



*How Appalachian People
Use Art To Make Change:*

STORIES OF THE POWER OF ART

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www.blacksoil.life

BLACK SOIL: OUR BETTER NATURE

Black farmers and culinary artists reclaim their agricultural heritage with storytelling

Black Soil, a social enterprise based out of Lexington, KY, launched in 2017 by Ashley C. Smith and Trevor Claiborn, her partner in life and in work. Their focus is to revive and reclaim the agricultural heritage of Black Kentuckians to build economic opportunities for 21st century Black farmers and producers through hands-on technical support and strategies including educational workshops, community events like Farm Tours and Farm-to-Table Dinners that showcase Black farmers and Black culinary artists, and by lifting up the stories and history of Black agricultural experience through art, cultural sharing, and community-building.

“If you reach back two generations or less, most African Americans will say they had a significant family connection to foodways by sustenance growing and farming, having stories of communities being so prideful of the harvest and the crop,” Smith says. “Our mission is to reconnect Black Kentuckians to their heritage, legacy, and agriculture. If you don’t know you’re a foundational pioneer in these industries, you can accept erasure, and

“FOOD CONNECTS US, ART TELLS THE STORY OF THOSE CONNECTIONS.”

– BLACK SOIL:
OUR BETTER NATURE



Black Soil Co-Founder Ashley C. Smith on a Farm Tour at the Cleav Family Farmer's Market in LaRue County, KY (Photo courtesy of Black Soil)

we’re here to say ‘no more’ because when you break down the economic impact of agriculture, there are so many ways people can be included.” Smith plants names like seeds – [Nancy Green](#), [Booker T. Whatley](#), [Edna Lewis](#) – Black agricultural and foodways pioneers whose legacies are the roots of Black Soil’s work today.

Black Soil’s efforts began by finding and building relationships with Black farmers. Smith says that was their first challenge – the barriers and obstacles Black Soil addresses include erasure, land loss, economic disparities, and structural racism. Census of Agriculture 2017 data show that Black farm products in Kentucky are valued at approximately \$10 million, while white farm products are valued at more

than \$5 billion. Out of 77,000 primary operators in Kentucky, only 433 are Black - less than 1.4 percent. Across the United States, at least 12 million acres of land have been lost in the Black land-owning community in the last 100 years.

To combat these inequities, Black Soil’s strategy makes Black farmers and culinary artists more visible and their enterprises more viable by connecting them with consumers, bridging rural/urban divides, increasing income for farmers, chefs, and value-added producers, and cultivating leadership, entrepreneurship, and pride in Black farming heritage to sustain the field into the future.

Their pilot program included three tours to [Barbour’s Farm in Hart County, KY](#) where Black Soil exceeded their

Black Soil: Our Better Nature Notables

AWARDS

- » 2018 Southern Foodways Alliance Guardians of the Tradition Award recipients
- » 2019 Laura K. Weinberg Entrepreneur Award Social Enterprise category
- » 2020-22 Southern Foodways Alliance [Smith Fellows](#)

MEDIA

- » [“The Soil of the Earth”](#) *Southsider & The Chevy Chaser*, Smiley Pete Publishing
- » [“Where are the Black Hemp Farmers?”](#) *Pew Stateline*
- » [‘A Return to Roots: African American Farming in Kentucky’](#) *WBKO ABC 13, on air feature*

total engagement goal by the second tour and saw immediate results in connecting local farm products with consumers. From there, they expanded their farm tours across 10 counties and added Farm to Table Dinners with meals prepared by Black culinary artists using the products grown on Black-owned farms.

Black Soil added art, culture, and documentation components to their work in 2019, utilizing photography and videography to amplify the story of the farmers, producers, and culinary artists they work with. They were supported by Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), a cultural nonprofit based at the University of Mississippi with a mission to document and explore the foodways of the American South.

SFA served as a funding network for Black Soil, and Oral Historian AnneMarie Anderson trained Smith and Claiborn to document the stories of the farmers and farms featured in their tours. “They were interested in telling the stories of rural Black folks for urban Black folks to know where their food came from and

to understand the cultural heritage of Black farmers in Kentucky,” Anderson said. “I was impressed at the care in their work — they feel these stories matter and they want to show other folks the opportunities in farming, and share new stories while linking with older stories and how they’ve been impacted by institutional racism in the Jim Crow South and within the history of farming and funding.”

Smith says creative documentation of Farm Tours and farm life is essential to expand the market and inspire a new generation to carry on the legacy. “Seeing is believing - if the only representation of Black farming I have is *Roots*, *12 Years a Slave*, or black and white photos in my textbook, we couldn’t do it,” Smith says. “The culture of resilience and resistance in farming paired with chronicling their on-the-farm experience through the lens and vision of another person telling the story through their artform is powerful.”

In 2020, Black Soil is expanding its storytelling by working with a visual artist who will document each

Black Soil event, including a Paint Party at a Lincoln County farm tour to reimagine the American Gothic portrait as an African American family living in rural Kentucky. They’ve also launched a social media campaign celebrating African American history and contributions in foodways and agriculture, and they are consulting with Ashland, Kentucky statesman Henry Clay’s estate, to develop a signature [African American experience tour](#) highlighting the 122 enslaved people on the plantation who cultivated the tobacco, hemp, and grain that contributed to Clay’s wealth.

“That’s how we’ve grown to tell a story and reclaim a very painful story - by showcasing the people who are entrepreneurs, the superheroes amongst us, holding to traditions in spite of so many barriers and obstacles. We want to celebrate that through bringing people to your farm, commemorate that through art, and celebrate it through cultural expressions,” Smith says.



Black Soil participants on a Wayne County, KY Farm Tour (Photo courtesy of Black Soil)

www.clearcreekcreative.net

CLEAR CREEK CREATIVE

A community uses theater to defend control of their land against extraction

In the winter of 2014, land prospectors started showing up in Rockcastle County, Kentucky. They were scoping out land for the next big hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking”, boom in Appalachia, looking to extract mineral rights and resources before the coal industry finally took its last dying breaths. Using divide-and-conquer tactics, they were hoping to buy up land leases from families in the community, offering money as the cold winter months approached in exchange for mineral rights.

