Clemmons, published on the blog *Remembering the Reeds*

Higher Ground was so moving—so much joy, hope, encouragement! [...] I am interested in working this summer with the Upward Bound program at Pikeville College....Pikeville is interested in doing a similar play project where students in the Upward Bound program will spend this coming summer writing their stories... to be incorporated into a play and then spend next summer producing the play....Just trying to gather some of your thoughts for ideas of how this could be managed at Pikeville. —Shannon Hoffman, Graduate Student Higher Education Administration, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

I was blown away by y'all's performance! The connection that you all have to one another and the strength of your community was so clear watching from the audience. I am a student of theatre and have never seen a performance so funny, powerful, and real or seen theatre build such strong community. I'm writing you because I'm currently an intern at the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) in Riverside, CA....We're currently looking for a way to use theatre as a tool to strengthen community members' connections with one another and to provide them with creative ways to express and communicate their stories. To help with this work I wanted to ask you more about your process with your community in Harlan....I just want to get some ideas for how to approach a similar project in Southern California. The performance was incredibly polished and seemed really natural, so it would really help if you could break down the stages of the process. —Alvin Sangsuwagul

Wow!! Your community play with all the Harlan people was just brilliant. That young woman who step-danced—awesome. All of those hands and voices and faces delivering us (the audience), delivering the news (bad and good and the medicine to heal us) in one evening....I want to do it here. I want to start now. Yesterday. Did you have a list of

open-ended questions to ask? Did you utilize students in the community to gather these voices? [...] For most of your play, I sat there amazed, reborn—truly. Weeping and rejoicing at its pure honesty. Finally. And the coal miners, oh my goodness. You nailed it. My father, brother, nephew—all miners. My dad had black lung. My family's drill rigs were the ones who saved the Que Creek miners. So much to comment on and love, really embrace in this heartfelt performance....Brilliant. Just brilliant. –Jeanne Bryner, nurse, author of *Tenderly Lift Me*

Spring 2010: Other community-based efforts involving ATP students ATP students also continued to work in partnership with the Cumberland Tourism Commission and will by the end of summer 2010 have created public tile mosaic artworks for permanent outdoor display in the county. These works will be narrative in nature, drawing on locally-collected oral histories. In some cases the artworks will incorporate stories in the **Higher Ground** plays. Part of the intention with these works is to increase the exposure of the project and the plays in the community through the artwork. ATP students and Higher Ground coalition members held a musical performance and discussion in April for members of the Central Appalachian Regional Network (CARN) which is part of the Rural People Rural Policy program of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The coalition has begun holding regular joint meetings with the Harlan County Historical Society, which has brought some new members into the coalition. The Spring 2010 Appalachian Studies class worked with two coalition members, Robert Gipe and Theresa Osborne, used what they learned in a workshop at the Building Creative Communities conference attended in Colquitt, Georgia in February 2010, to initiate a process with elementary and community college students to turn storytelling sessions into plays within the context of the classroom.

Project Outcomes: Our **project outcomes** are aligned with those of the Appalachian Teaching Project. Our work has resulted in:

- A learning and research partnership between the people of Harlan County and Southeast Community College.
- Research, recommendations, and action that lead to sustainability of Harlan County by capitalizing on its assets.
- Research, recommendations, and action that are consistent with the goals of the ARC strategic plan.
- Development of a network of students, faculty, **and community members** across the region who will continue research and service partnerships beyond the current project.
- Development of leadership and civic-capacity among the students **and community members** engaged in the project.
- Enhancement of student and community awareness of the work of the ARC at all levels.
- Improved working relationships between academic institutions and local, state, and federal partners in the work of the Commission.
- Opportunities for Southeast students to experience various parts of the region and the work of the Commission in Washington, D.C.
- Opportunities for Southeast students to share their research activities in the broader professional community of Appalachian Studies scholars and activists in the Appalachian Studies Association.
- An improved working relationship between Southeast, its constituent communities, and the Appalachian Regional Commission.
- Improved coordination of research and service efforts/initiatives toward community sustainability.

Specifically, the community-based work catalyzed by our participation in the Appalachian Teaching Project over the past decade continues to be a wellspring for developing student leaders who become community leaders. For example, the ATP students who are providing leadership in the tile mosaic projects undertaken in collaboration with the

Cumberland Tourism Commission were participants in the 2004 and 2008 Washington trips and have remained engaged with the work even after their time at Southeast ended.

In addition, the expansion of this culturally-based work in new directions has produced new collaborations between local citizens. For example, students involved in the technical production of the Crawdad events became involved as musicians and lighting designers for the Dahlonega Higher Ground production. Former ATP students also became involved with public arts projects undertaken with the local high school during the 2009-2010 school year.

Problems Encountered: No significant problems encountered this year.

Program Continuation and Sustainability: Crawdad and Higher Ground have become sustainable parts of the community's cultural life. Crawdad enters its fourth year in 2010-2011 funded entirely by college funds, and as a collaboration between the music department, Appalachian Program, admissions office, and academic support center at the college. The members of the Higher Ground coalition continue to get together on a monthly basis to perform for various community events and/or work on their next play, scheduled to be presented to the public in Spring 2011.

Conclusions and Recommendations: SKCTC's ATP work continues to engage thousands of people in our county, which is still labeled by ARC as distressed. For many of us, however, that distress has been diminished by meeting ARC's challenge to take advantage of our own assets, to build on the traditions for cultural self-sufficiency that are at the root of the strength still extant in Appalachian communities. With the help of ARC and ATP we are finding new ways to exercise that strength and carry it into the next generation.