

The Harlan County Project: Phase 13

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Final Report Narrative

Title of Project: The Harlan County Project: Phase 13

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Project Director: Robert Gipe

Description of Project:

Our project continues to take place in Harlan County, on Kentucky's southeast border with Virginia. Harlan County's economy has been driven by coal mining since the earliest years of the twentieth century. The county's coal mining employment has been in rapid decline in recent years, and unlike other economic downturns in the community's history, there is little hope that boom times for the coal industry will return. Our project engaged (and continues to engage) a range of community partners with community college students and faculty in an attempt to use the arts to instill the habit of creative thinking throughout our community and help Harlan County **create a sustainable economy**.

As part of their work in 2013-2014, ATP students in two summer 2013 classes, one fall 2013 class, and one spring 2014 class helped produce eight community performances of **Higher Ground 4: Foglights** at four Harlan County locations (the Eastern Kentucky Social Club, the old Evarts Higher School, Harlan Elementary School, and Pine Mountain Settlement School) during Fall 2013; produce a traveling version of **Foglights** for a Berea College convocation in April 2014; conduct a residency that resulted in a new play (**Lockdown!**) with Harlan County High School in Spring 2014 class; host a community youth forum with Earl Gohl and Guy Land of ARC; and meet with several funders along the way.

ATP students and faculty worked with a number of **community partners** including the Higher Ground coalition (a group of community members made up of business leaders, educators, students, senior citizens, church leaders, committed to using the arts and local culture to build local quality of life and explore new economic opportunities), the Robert E. Frazier Foundation (a new community foundation which recently made a three-year commitment to the Appalachian Program for a creative community development project in the Tri-Cities area of Harlan County), and two community sites hosting Higher Ground community performances this fall—the Eastern Kentucky Social Club (an African-American community organization in Lynch, Kentucky) and the Clover Fork Citizens for Progress—as well as a variety of other local organizations. The **central focus** of our participatory community-based research project has been and will be to explore how community-based theater and arts education can contribute to a new economic base for the county and enhance the quality of life in our community.

Number and description of meetings with community partners. ATP students met on a weekly basis with Higher Ground coalition members and met several times during their classes with the other community partners to discuss arts-based community development. The total number of meetings between ATP students and community leadership at which discussion of a sustainable future for the community took place would probably number over a hundred. The play that the students created took as its main focus an examination of what the future of our community will be. Every rehearsal, every performance, every car ride to and from a Higher Ground meeting became a potential opportunity to talk about the future of the community. The play was called **Foglights**, because it addressed the community's foggy future, and used scenes of intergenerational conflict and resolution, and stories from our oral histories addressing past confrontations with the unknown. The whole project then is a community meditation on how to sustain ourselves in the future.

Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College developed community-based research projects affiliated with the following credit-bearing

courses: ART 299: Directed Studies in Art taught by Joseph Scopa and **THA 101** Introduction to Theater taught by Michael Corrison during the Summer of 2013. Robert Gipe assisted the teaching and organization of both these courses. University of North Georgia ATP Faculty Chris Dockery and her colleague Paul Dunlap did a visual arts residency as part of the ART 299 course. During Fall 2013, Robert Gipe taught **HUM 202**, Survey of Appalachian Studies I and during Spring 2014, Robert Gipe also taught **HUM 203** Survey of Appalachian Studies II. All of these courses were involved in the community-based research and activity towards sustainable development discussed in our ATP proposal. Note: Ann Schertz's MUS 222 History and Sociology of Rock and Roll course in Fall 2013 did not participate in our ATP project this year, as was mentioned in our proposal. Schertz's classes did, however, work on the Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 Crowdad student arts festivals, as did SKCTC criminal justice instructor Allen Layne's classes. Crowdad has been a part of past ATP projects.

We used the local community's assets to address the needs and build sustainability thus: Not only did we draw on local storytelling traditions as part of this project, but ATP students were involved with people in the construction trades, tourism officials, college administrators, local philanthropists, and others demonstrating the capacity of youth to engage the whole community in change efforts if given the slightest chance.