It was a tactic that had worked in other communities, where the promise of profit sharing had lured residents into leases that allowed corporate access to drill for oil and gas on their land. Unfortunately, the corporations rarely kept up their end of the bargain, devastating not only property and the natural environment, but families’ checkbooks, too – contracts were reneged, payment percentages drastically reduced, if paid at all, and the corporations extracted the wealth and the resources, leaving community members with nothing but contaminated water, increased risk of earthquakes, air and noise pollution, and empty pockets.

That winter in Rockcastle County was different. Many in the community were already well aware of the resource extraction and land exploitation in their region and beyond, and they had recently come together to talk about it through a dynamic, intentional process

that celebrated art, culture, and story sharing to envision a different path forward.

Clear Creek Creative in Rockcastle County is an initiative in which Carrie Brunk and Bob Martin facilitate art, cultural and community organizing and leadership development programming. They had hosted the Clear Creek Festival for 8 years leading up to that winter, bringing artists of varied disciplines and backgrounds together in an annual event that lifted up popular education, foodways, relationship building, and community. Just a few months before the land men arrived on locals’ doorsteps, Clear Creek had added a theater component to the festival to embrace the larger stories of the place it calls home, the people who are its neighbors, and to engage with community members in creative dialogue about land and culture. To facilitate the process and build bridges of commonality over geographical divides, they invited *Cry You One*, a theater project of New Orleans companies ArtSpot Productions and Mondo Bizarro, to collaborate, bringing their performance that addressed the consequences of extraction in the Gulf Coast to an Appalachian context and a Clear Creek audience of 150 people.

The heartfelt response to the performance inspired Clear Creek to organize community members to create an Appalachian reflection on *Cry You One*, lifting up the same themes of land, place, loss, and community

connection. They embarked on a parallel process, crafting community meals with local farmers in a setting that invited participants to share stories and exchange ideas. The resulting dialogue was infused into a culminating performance of the community’s theater response. Soon after *Cry You One* wrapped, the land men came to town, and the themes and relationships the performance and its collaborative process had fostered helped bolster the community and rallied them to respond.

“Rather than being isolated in our homes, we had all been talking through this art piece on extraction,” Clear Creek Creative’s Bob Martin says. Clear Creek organized a new dialogue in response to the land grab, inviting the community to share who was visiting their homes and the details of the proposed leases. “[It was] building a unified front that this is not the place you want to start grabbing bargain basement land and speculating,” Martin says. The community’s opposition ran the prospectors out of town, and the process that began with *Cry You One* and continued with community organizing had solidified residents’ commitment to examine what they wanted for the land as part of a region in economic transition from the coal crisis.

“We often look to the shiny, new, innovative next thing, and the work of artists and activists is to help us remember the stories and things we need to bring forward and honor from



Bob Martin as Ezell in Clear Creek Creative's *Ezell: Ballad of a Land Man* (Photo by Erica Fladeland, printed with permission from Clear Creek Creative)

the past," says Clear Creek's Carrie Brunk. "I think that role of the artist and of arts as a strategy helps us to remember and bring forward the values, richness, and stories of what our communities are and have held in the past, as well as the vision and the aspiration for going forward. I don't know of any other means that's as rich and vibrant."

For Clear Creek, that work led to *Land, Water, Food Story*, a project that continued to examine land and place as nourishment and sustenance through a community story-sharing and storytelling process. It became a collaboration with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) through *A Seat at the Table*, a statewide tour that engaged hundreds in story circles to develop a

Clean Power Plan for Kentucky. The story circles culminated in *Where's That Power Gonna Come From*, a performance piece that synthesized the communities' stories, hopes, and dreams for their infrastructure and green energy options, supporting KFTC's work in presenting the Power Plan to Kentucky's governor and legislature.

Cry You One had planted a seed in the foothills of Appalachian Kentucky that has flourished into larger, ongoing work that has allowed the community to pull together in the face of potential crises and that will soon take their stories to a national audience.

Ezell: Ballad of a Land Man is the latest Clear Creek theatrical work birthed from the collaborative art and cultural work that helped rally communities in the winter of 2014. Clear Creek says *Ezell* is "an environmental, cultural and spiritual parable derived from living in the foothills of Appalachia, one man among many seeking to make sense of the time, place and condition in which we live... as he seeks to take advantage of an anticipated fracking boom and the opportunity to reconnect with the people and land of his raising." The project transcends a typical theater experience with an installation, a nature walk, and a communal meal, mirroring the process that built its story.

Produced in 2019, *Ezell* will tour nationally in 2020-21 with the support of the [New England Foundation for the Arts'](#) (NEFA) [National Theater Project](#), expanding the impact of a local community coming together at the intersection of art, culture, place, and

politics to a broader stage. Clear Creek is particularly interested in touring in Appalachian communities facing fracking and extractive industries to continue to build dialogues and solutions around land.

Program Officer Meena Malik says NEFA seeks projects that embody the foundation's core values of equity, inclusion, diversity, and accessibility. "At NEFA, since we incorporate our core values, it became really important to tell authentic stories. Even if you come from different places and different beliefs, you can always find commonality through stories. It brings it to a personal place where people can relate to each other," she says. "For *Ezell*, this topic of fracking and the climate crisis is such an important part, but also a divisive idea that people have different beliefs about. We believe something like this production, where it's not just about coming to a show, but creating a relationship with people through sharing a meal, a walk in the woods, experiencing the land and nature, that this could be a way to reach people to change their perspectives just a little bit. We all believe that and that's why we do this work."

www.keeperofthemountains.org

KEEPER OF THE MOUNTAINS | SOLARFEST

A music festival celebrates solar energy solutions

In a 2012 [Earthjustice video](#), Keeper of the Mountains co-founder Larry Gibson guides the camera crew across the lush, wooded property on Kayford Mountain in Kanawha County, West Virginia that his family has lived on since the 1700s.

As his tour proceeds through the woods and up the grassy mountain, it ends at what should be a breathtaking view of rolling green mountains as far as the eye can see. Instead, Gibson reaches the apex only to unveil one of the largest mountaintop removal coal mines in Appalachia – 7,500 sprawling acres of gravel and rock devoid of any plant life, trees, or beauty. After almost 30 years of constant destruction on the mountain he called home, the sight still moves him to tears.

