

**The Harlan County Project: Phase 14  
Final Report**

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## Final Report Narrative

Title of Project: The Harlan County Project: Phase 14

Grant Period: February 1, 2014 – June 30, 2015

Grantee Name: Southeast Education Foundation

Project Director: Robert Gipe

### Description of Project:

The Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College began development of a smartphone application, created a new community performance, and planned a regional conference on community development designed to increase community capacity with technology and tourism development in Harlan County, Kentucky. That conference will be taking place in Harlan August 13-16, 2015.

### Activities:

**June-July 2014: What's Next community forum.** In collaboration with the Kentucky Coal Mining Museum, students in the primary ATP class for 2014-2015 produced a community forum at Benham which combined music, storytelling theater, a facilitated discussion of the future of Harlan County, and a lecture on the role of creativity in community development by performance carpenter and independent television producer Jimmy Diresta. The event was recorded by independent filmmaker and former ATP student Jason Edwards and is being edited into a pilot for a potential public television series. The pilot, which will be called "Make/Do," is an exploration of how eastern Kentucky residents are using their creativity to create new economic opportunity, and documented, among other things, the creation of a title sculpture for the program and the creation of Higher Ground 5. The event took place in conjunction with the opening of an exhibit at the Museum in which Museum staff interviewed community residents about the future of the community. The event also served as an opportunity for emerging local artists to develop their skills in lighting design. Emerging artists Justin Taylor and Devyn Creech, who served as music director and co-director of Higher Ground 5: Find A Way, also performed as part of the event. Community partners: Robert E. Frazier Foundation, Kentucky Coal Mining Museum, Appalshop.

**June-July 2014: Classes with University of Pikeville.** As part of the ATP summer coursework, ATP students took classes in web design with the University of Pikeville. Beginning work on the smartphone application took place in these classes.

**September 13, 2014: Appalachia's Bright Future 2.0 discussion, Whitesburg, KY.** ATP students and other emerging artists participated in a regional forum, leading a youth-centered discussion that was part of the conference's culminating event. Community partners: Appalshop, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth.

**Fall 2014: Oral History collection.** Students in a Survey of Appalachian Studies class collected thirty oral histories for potential use in Higher Ground 5: Find A Way. Community partners: Various community members.

**October 2014: ARC Investing in Appalachia's Youth conference, Florence, AL.** ATP students and young artists attended the conference, as part of conference planning for our August 2015 conference.

**December 2014: Community gathering for oral history contributors.** Appalachian Studies students held a community gathering and potluck dinner for the local people who contributed oral histories in the Fall 2014 semester.

**December 2014: ATP conference, Washington, DC.** Summer students and community artists presented at the Appalachian Teaching Project annual conference. Students created a poster and displayed it at the conference.

**January 20-21 2015: Chorus Foundation grantee meeting, Berea, KY.** ATP students served as sole Higher Ground representatives at grantee meeting as part of leadership development efforts.

**Winter 2015: Alternate ROOTS Partners in Action community workshop, Durham, NC.** Emerging artist/former ATP student participated in professional development workshop and talked about community-based work with network of grassroots artists using the arts to pursue social justice. Part of a partnership with the community partner Appalshop.

**April 9-12, 2015: Higher Ground performances, Cumberland, KY.** ATP students, former ATP students, and other young artists in the community worked with the Higher Ground community coalition to write, rehearse, and produce the fifth installment of the Higher Ground series of community performances. ATP students were part of the cadre of young artists who wrote six original songs, a full script for a cast of fifty performers, ran rehearsals, communicated with cast, built and designed sets, designed the lighting and ran the lights, and promoted and marketed a five-show run. Over 1000 people saw the show, which dealt directly with economic change, entrepreneurial thinking, and the need for local educational structures to step up their game to create and employable workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. The play openly questioned how long the community can afford to grieve for lost coal mining jobs, explored for the first time in a Higher Ground play the place of same-sex couples in the community, and generally asked, as it says in the refrain of the show's closing number, "Who's it going to hurt to say, 'What's next?'" Community partners: the cast of Higher Ground includes many non-students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, age brackets, and sections of the county. While Higher Ground is coordinated by the SKCTC Appalachian Program, it has become its own independent community organization.