The way that our classes went beyond folklore, ethnographic field work, and volunteer or service-learning activities to promote long-term sustainability is this: ATP students were engaged hands-on in construction projects that took them all over the county as they built, took down, moved, and re-assembled the Higher Ground stage set in four locations throughout the county. They were actively engaged in advocating for youth-centered arts activity and arts education, and the establishment of the creative development center, speaking with SKCTC's new president, donors to the college, local civic leaders, and ARC staff at a community forum for youth with Earl Gohl and Guy Land in Cumberland on January 16th 2014.

The way students developed leadership skills and awareness of community assets that foster sustainability is this: During the summer classes, students often worked in self-directed situations. They were also working directly with community members on their projects. They worked with local entrepreneurs with their own lumber mills and electrical service businesses, unemployed coal miners scrambling to make ends meet, local civic leaders at the Eastern Kentucky Social Club and Clover Fork Citizens for Progress, music store owners, local tourism officials, and other civic leaders who contributed to the success of the Fall 2013 Higher Ground tour not just as art, but as a community development strategy, a tourist attraction in its own right and a perception changer as to what is possible in our community.

The way students were engaged as active learners and participants in community projects was this: Students worked with local residents to take photographs of their community and turn them into inkjet transfer murals which were then a part of the Higher Ground stage set. Students cleaned up a long unused downtown building and used the junk they found to make junk art panels which were also used as part of the Higher Ground set. Students met with community leaders to discuss the stories that had been collected for the Higher Ground 4 script, and worked with the Higher Ground script committee to create new scenes and arrange other scenes to finalize the Higher Ground 4: Foglights script. Students were involved in the actual performances in four locations around Harlan County, and interacted with audience members, talking about what the stories meant to them, and their hopes for the future of Harlan County. Students conducted follow-up interviews with audience members, documenting their thoughts and feelings after seeing the play.

ATP students led the creation of artwork to surround the stage set—300 square feet of junk art panels and 700 square feet of inkjet transfer murals. ATP students took a leadership role in creating a seven-stage set and seating units for 150 theatergoers out of locally harvested lumber milled by a local entrepreneur. They also were involved in the crews that broke down and moved the whole monstrosity

to four locations in Harlan County during the Fall of 2013. **These activities addressed ARC's goal of strengthening the capacity of Appalachian people to compete in the global economy in the following ways:** The scale of the stage set and the act of moving it to four remote locations raised the students—and the community's sense of its own capacity. The project was a major youth-led accomplishment. It led directly to some of the ATP students taking a leadership role in directing a new version of Higher Ground 4 for a convocation at Berea College—work for which the ATP students were paid. As a direct result of their work, civic leaders in both Cumberland and Harlan have been raising money to refurbish buildings in the two downtowns to house youth-centered cultural activity and college level arts education programs as anchors of downtown development. During Summer 2014, students will be actively engaged in defining cultural programming that is a not insignificant part of the hope of the county for future community development. The city of Harlan has voted to be the lessee for one of the creative development centers proposed. Paying youth to do culturally-based community development is at the heart of a \$200,000 proposal submitted by SKCTC to the National Endowment for the Arts. We will hear about that proposal in July 2014.

Here's how ATP students worked with the local community to identify and address needs and engage in active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development: The work that took place during the 2013-2014 ATP year was more about applying past community-based research than it was doing original research. This year's students built on past students work in oral history collecting, in public forums about what stories wanted telling in this year's Higher Ground production, and past student participation in community development discussions in Harlan. That said: Spring 2014 Appalachian Studies students took part in federal Promise Zone listening sessions, and Fall 2013 Appalachian Studies students interviewed each other and community members and developed a set of community development principles which were then shared via social media. Summer 2013 students participated in entrepreneurship workshops sponsored by ARC in Middlesboro in May 2014.

Project Outcomes:

ATP students were integral to the success of the eight Higher Ground performances in our county in the fall of 2013, the Berea College convocation Higher Ground show, and the theater at Harlan County High School this fall. All of this work involved original work on the part of the people of Harlan County. All of the work was Harlan County people crafting their own messages for each other and the world. This is not an insignificant outcome for a place and a people who have been defined by others outside of the county for well over a century.

The ATP students did work that has contributed directly to local tourism officials, city councils, county government, and local philanthropies turning to them to do work as part of downtown development in at least two Harlan County locations. Local civic leaders have raised over \$10,000 to support the establishment of youth-led cultural centers in downtown Harlan.