“I’ve cried myself to sleep many nights thinking what I could have done different that day, and what can I do tomorrow to make a difference,” Gibson says, wiping his eyes. Although Gibson passed away in 2012 not long after the video was filmed, his love for his mountain home continues to make a difference through Keeper of the Mountains, the organization he co-founded in 2004 to fight mountaintop removal.

Keeper of the Mountains President Paul Corbit Brown says a conversation they had shortly before Gibson passed is the inspiration for Keeper of the Mountains’ work today.

“Larry was very discouraged because after years of fighting mountaintop

removal, we hadn’t been able to stop it,” Brown says. “I said, ‘we can keep fighting what we don’t want or spend our energy building what we do want: clean, renewable energy and jobs for people in West Virginia and everywhere. So, let’s turn this mountain into a beacon, a victory garden. Let’s use solar to push our message out there.’”

The idea of celebrating solutions and building alternatives led to SolarFest, a solar-powered music festival hosted annually by Keeper of the Mountains in Fayetteville, WV. It’s another living example of Gibson’s influence – he hosted an informal gathering every July 4 on Kayford Mountain that brought family and friends together around food and music.

SolarFest is an ever-growing community event that opens attendees’ minds to sustainable energy alternatives by showing them what is possible and letting them experience it for themselves in a fun setting that celebrates art and culture while still actively fighting mountaintop removal.

“I’m now 20 years into this fight and the only time we get together is at the Capitol or chained to a bulldozer being arrested, protesting, and yelling,” Brown says. “Maybe there’s room in this movement to have a moment of joy and community that’s not quite so harsh and abrasive. The more critical thing is to find a way to win the hearts and minds of our community and the people around us. If all they ever hear is ‘no fracking, no mining, no, no, no’ – how do we say yes to what we want instead of always saying no to what we don’t want?”



Rasta Rafiki performing at Solar Fest – photo by Xavier Walter from KOTM website



Photo of mountaintop removal – photo by Paul Corbit Brown

The festival brings people in with live music, but also includes dozens of tents featuring green energy vendors and environmental groups who share the job opportunities and energy-saving options solar and other sustainable sources provide without destroying communities' natural resources and environments.

"To show people what solar can do, we have huge solar panels that sit there quietly, soaking up the sun, and powering the stage," Brown says. "A lot of people have misconceptions about it and how functional it is - to demonstrate fully, we let the music go into the evening and sometimes show a movie and set up a big screen on the stage. Then we remind people they're watching a movie that was powered by the sun today, so it becomes a great tool for outreach to show that solar is a viable thing and it works all the time." Solar vendors onsite are available to meet with attendees and often leave

with multiple appointments scheduled to set up installation or provide estimates.

Keeper of the Mountains is also aligning the festival with their goals of creating jobs and economic opportunities in the region. The festival invites artists and activists to speak between music performances, providing in-service training to inspire attendees to get involved and highlighting artists whose work addresses injustice. Through grassroots fundraising, crowdsourcing, and business sponsorships, they ensure musicians, artists, and the venue are paid for their work.

"It's an economic development tool," Brown says. "It's about finding ways to help people understand the concept of moving money around in the community. As that money flows, everyone is getting help from that. We offer a healthy alternative to this

problem and the legacy of coal, and we offer it in a fun, inviting way."

Keeper of the Mountains has also taken this approach in leveraging support for other Appalachian organizations through the KOTM Foundation and from their primary funder, the [EACH Foundation](#). EACH president and founder Lionel Shaw says Brown's work at Keeper of the Mountains inspired the foundation to expand its funding to the Appalachian region for the first time. EACH is giving away 100 percent of its funds in 2020 and closing its doors, pursuing legislation in its home state of California to increase the minimum amount foundations are mandated to give annually.

"We like to fund bootstrapped organizations that are on the ropes and might have to close down if we can't save them," Shaw says. "We understand the restrictions of government funding for the arts, particularly in Appalachia, and we are trying to pick up to fill those gaps. We know the healing ability of arts and music to bring people together, lift them up, and improve communities' health and wellness - that's why we give."

TO SHOW PEOPLE
WHAT SOLAR CAN DO,
WE HAVE HUGE SOLAR
PANELS THAT SIT THERE
QUIETLY, SOAKING
UP THE SUN, AND
POWERING THE STAGE

Keeper of the Mountains is also providing exciting and important support to other communities impacted by manmade climate change and environmental exploitation through The Dandelion Project, including Flint, MI, and Puerto Rico. Learn more about this work at <https://www.keeperofthemountains.org/news/the-dandelion-project>

Cattywampus Puppet Council and the Good Guy Collective:

APPALACHIAN PUPPET PAGEANT & WHAT THE WATER TELLS ME

Hip-hop, theater, and puppets help grow new relationships and economies

The Appalachian Puppet Pageant takes to the streets of East Knoxville each year in a community parade that celebrates art, culture, and the resilience of the historically Black community it's rooted in. A 10-foot tall papier-mâché Dolly Parton puppet dances alongside papier-mâché animals to the sounds of live music while community groups and neighbors in masks and costumes march alongside each other in a spectacle of pure joy.

Parade participants typically work alongside the co-organizers, [Cattywampus Puppet Council](#) and the Good Guy Collective, for months leading up to the parade, creating their own puppets, imagery, and music in response to each year's theme. In this way, the community learns new creative skills and the parade tells a story that's woven from the experiences of each person and group who takes part.

But in 2019 as the parade was rained out and moved into a sheltered community space, Cattywampus Executive and Artistic Director Rachel Milford and [Good Guy Collective](#) organizer Jarius Bush looked around the room as MCs performed, people danced with puppets, and everyone laughed and had a good time. Realizing the sudden weather change and

disruption could have led to a disaster, Milford asked herself, "How did we still get everyone to play together?"

Getting everyone to play together is instrumental to the story of how these two seemingly disparate art and social justice organizations in Knoxville have created a collaboration together that is growing community relationships and new economies through art, culture, story, and finding collective joy.

The Good Guy Collective is a hip-hop collective that is comprised of an independent music label and community programs including a recording studio, hip-hop classes for youth, and hosting showcases to boost economic opportunities for performing artists. Cattywampus Puppet Council utilizes community-based theatre, parades, and participatory workshops to build power, creativity, justice, and liberation in the Southeast.

