

**The Harlan County Project: Phase 16
Final Report**

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Final Report Narrative

Title of Project: Harlan County Project, Phase 16

Grant Period: January 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017

Grantee Name: Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College

Project Director: Robert Gipe

Description of Project

The Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College worked in partnership with community organizations in Harlan County to 1) Integrate technology training and 21st century workplace skills into the teaching of the humanities in an ARC-distressed county; and 2) Increased youth leadership and tourism capacity in an ARC-distressed county by engaging young people as leaders in theater production and the production of a multi-county theater conference.

Activities

Meetings with community Partners. ATP students met with community partners in Higher Ground on a monthly basis to plan radio programming and training and to plan a theater conference taking place in Harlan County. SKCTC ATP students interacted with community groups not only in Harlan County, but also in Letcher, Clay, and Owsley in the process of creating the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute.

Higher Ground Radio in the classroom. During the fall of 2016, students in the Tuesday evening section of Humanities 202, Survey of Appalachian Studies I, at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College worked with Americorps VISTA Alexia Ault to learn how to record oral history interviews digitally and then edit those interviews as a part of their classwork. The students' interviews focused on the experience of people in our community during the years 2006-2016, and gave the students opportunity to engage the community in reflection on what has happened with the coal industry in our community, and think together about emerging economic trends. Pieces from the students' interviews will be part of Higher Ground radio's podcast, Shewbuddy!, which is available on iTunes and is broadcast on WMMT-FM, Mountain Community Radio in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

The Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute. During the Summer of 2016, ATP participants collaborated with Higher Ground, Clear Creek Creative, and Cowan Creek Community Theater Group to host the first Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute (HGCTI) July 19-24 at Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County, Kentucky. The Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute included four days of workshops for those interested in improving their community's capacity to present theater based on local stories and incorporating local music.

Workshops were led by theater professionals from across the country, including Massachusetts-based lighting designer Peter Kallok, Colorado-based director Richard Geer, Kentucky-based acting coach Robert Martin and writer Anne Shelby, Georgia-based musician Paula Larke, and Chicago-based choreographer Kevin Iega Jeff. The Kentucky Arts Council also led a day long workshop on cultural assets mapping on Friday July 22nd. SKCTC students and ATP participants worked as interns at the conference, and participated in all the details, of logistics, conference design, and coordination. The Institute included performances by four community story play practitioners. On Friday July 22nd, The Cowan Creek Community Theater Group from Letcher County, and Harlan County's Higher Ground will perform. On Saturday, July 23rd, Monkey Dumplings from Clay County, Kentucky, Homesongs from Owsley County, Kentucky, will perform. Performances took place at the Cowan Community Center in Letcher County, Kentucky, and Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County, Kentucky.

Higher Ground 6: Life is Like a Vapor. SKCTC ATP students were involved in writing *Higher Ground 6: Life is Like a Vapor* during the spring and summer of 2016 specifically for performance at the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute, a multi-community collaboration dedicated to helping communities using theater to tell their own story and increase their capacity in the theater arts.

Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange. During the summer and fall of 2016, SKCTC ATP students participated in the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange. As part of the exchange, students traveled to Paducah and Lexington to meet with local food entrepreneurs, sustainable community development specialists, and artists and other cultural workers to learn about their work and what their communities were doing. In August, these students were part of a local team that hosted over 100 people from across Kentucky here in Harlan. The Harlan Exchange was a co-production of the SKCTC Appalachian Program and Pine Mountain Settlement School. RUXers took part in arts workshops, outdoor activities, and attended a performance of *Higher Ground 6: Life is Like a Vapor*.

It's Good To Be Young in the Mountains 2. The second It's Good to be Young in the Mountains conference took place at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College Cumberland campus April 21-23, 2017. The conference is a three-day event that celebrated Appalachian heritage and gave space to young leaders to discuss their hopes, dreams, and needs for our region. This conference included a wide range of conversations, hands-on workshops, and featured artists and musicians from across the region. It's Good to be Young in the Mountains is a space to celebrate and give agency to young leaders and welcomed the participation of people of all ages, ethnicities, religious affiliations, gender identities, and sexual orientations. The conference featured over twenty workshops on Saturday April 22, including writing and art workshops, roundtable discussions of political and environmental issues, and workshops on life skills or soft skills. Participants networked with other young leaders and professionals throughout the conference. Staff from Pine Mountain Settlement School and Explore Kentucky led local hikes on Saturday and Sunday to allow participants to enjoy the beauty of these Appalachian Mountains.

Each evening included entertainment featuring local musicians and artists. Friday evening was Crawdad night. Crawdad is the Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College Student Arts Festival. This year's Crawdad included performances by Shyla Blevins [Americana], Zach Long [Jazz Rock], Cherry River String Band [Bluegrass], Park Row [Alternative Punk], and Dimitri's Demise [Punk]. The event was free and open to the public, and the conference accepted donations for the Empower Project. Empower is a project supported by Higher Ground and individuals across Harlan County. Donations of pads and tampons will be accepted at the door and distributed to Family Resource and Youth Service Centers at Schools across Harlan County. Saturday evening's concert included a square dance featuring caller Alex Udis. The dance was followed by a concert featuring Random Rock Radio [Rock], Mexican Hot Chocolate [Independent Jazz], Tuar [Rock and Roll], the Woodsheep [Indie Folk], and Late Day Sons [Americana]. The conference included an art exhibit featuring artists from across Kentucky and the region. Artists, vendors, and organizations also set up booths.