**May 22 2015: Performance and planning meeting, Roots & Wings, Louisville, KY.** Higher Ground and some of its ATP-affiliated students have provided leadership in organizing all the

groups in Kentucky who have received either NEA Our Town or ArtPlace America grants—the two principal national grants funding the community development strategy known as “creative placemaking.” ATP students participated in planning meetings that led to the creation of the Kentucky Creative Community Network. As part of this Network’s activities, community development groups from Louisville and Hazard came to Higher Ground performances in April 2015, and in May, fourteen Higher Ground community coalition members, including several ATP students, went to Louisville to see a performance by Roots & Wings. The youth-driven “poetry opera” was very hard-hitting, dealing with issues such as housing segregation, broken families, police brutality, and systemic racism. The Roots & Wings performance drew openly on some of the presentation techniques the group learned from Higher Ground, and in a post-show conversation between Higher Ground and Roots & Wings, plans were hatched to bring Roots & Wings to Harlan in August to perform with Higher Ground as part of the It’s Good To Be Young in the Mountains conference.

**May 11, 2015: SOAR conference, Pikeville, KY.** ATP students and IG2BYITM conference coordinators attended the SOAR conference and met with community partners in the conference planning process, including representatives from the Kentucky Arts Council, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC), and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED).

**May 12, 2015: Regional forum with White House staffer Jason Walsh, Benham, KY.** An ATP student was asked by community partner KFTC to present on the work we have been doing in arts-based community development--both Higher Ground and the IG2BYITM conference—to White House staffer Jason Walsh who was in the county gathering information on sustainable economic development efforts going on in central Appalachia and to talk about the POWER Initiative. ATP student Devyn Creech presented alongside representatives of the non-profit housing, renewable energy, community-supported agriculture, community philanthropy, environmental protection and various other sectors engaged in progressive development.

**May 2015: Visual arts workshop with Chris Dockery and Lacy Hale.** ATP students worked with University of North Georgia (and ATP faculty) professor of art Chris Dockery and painter/muralist/printmaker Lacy Hale from Whitesburg to learn silkscreening techniques as part of a visual art messaging campaign going on in the community in association with IG2BYITM. Inspired by the work UNG students brought to the ATP conference in Washington in December 2014, ATP students in Harlan County are making art pieces extending the public dialogue begun by Higher Ground 5 and the visual art created by Southeast ATP students Cassidy Wright and Carrie Billett.

**June 2015: It’s Good To Be Young in the Mountains planning and visual arts campaign.** Throughout the year, ATP students and affiliated community members have been working to plan a meeting that will bring under-40 leaders (and their supporters regardless of age) to Harlan in August to present on their work, network with one another, craft an agenda for mutually supportive regional development driven by next generation leaders, and celebrate their accomplishments. Students in Spring 2015 Appalachian Studies classes designed

workshops for the conference, and ATP students/conference staff have designed a website and are recruiting participants. We are also working on a visual arts messaging campaign in a Summer 2015 class in arts administration which is helping to organize the IG2BYITM conference.

### **Project Outcomes:**

See above.

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.

### **Problems Encountered:**

Our major setback is that we did not get the smartphone application up and going. The reason we didn't is that after we received the grant from the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program, we had to focus our energy on the community development work that we promised to do in that proposal. We lay some groundwork for the application—specifically, we have created photography and edited interviews for the app—and our higher education partner on the project, University of Pikeville faculty member Bruce Parsons is part of the IG2BYITM planning team, and so we are still engaged there.

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

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.

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.

## **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:**

Lexington (KY) *Herald-Leader* article about *Higher Ground 5: Find A Way*:

[http://www.kentucky.com/2015/04/04/3784610\\_fifth-installment-of-higher-ground.html?rh=1](http://www.kentucky.com/2015/04/04/3784610_fifth-installment-of-higher-ground.html?rh=1)

WYMT-TV (Hazard KY) news story about community forum in which SKCTC ATP students participated:

<http://www.wkyt.com/wymt/home/headlines/Appalachias-Bright-Future-20--A-call-for-change--275037691.html>

Community partner discusses Higher Ground 5 and IG2BYITM conference on Alternate ROOTS website.

<http://alternateroots.org/a-terrifying-liberation-kentucky-builds-a-future-free-from-coal/>

SKCTC ATP presentation, December 2014:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/b0a3wgeot5279ds/ATP%202014.pptx?dl=0>

Notes on slides: Slide 12 = SKCTC ATP students presenting at Appalachia's Bright Future 2.0, Whitesburg. Slides 22-24 = Promotion of What Next? Summer Forum/performance. Slides 26-44 = What Next Forum/performance images. 45-62: Portraits and interview excerpts for use in smartphone application. Slides 78-84 = HG5 Playwriting process notes Slides 91-102 = images from SKCTC ATP participant residency with Chris Dockery, Dahlonega, GA.

Higher Ground 5: Find A Way performance photos:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/s1pc30rju8t3rh3/AAAfA4gvPDoLvClzis5ASxGba?dl=0>

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

<http://www.ig2byitm.com>