Most people don't associate hip hop with puppets, but shared vision, community needs, and lived experiences brought Bush and Milford together in 2016 in an artistic partnership grounded in a political and economic analysis that has expanded the community's notion of what is possible while expanding the creative reach of both organizations' missions.

"We realized that in general in East Tennessee, there is a tremendous lack of funding for this work unless it's Christian based," Milford says. "There is a lack of space, a lack of resources, so we got together and met with the idea of sharing space together to provide programming. What grew out of this meeting was a collaborative theater project and through this creation process of merging hip-hop, giant puppets, acting, spoken word, and movement all together; we also built strong relationships with one another and so many other community members."

WE REALIZED THAT IN GENERAL IN EAST TENNESSEE, THERE IS A TREMENDOUS LACK OF FUNDING

Bush adds, "I believe hip-hop is one of the most revolutionary art forms and it's a culture that comes from youth using whatever resources they have to express themselves – spray paint, dance, DJs – taking what you have and creating art from it. That's what marinates Good Guy and Cattywampus and how we work together – we both take what we have and make art with it."



Rachel Milford in a scene from What the Water Tells Me (photo courtesy of Cattywampus Puppet Council)

Storytelling is another common approach that links their work together, and the storytelling traditions that underlie both hip-hop and Appalachian cultures led to their first major collaboration – *What the Water Tells Me*, a theater piece that brought their different mediums together to tell a story about environmental justice and water issues in their community.

The collaborative process was an experiment that unfolded through its creation and ultimately involved almost 100 community members in bringing the final product to life. Bush wrote the soundtrack, composing beats, singing and performing the music while Milford directed and led the visual component of creating puppets and props with both bringing in collaborators focused on dance, costuming, and poetry.

“There’s an underlying method we operate in when we collaborate – the connection, the relationship with whatever space and place we step into,” Bush says. “The parade is an expression of creating together and it’s the same

thing with *What the Water Tells Me*. It’s cool to see all these different walks of life come into the same space and see that connection in creativity.”

What the Water Tells Me toured regionally in both urban and rural settings and included an audience talk-back that often led to conversations continuing into the night.

“The theme of how we come into the world innately connected to each other and the land, and how systems come in and sever that, it really resonated with people and created a space for people to tell their own stories,” Milford says. “We have a lot of gratitude because it often feels we have to create everything we want to exist here. We have gratitude when people participate and also help us create something, so people supporting it who didn’t think of themselves as artists was amazing.”

While Cattywampus and Good Guy Collective work together using art and culture, their work is rooted in strategies to shift power and create social change, including expanding

economic opportunities for the arts, artists and arts groups.

“We think about arts and culture as being the most important piece in driving any change we want because we are creatures of stories. If we want to create leverage to make changes on a local or national scale, we have to shift culture,” Milford says. “It’s a fundamental piece of our work. We believe everyone is an artist and that everyone has important stories to share and we see these projects as tools to help people feel empowered, give them a voice, and talk about what matters to them.”

Their work together has been formalized through support from Alternate ROOTS and its Partners in Action grant, providing funding for their work to continue and grow. Both Bush and Milford say their organizations’ work and their personal well-being have suffered from a lack of resources and arts funding in our region, particularly in general operating support and resources to build their capacity for their work. In recognition



The Appalachian Puppet Pageant makes its way through East Knoxville, with the giant Dolly Parton puppet in tow (photos courtesy of Cattywampus Puppet Council)

of these challenges, they are paying the support forward and leveraging their grant funds to boost resources for their broader communities.

Cattywampus is incorporating a Teaching Artist program into their work, providing income for local artists, and is also in its second year of running its Parade Youth Intern Squad, where LGBTQ+ identifying youth of color get paid to learn cultural organizing skills through helping to coordinate, create art for, and lead community outreach for the annual Puppet Pageant. The Good Guy Collective is supporting local artists and activists by hosting album release parties and providing

music entertainment to benefit local community organizations.

Bush and Milford say rooting the annual Puppet Pageant in East Knoxville to bring revenue into the community is another economic strategy they're working toward with their art, alongside providing arts education in schools and programs that have lost funding for arts programming.

"There are religious, economic, and political challenges to what we're doing," Milford says. "In general, arts funding in our region is geared toward tourism and trying to bring outside folks into our community when there

are people here, amazing artists, who don't have food or housing. We're swimming in social capital – we know how to work together, to work collaboratively and collectively, and Appalachia has so much to teach the rest of the country about how that's done because we've had to do it for so long out of necessity. We have amazing creative people and relationships, but the other challenges are real."

While their own story is reflective of the communities and the Appalachian region they are engaging, Milford says these stories can bring about the changes that are needed.



Jarius Bush, left, and Rachel Milford, right, in a scene from *What the Water Tells Me* (photo courtesy of Cattywampus Puppet Council)



“THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING STORIES AND SHIFTING CULTURE TO MAKE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE, I THINK IT’S TREMENDOUSLY IMPORTANT AND I THINK IT’S IMPORTANT THAT ALL THIS TRANSFORMATION WORK WE’RE TRYING TO DO BE JOYFUL AND PLEASURABLE,” MILFORD SAYS. “IT IS INHERENTLY HEALING TO TELL YOUR STORY, AND TO SEE YOURSELF AS SOMEONE WHO MATTERS AND WHOSE STORY MATTERS. GETTING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO MAKE ART AND BE IN COMMUNICATION IS A POWERFUL TOOL FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ORGANIZING.”

OPPORTUNITY SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA | RALLY SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

Arts, culture, and craft entrepreneurs prove their value as economic drivers

In 2011, staff in the Office of Economic Development at the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVa-Wise) recognized a challenge. With a mission to encourage economic development in Southwest Virginia by connecting the community with the college's resources and building professional and leadership development, there was one piece missing: A culture of entrepreneurship.

"Entrepreneurship is critically important," says Shannon Blevins, Associate Vice Chancellor for Economic Development and Engagement at UVa-Wise. "Helping people identify their talents and passions, and helping them create their own jobs and business, they will stay with your community, they won't leave, and when you're thinking about retention and growth strategy, entrepreneurship is so important."