Students in our 2016-2017 ATP projects, all of whom are residents of ARC distressed counties, worked with their fellow community members to learn leadership, production, and conference coordination skills. They engaged with county and college leadership to raise the workforce and tourism capacity of Harlan County.

Project Outcomes

- Over 100 people attended the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute, with attendees coming from as far away as Massachusetts, Colorado, and Chicago. In addition to the theatrical knowledge transferred in the workshops, the attendees created income for local hostleries and eateries.
- Over 100 cultural workers and community development specialists came to Harlan for three-days as part of the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange. SKCTC ATP students participated in the design and execution of this event.
- Over 20 community residents were engaged in student interviews during the Fall 2016 Appalachian Studies class, and reflected with our students about the course of the economy in Harlan County and the coalfields in general.
- Over 20 students learned digital literacy skills, learning to edit audio using the Audacity editing software.
- Over 200 people attended IG2BYITM2, again providing a unique group of visitors to our county, and continuing to expand people's notion of what Harlan County is and what could happen here.
- Over 700 people saw Higher Ground 6: *Life is Like a Vapor* in performance in Cowan during the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute, Cumberland during the Swappin' Meetin' festival, Harlan during the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange, and Blacksburg, VA at the Appalachian Studies Association conference.
- 10 students presented research at the ATP conference in Washington, D.C., on December 2-3, 2016. All students who attended the conference were active presenters.
- 5 students created a poster for presentation at poster sessions at the Washington, D.C. conference.

- 2 students presented as part of a forum organized by West Virginia Public Radio at the Appalachian Studies Association conference. Their testimony was part of a show on the radio series *Inside Appalachia*.
- All our student participatory/active research focused on Harlan, County, Kentucky, an ARC-designated distressed county.
- 10 SKCTC students, most of whom are Appalachian natives and/or residents, experienced various parts of the region and the work of the Commission in Washington, D.C.
- The work the students did addressed **ARC Goal 1, Economic Opportunities**
Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that strengthen Appalachia's economy.
- The work the students did addressed **ARC Goal 2: Ready Workforce**
Improve the education, knowledge, skills, and health of residents to work and succeed in Appalachia.
- The work the students did addressed **ARC Goal 4: Natural and Cultural Assets**
Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets.
- The work the students did addressed **ARC Goal 5: Leadership and Community Capacity**
Build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development.

Project Impact

- The project produced nearly \$10,000 of impact for local businesses by bringing in folks from out of town for the Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute, Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange, and It's Good 2 Be Young in the Mountains conference.
- Higher Ground earned a \$5000 contract to produce Life is Like a Vapor at the Appalachian Studies Association conference.
- We have been asked to plan a second Hurricane Gap CTI by participants.
- Production of four Shewbuddy Radio episodes
- 20 students were trained as audio/video/podcast producers
- 20 students developed leadership skills in managing the various aspects of the project.
- The project led directly to the SKCTC Appalachian Program developing a POWER grant proposal currently under consideration at the ARC.
- There has been enhancement of student and community awareness of the work of the ARC.

Problems Encountered

- We did not operate an Introduction to Theater course during the summer. We had students participating in the festival, but they were not interested in doing so for credit. We were, however, able to pay them as interns for the summer.

- We only had one SKCTC class participating in the Higher Ground Radio process. We had hoped for more. Southeast Television was not involved in our project. This deviation can only be explained as excessive ambition on the part of the project coordinator.

Program Continuation and Sustainability

The SKCTC Appalachian Program survived a year of cuts and purges at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College. It was not a foregone conclusion that we would do so. That storm has passed for the moment, and so we are cautiously hopeful about the future. We are working on a new play, a new Hurricane Gap Community Theater Institute, and our staff is taking a larger hand in the Kingdom Come Swappin' Meetin,' the community festival sponsored by the college. We have an application into ArtPlace to take a larger role in art education for community development, a proposal to the Kentucky Arts Council for downtown enhancement and engagement with the county detention center, and a proposal into ARC for workforce development focused on creative placemaking. We still have full-time staff. We will continue. We will endure.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We have created a great deal of art in our community over our 16 years in the Appalachian Teaching Project. Higher Ground gets studied by scholars and media types constantly. We have colleges and reporters calling us from all over the country wanting to hear what we think about things. But our community's economic struggles only seem to intensify. In the past two years, we have been drawn more and more into thinking about downtown development, and using our cultural influence to help develop the community. We have become more event-driven, thought more about what we can do to bring visitors into the community and help our local businesses tune into how they can profit from the kind of visitors Higher Ground and the Appalachian Program generate—visitors who come here to learn, to take part in conferences and festivals. We, and by we I mean Higher Ground and the SKCTC Appalachian Program, are in a transitional phase. On the one hand, many Higher Ground participants want to keep making plays. There is much to comment on. There are stories need telling and songs need singing. The plays are an important part of their quality of life. But increasingly, the funding game is more about hardcore economic development—development that is more interested in the role of the arts, to be sure, but asking of us more emphasis on jobs and dollars generated and visitors generated than we are used to. And so we are figuring it out. Because we are in this place and we love this place. And more deeply than that, we love each other. We are tired of being parted. We want to stay together, and we want to stay here. So we will figure it out. And as always, we deeply appreciate ARC and our partners in ATP for giving us our most important framework in which to think and act.

Attachments

Attachments can be found here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/g556t8ps8qtloc/AAAgZUGTp7u9YoyAu9gFYPXa?dl=0>