The work has inspired the Appalachian Program to explore partnerships with four-year colleges to expand the educational opportunity for these students. We are offering courses in Harlan County through the University of Pikeville during the summer of 2014 that will engage our students in the creation of smartphone applications that will connect Higher Ground-style stories to GPS coordinates delivered via phone to tourists and residents alike. [In this work we will soon be reaching out to UPitt-Bradford, inspired as we were by their ATP presentation.] The Appalachian Program is also working in partnership with Chris Dockery, Rosann Kent and the University of North Georgia as they design a major in community-based arts that will use Harlan County as a field site. We are hoping to be offering courses in that program by summer 2015.

Problems Encountered:

n/a.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

Now is a time of great opportunity and trepidation in the coalfields. The economy is more ripe for change than it has been since the arrival of the railroads. The social energy behind exploration of new opportunities is encouraging. But the infrastructure is crumbling, and the funds for investment can be scarce. We must work smart. And we must maintain faith in the young. We are waiting to hear about over \$700,000 in grant proposals. We will be moving forward, but the funding sources will determine both pace and direction of our progress.

Our greatest challenge is maintaining an economy for the young people who are most engaged in the kind of cultural-based development this work is about. A generation of Harlan Countians has grown up around ATP work. ATP students hold public office now in Harlan County. And many others have their hearts set on local careers that are linked to what they've done as a result of their participation in ATP. Creating paying opportunities for our young creatives is our focus right now—that and expanding educational opportunities here at home in creative fields.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

We see expanding localized educational opportunity for the creative young people in our community as not just good for them but good for the community. The grant proposals that are going out are beginning to articulate the relationship between being a happy place for creative people to learn and work, and being a happy place for residents and for visitors. We are seeing real opportunity, real impulse for collaboration between those interested in creative expression and our tourism sectors—both adventure and heritage tourism. But this is hard work in such a straitened fiscal climate. We are getting numerous opportunities to model for our young folks that you don't not do something just because it's hard.

On the ATP front, I hope we continue to evolve our ability to understand and define ATP's work as both research and the application of research. And that we will be

able to embrace and articulate the importance of what I would call participatory research in projects like ours. Here in Harlan County, we integrate a lot of opportunity for student and community reflection in our work, but it is rarely formal. We have been serious about trying to create a community of reflective practitioners, and to blur the line between student and community member, and to do work that builds on what has happened in previous years. Some of the assumed dichotomies in the structure of ATP—are you student or community member?—are you doing research or not?—reinforce rather than diminish division. And I think we need to continue to search for ways that allow schools to define their ATP work in ways that encourage long-term commitment to particular communities, to encourage work to evolve and improve in specific places over long periods of time so that we have the possibility of demonstrating the long-term positive impact of community/higher education partnerships. I do not mean to imply that every school needs to form long-term partnerships with particular communities. I like the diversity of projects and approaches in ATP. What I am saying is that when institutions do have evolving long-term work, and work that goes broader at institutions than one class in the fall, that ATP and ARC recognize the opportunity that such approaches represent.

The work of everybody in this project adds up to one of the deepest and best experiments in community engagement in higher education that I can imagine—and in collaborative practice. Our strength is the creativity, commitment, and diversity of our faculty. The other great strength of what we have built is that affinity groups are emerging—schools pursuing similar approaches within ATP who look forward to seeing where one another have taken the work when we get together. I know I particularly look forward to seeing what has happened at Appalachian State, University of North Georgia, Emory and Henry, and Auburn—and we are forming working relationships with three of those four schools that extend beyond the confines of ATP.

And of course, those are the schools that do work that is essentially based in their own community or long-term work. I do not speak for them, and really I don't know

that we/ATP needs to change the way it does things. We all find our way to work within the structure. And the structure is very serviceable. I would just note that for me, ATP has been such an inspiration, such a source of ideas and encouragement, such a tool for expanding students' sense of the importance of their work, that I cannot help but take it broader at our school, and try to make of the work a continuity that makes what we do at Southeast in a given school year vary widely in its alignment with the ATP scope of work.

So I guess this is kind of an apology. And a substitute for not doing an evaluation in Washington. And I hope it will be taken, in a way, as a love letter. Because ATP really is a great endeavor, and I am very grateful to you for making it happen and making it last.