In the last 10 years of supporting entrepreneurs in Southwest Virginia, UVa-Wise and its partners have found that the talents and passions of communities often center around the

arts as a central connective tissue that pulls towns together, beautifies public gathering areas, and provides unique points of pride that invite tourism and inspire new economic innovations. It was a winding path to get there, but one that has strengthened not only entrepreneurship and economies, but the fabric of communities who've participated in the process.

In a region that had historically relied on one industry, the coal industry, to fuel its economy, UVa-Wise knew it would take a regional response to shift the culture to one that could grow and sustain community-based businesses. Over five years, they created and published a regional blueprint toward entrepreneurship, brought together dozens of entities in Opportunity

Summit events that strengthened partnership and collaboration by providing a one-stop-shop for would-be entrepreneurs, and hosted Entrepreneur Challenge competitions that provided investment grants to winners.

The lessons learned through these collaborative projects launched a unique network of entrepreneurship-support organizations that now provide a model across the state, with partners like the Virginia Tourism Corporation, The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, and Friends of Southwest Virginia working together with UVa-Wise to provide leadership and guidance to 33 different supporting organizations across 19 counties.



Narrows RALLY project participants highlighting their work at the Narrows Fall Festival (photo credit: <https://virginiasmtnplayground.com/narrows-completes-rally-southwest-virginia-project/>)

THESE SMALL COMMUNITIES, YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW RESOURCEFUL THEY'VE BEEN

The years of collaboration and increasing partnership ultimately led to the Opportunity SWVA initiative and its RALLY program that stands for Real Action Leadership Learning (the Y stands for Yay!). RALLY provides hands-on learning and mini-grants, engaging community leaders in collaborative processes that support and sustain small businesses, often centered around arts and culture. In a region where arts heritage springs from a Do-It-Yourself mentality born of necessity and innovation, the connection with entrepreneurship is a natural link.

“We saw that entrepreneurs were in towns and communities that weren’t very business friendly,” Blevins says. “So we saw that we needed to provide additional support to create buzz around entrepreneurship, for leaders to see it as a viable part of strategies for economic development. We’re chasing larger industries that were out of the region, chasing huge projects, but entrepreneurship is just as important to economic development.”

To build business-friendly communities, RALLY brings together communities across sectors to envision what they want locally, identify a project, work together, build relationships and skills, and establish a strong network that can carry on the work after the RALLY experience ends. Participation includes a \$3,000 mini-grant for the community to kickstart their collective project.

Becki Joyce, Director of Community and Economic Development at UVa-Wise says RALLY works with communities in a two-phase process, supporting participants in identifying

a project together, then supporting them in the fundamentals of project management and providing coaching and mentoring to build leadership within the community to see the project to completion.

“One of the first things we do in a community is ask people to tell us what they love about where they live,” Joyce says. “We always get similar responses: family atmosphere, the friendliness of the community, the history and culture of our communities. The projects serve as reminders of that and instill pride in their community and the mini-grants go toward something they can attach to and celebrate about their place.”

Gate City, VA is one participating community that wanted to revitalize an old theater as part of their project, but they needed help getting the community to buy into the revitalization and needed assistance to apply for grants and fund the revitalization.

RALLY provided its \$3000 mini-grant, and engaged the community in cleaning the theater up, painting it and hanging lights. Since the theater didn’t have a roof, the community got creative with their limitations and turned it into an outdoor theater. To raise money, they hosted movie screenings and community events each weekend like a Great Gatsby viewing that included antique car parades and a costume theme. Because of the support of the RALLY program, the community’s work has evolved and they’ve moved forward with grants to revitalize and rebuild the theater.

Other communities like Pennington Gap and Dungannon have participated with projects to paint murals on windows and storefronts of downtown buildings that are awaiting revitalization. The town of Narrow’s RALLY project brought the community together to create large posters that marketed tourism and local businesses using photos taken by citizens and cultivated through a community-wide photo contest. The photos also

highlight available business space to encourage entrepreneurship, and the RALLY mini-grant was supplemented by support from the New River Valley Regional Commission, providing assistance in the start-up or expansion process for potential business owners.

The program has seen real successes, seeing participants grow in their leadership, including a natural outgrowth of RALLY participation that brought participating communities together to cross-pollinate skills and ideas, strengthening the regional fabric of an entrepreneurial spirit.

But one critical piece is at a crossroads: funding support for the critical mini-grants that give communities the kick-off resources to bring their collective visions to life ended in April.

“These small communities, you’d be surprised how resourceful they’ve been to stretch that amount and use it as a seed to grow such good projects,” Joyce says. “We’re looking now for the sustainability piece for communities to build onto that \$3,000.”

Since the program launched, 392 entrepreneurs have been supported and \$100,000 has been invested in regional businesses and communities, strengths that grow alongside the increased collaboration and partnership that sustains not only the programming but the participating communities.

“This region, over the last 10 to 15 years, has worked to establish itself as a destination for tourism,” Blevins says. “We have exceptional craftsmen, talented musicians, we have the food and Appalachian cuisine. There’s little bits and pieces of this throughout all these communities, and, the beauty of RALLY is that a community creates their own experience. All have their own personality and RALLY supports that by building on the natural, creative skillset of the region and building on those skills to monetize and build resources.”

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE: MORE STORY TEASERS FROM ACROSS THE REGION

Appalachia is full of stories of the power of art. On the following pages are short profiles of organizations and projects that are working with artists to advance critical outcomes in Central Appalachian communities.

ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY CENTER | CREATE APPALACHIA

“Where art meets business”, Create Appalachia builds a supportive arts industry in the Appalachian Highlands of Northeast Tennessee by resourcing innovation and entrepreneurship. Professional development workshops, community events like the Tiny Art Throwdown, and local food and farm demonstrations are promoting the arts and supporting artists and their communities to thrive economically.

Through a 2019 POWER grant from the Appalachia Regional Commission, Create Appalachia is partnering with the Johnson City Development Authority to establish the

Create Appalachia Arts and Technology Center, “a micro-enterprise incubator and professional development center specializing in digital arts production in Johnson City, Tennessee.” Revitalizing a historic downtown building, the Center will support artists, businesses, and nonprofits across digital arts sectors and technologies with work space, production studios, event space, professional technology access, and educational workshops. The Create Appalachia Arts and Technology Center is slated to open in late 2020.



BLACK APPALACHIAN YOUNG AND RISING

Black youth living in Central Appalachia collaborated in 2019 to create, host, and facilitate the inaugural “Black Appalachian Young and Rising” gathering, bringing together dozens of Black youth from across the region to examine Black Appalachian identity, build relationships, and launch a call to action to organizations in the region to support and build leadership among Black youth. The space and the Steering Committee were autonomous and not affiliated with any one organization, with the goals to “define Black Appalachian joy and identity for ourselves, to begin a restorative process for Black leadership in regional youth networks, and to celebrate the many shades and melodies of our existence.”

The weekend-long event at the Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County, Kentucky, included workshops on

Black Appalachian history, skill-building exercises, and facilitated conversations to share their experiences, strategies and vision for the future they are working together to create. A Saturday night BONDFire included spoken word performances and rap battles with s’mores around the campfire.

Their work continues as Black Appalachian Young and Rising works to grow its networks, expand leadership of Black youth in regional organizations, and continue to build skills and opportunities among Black youth in Appalachia.



COALFIELD DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

West Virginia’s Coalfield Development Corporation “develops the potential of Appalachian places and people as they experience challenging moments of economic transition by unlocking people’s creative power to transform perceived problems into opportunities in the communities we call home.” Projects like the Big Ugly Workshop and the Saw’s Edge Workshop provide training and resources to build skills and artistic enterprise in woodworking design and production while programs like Refresh Appalachia boost agricultural

entrepreneurship supporting growers and producers in expanding markets and economies while increasing access to healthy foods.

Much of the work takes place under the roof of the West Edge Factory in Westmoreland, WV, an 8,000-square foot community hub for creating, growing, collaborating, and convening, all in a historic setting reclaiming an abandoned textile factory.



COWAN COMMUNITY CENTER

The Levitt AMP Series grant awarded the Cowan Community Center one of 15 grants to support free live music in small-to-medium communities' downtowns across the U.S. Partnering with the City of Whitesburg, the Mountain Heritage Festival Committee, Appalshop, Whitesburg/Letcher County Farmer's Market and CANE Kitchen, Cowan Community Center hosts free live music in downtown Whitesburg's Mountain Heritage

stage every Thursday from May to August, bringing diverse professional musical entertainment to the community in a family-friendly environment.



RIFFRAFF ARTS COLLECTIVE | CREATE YOUR STATE

The RiffRaff Arts Collective brings creativity, entertainment, and education to Princeton, WV, revitalizing a once-neglected downtown district and boosting entrepreneurial and business opportunities for local artists. The Collective of cooperative, interdisciplinary artists hosts community events including the Culturefest World Music and Arts Festival and All Together Arts Week. RiffRaff's Create Your State Tour tells the story of the community the Collective has fostered in downtown Princeton, through a presentation that includes original music, visual art, and workshops facilitated by RiffRaff co-founders, artists and cultural entrepreneurs Lori McKinney and Robert

Blankenship. Participants learn how to create a similar infrastructure in their own communities, gaining skills, tools, and follow-up support to build creative capital where they live and work. The tour has visited 25 West Virginia towns and launched its inaugural Create Your State Convening in October 2019 to build a stronger network of creative communities and boost transformation through local arts and arts spaces across the state.



CULTURE OF RECOVERY | APPALACHIAN ARTISAN CENTER

The Appalachian Artisan Center in Hindman, Kentucky, develops the economy of eastern Kentucky through arts, culture, and heritage, supporting artists to help them create and grow successful businesses. Its Culture of Recovery program addresses health and economic needs for families struggling with drug addiction by bringing a "holistic and arts-integrated approach" to recovery. It offers workshops

and apprenticeships that support those in recovery to build skills in craft trades like luthiery, blacksmithing, and ceramics, which also preserve and celebrate cultural arts traditions of the region.



FARM DINNER THEATER | UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY | UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA | COOPERATIVE EXTENSION PROGRAMS IN KY, TN, & VA

Farm Dinner Theater is a creative response to a community in crisis. With family-owned farms suffering from economic and health challenges associated with a changing industry and landscape, Dr. Deborah Reed developed an innovative approach to address the problem. Creating a space to share a meal and conversation, Farm Dinner Theater unites family

farmers in telling their stories at each event, with stories being transformed into plays that unite the common themes and lift up challenges. The plays are performed for farmers and community members with facilitated discussion to support families in engaging with the creative material to identify possible solutions to the mutual problems they face.

FESTIVALL

Charleston, West Virginia's FestivALL partners with over 90 community organizations and artists annually to provide arts programming and collaboration throughout the year. Every June, the city is transformed through FestivALL's city-wide, multi-arts events that showcase music, theater, visual art, dance and more throughout the month. Its Neighborhood Arts Initiative provides programming for youth to learn about and engage with art and performance, while programs like

the Three Things speaker series monthly from February to October provides intimate experiences for community members to learn more about each other through the themes of "My First, My Favorite, My Future".



GATE 5 INDUSTRIAL ART FESTIVAL | CITY OF WEIRTON, WV

The No. 5 gate on Weirton, West Virginia's Main Street was the entry point for thousands of steel workers going to work at Weirton Steel since 1918. In 1982, Weirton Steel employees bought out the company and ran it successfully until a controversial decision to make the company public on the NY Stock Exchange, combined with overseas competition led

employment to decline steadily. The annual Gate 5 Industrial Art Festival launched in September 2018 to celebrate the local industrial heritage represented by Weirton Steel's Gate 5 and to unite the community with activities that promote health, art and culture, including a 5km race, glass blowing demonstrations, a fashion show, and live sculptures.

THE GRID | BRIDGE VALLEY COMMUNITY AND TECH COLLEGE

The GRID in Montgomery, WV stands for Generate, Renew, Innovate, and Design and is "a special place where creative energy, civic spirit, and resources converge to unleash innovation, seek new enterprises and invest in the region's people and the city's downtown; a unique concept that combines the robust elements of a business accelerator with the creative environment of a Makerspace. The GRID provides

a physical space and resources to support business and art innovation and production, space for networks and collaborations to spark and nurture new ideas, and practical support through access to high-speed Internet for the surrounding community.



EKY FOOD AND DANCE TRAIL | HINDMAN SETTLEMENT SCHOOL

Hindman Settlement School in East Kentucky brings educational services to area families, provides community service programs, and honors and preserves the area's cultural heritage with programs focused on arts, music, dance, and foodways. Uniting these traditions, Hindman's East Kentucky Food and Dance Trail celebrates the history of food and dance in gathering communities together, with three main components to its work: mapping and publicizing spaces like farmers markets and square dance halls, hosting gatherings like community dances and pop-up dinners to showcase local talent, and telling the story of intergenerational traditions in agriculture and the arts.

The annual *Dumplings and Dancin* event includes workshops and meals "celebrating the diverse history and present of

Appalachian food and dance" and a Kentucky Dare to be Square weekend-long event served as a fundraiser for the Cowan Community Center in Whitesburg Kentucky. The trail, cultural events, and the films, oral histories, and photographs that share the story of this work are not only preserving vital economic and cultural assets of the region, but also expanding interest and opportunities for new generations and visitors to Eastern Kentucky who are helping sustain these traditions and the resources they provide to communities.



HONEY FOR THE HEART | PASSION WORKS

Passion Works Studio in Athens, Ohio, is a collaborative community arts center led by professional artists with developmental disabilities who create public art and exhibitions, partner with local artists and students, and build community arts to share their stories and experiences, reclaim their own narratives, and provide income opportunities for participants.

Passion Works practices a Creative Abundance Model "for transforming segregated institutional spaces and programming into vibrant community-centric places", building power and expanding community for participants who have historically experienced isolation and disenfranchisement.

Passion Works' Honey for the Heart project brings the community together over three weeks every October to make giant puppets from repurposed materials, bringing life to

local festivals and events. Passion Works artists host artist-in-residence to support community volunteers in puppet making, culminating in the puppets marching alongside the community in the Honey in the Heart parade, which held its eighth annual procession in 2019. A Honey for the Heart Ball celebrates their collective process and the community's collaboration. Honey for the Heart says their process brings "beauty, delight, collaboration with a goal to generate excitement -- a fluttering in the heart.... for people to see evidence of their creative spirit, experience the unexpected, find their joy and power to make visible the talents and passion that already exists within a community."



HUMAN RIGHTS GARDEN | TEACHARTSOHIO | PORTSMOUTH HIGH SCHOOL

The Ohio Arts Council's TeachArtsOhio (TAO) program "brings schools and community organizations together with teaching artists to share engaging, personal, high-quality arts learning experiences." TAO provides grants to the teaching artists to share their knowledge and skills with students and community groups in settings that last from one day to one year, expanding arts education and future job opportunities in the arts for students.

Portsmouth High School's Human Rights Garden is one exceptional project fostered through the TAO experience, with a student-crafted plant and sculpture garden at the school

providing space for students to combine learning with hands-on experience in social studies and science.

Connecting human rights issues with Appalachian history and life, students learn about hunger, poverty, identity, and regionalism, creating works in response to the lessons and their own lived experience that populate the garden and pollinate future lessons for students following in their footsteps. The garden is an ever-evolving process and space, reflecting the collaborative work students engage in with TAO artists, spanning the mediums of poetry, stained glass, sculpture, woodworking and more.

LETCHER COUNTY CULTURE HUB

"We Own What We Make" is the motto of the patchwork of networked community groups who work together as the Letcher County Culture Hub in eastern Kentucky. Celebrating local culture while building community-owned economies, members collaborate to host and celebrate cultural events, advocate and innovate public policies to build community wealth and health, and support residents in building collective strategies for their futures. Three new businesses have been

founded and incubated through the Hub, jobs have been created, and creative and cultural skills have been nurtured and resourced to provide revenue for artists and community members since the Hub's launch in 2015.



MESH DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT | MAKESHOP

MESH is a communication design studio whose "visual storytellers and digital architects make things that promote greater equity, playful education, healthy living, creative entrepreneurship, creative technology, local economies, and good old-fashioned fun" in Appalachia. Makeshop is a public design space in the Elk City neighborhood of Charleston, WV, providing free workshops, pop-up experiences, meet-ups, and other community-designed and -developed events. From film

screenings and discussions like "Queer and Black in Appalachia: Paris is Burning" to Holler Health Justice Abortion Fundraiser indie pop concert benefits, Makeshop provides the physical and creative space for the community to dream and scheme new ways of being together and caring for each other.



NEEDLE WORK | HIGHER GROUND

Community Arts organization Higher Ground in Harlan County, Kentucky, a project of the Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, lifts up local issues by amplifying local voices to tell local stories. Community members are supported in creating community-based art including photography, mosaics, and plays that are informed by oral histories collected by Harlan County community members in conversation with each other about their experiences. An impactful outcome of this work emerged in 2018 in response to the opioid crisis many communities are grappling with in our region – the play Needle Work was created in collaboration with USAP, a Letcher County community coalition working to reduce the harm caused by intravenous drug use. Crafted from community interviews, it

tells the story of a mother who copes with losing her daughter to substance use disorder by offering a needle exchange program out of her home. The play evoked such a response in the community that it evolved from two local performances to performances in multiple states, engagement with health centers and schools, and informed strategy to develop innovative responses to the crisis as part of the Southeast Kentucky Revitalization Project.



RIVER ARTS GREENWAY | PATHFINDERS OF PERRY COUNTY

Pathfinders of Perry County is a non-profit citizen action group that promotes community well-being, engagement, outdoor recreation, and education in Perry County, Kentucky. Their River Arts Greenway project promotes public health, conservation, and public art on the north fork of the Kentucky River with a walking path adorned with art created by

community members. Events like the HazART Block Party in 2018 unite the community in adding colorful murals to the greenway's parking lot that promote collaboration and beautification while lifting up local culture and inviting visitors and residents alike to join outdoors, get exercise, and maintain a healthy downtown for all to enjoy.

ROUND THE MOUNTAIN | FRIENDS OF SWVA | NEW MARKETS GENERATION

Round the Mountain is Southwest Virginia's artisan network, "sustaining the creative economy of craft" and sustainable economic development in the area. With program management through a partnership with Friends of Southwest Virginia, its membership structure provides opportunities for members to network, receive referrals, partner with venues to showcase their work, access educational opportunities and trainings, expand market access, and gain national exposure. Round the Mountain also hosts community arts and cultural events, co-operates the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace with Friends of Southwest Virginia and the

Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation, and publishes 15 artisan trail maps guiding visitors to local arts studios, crafters, farms and wineries in the 19-county area.



The New Markets Committee amplifies the work of the region's artisans to local, regional, and national audiences to expand consumer and market access, boosting the economy and small business ownership while increasing travel expenditures in member communities and boosting tax revenues.

SHIFT WORKSHOP AND EVOLVE PROGRAM | AIR INSTITUTE

The AIR Institute provides rural and under-resourced communities with programming that inspires new connections and ignites the creative economy. Creative people expand business skills, businesspeople get more creative; they learn to collaborate, adapt, and thrive together. Its Shift Workshops link business people, community members and creatives over three days to exchange skills and approaches through hands-on collaboration that boosts creativity in business approaches and increases business savvy for artists. Shift Workshop participants work together quickly to design and plan implementable projects for their community that focus on raising the value of arts and creativity. Projects have a one-year timeline and less than \$10,000 budgets to ensure their local success. Completed projects have included support for young entrepreneurs through youth-run farmers markets and coffee shops, trail mapping of public art and health spaces, and programs to address social issues like suicide prevention and access to science education.

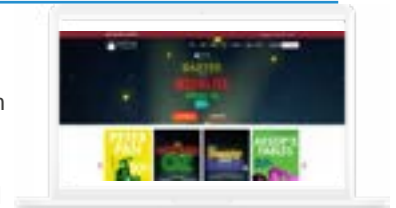
The Evolve Program expands this concept over six to nine months, supporting Cohorts of creative entrepreneurs to learn practical business skills using design thinking, the AIR venture canvas, and Lean Startup principles. Each participant prototypes their venture during the program and gets constant real world feedback from their potential markets, even in the first class. Throughout the program, participants build and refine their business plan in preparation for a final presentation that helps them gain support for their venture. Both initiatives have brought economic impact to participants and their communities with 87% of Evolve participants reporting increased revenue and 20% launching new businesses as a result of the program's support.



SPOTLIGHT SOUTHWEST VA | BARTER THEATER

A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts supported creation of Spotlight Southwest VA, a theater networking and support program for historic theaters in Southwest Virginia. Abingdon's Barter Theater opened its doors in 1933 during the Great Depression, inviting community members to bring produce from their farms as the entry fee to enjoy productions in a concept coined "ham for Hamlet". To strengthen local arts infrastructure and preserve important historical and

cultural institutions like the Barter Theater, the Spotlight program brings theaters from nine Virginia communities together to strengthen best practices, build capacity, and expand opportunities for the region's creative industry.



THURSDAYS ON THE TRIANGLE | INVISION HAZARD, MACED, FOUNDATION FOR APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY, CITY OF HAZARD, APPALACHIAN ARTS ALLIANCE

Every Thursday throughout the summer, downtown Hazard, KY springs to life for Thursdays on the Triangle, a free community arts festival that supports and celebrates local artists, musicians, craftspeople, and food and beer vendors. Launched in 2015, Thursdays on the Triangle provides a

"barrier-free marketplace" for local food and farm vendors, encouraging local tourism and celebrating the "music, art, and food of the mountains".



VERBATIM THEATER PROJECT | THE HEALTH FOUNDATION

The Health Foundation works to improve the health and well-being of the people who live in Wilkes County, NC through "community engagement, health equity, and addressing social determinants of health using a systems approach." In response to the county experiencing the highest drug overdose mortality rate in the state in 2015, the Foundation worked to address the crisis, ultimately partnering with the Community Opioid Prevention and Education (COPE) Team in 2019 through a two-year grant from UNC-Chapel Hill. The partnership led to the Verbatim Theater project, with Foundation team members interviewing Wilkes County

community members experiencing substance use disorder, incorporating their experiences into a play that will foster community dialogue about the issue and develop solutions to combat the crisis.

Verbatim Theater will be directed by Dr. Jim Brooks, Language Arts department chair at West Wilkes High School and a member of the National Teacher Hall of Fame.



YOUNG APPALACHIAN STORY SUMMIT | INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

The International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee, celebrates the power of storytelling through performance, preservation, and practice, hosting community events like the National Storytelling Festival, protecting oral traditions from family to global levels, and supporting people in telling stories to impact social change and improve health and economies in communities.

With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Young Appalachian Story Summit is an event led by young people under 30 years old in the region who are

leading community development projects, examining and celebrating leadership development through storytelling. Youth participants' goals and experiences are centered in the planning and implementation process, so the agenda is uniquely crafted to reflect their identified needs, and supports participants in taking action to address issues in their communities through storytelling. Young storytellers learn how to share their message with impact and gain support for their initiatives back home, with an added outcome of joining the peer network of young leaders who guide the program.

This is a project of The Appalachia Funders Network's Art and Culture Group, profiling innovative projects in Appalachia that infuse community economic development work with arts and culture in order to strengthen strategies and outcomes. Through the profiles, we sought to:

- + Bring attention to the ways that arts and culture can integrate into any sector and across just transition issues;
- + Lift up arts and culture work in the region as a way to draw in potential new funders to the region;
- + Show funders who typically don't fund arts and culture that using arts and culture strategies can amplify project impact in new ways;
- + Demonstrate how funders are already engaging with and supporting this work;
- + Share perspectives of how projects can be funded holistically and across multiple sectors.

The project was originally envisioned before a pandemic brought our economy and in-person social activities to a halt and before the profound national attention on racial injustice began creating new openings for changing broken systems. These simultaneous crises and opportunities are now the context in which these profiles debut, and their themes are even more salient: art heals; art builds power; art resonates when other forms of communication fall short; art helps us reimagine new ways of being. These stories illuminate what is possible when communities set culture as the root for positive transformation.

The Appalachia Funders Network works across the Central Appalachian region to accelerate an equitable Appalachian transition by convening and connecting funders for learning, analysis, and collaboration. We envision a healthy, equitable, and vibrant region that, through strong partnerships, civic engagement, and leadership, preserves our unique assets and provides prosperity for all. (See more about the Network at Appalachiafunders.org)

