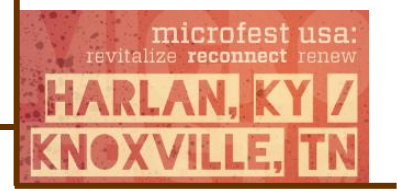


Microfest: Democratic Arts in Appalachia's Coal Country

by Mark W. Kidd



I began my career in Appalachia in 2006 as an organizer and community development practitioner on environmental reclamation and economic development projects, after receiving a Bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky. I was based in Dante, Virginia (pronounced to rhyme with *aint*, or like *dainty* without the "y"), one-time headquarters of Clinchfield Coal, later Pittston Coal, with a peak population of more than 4,000 people. After the [Pittston Coal Strike](#) in 1989 and 1990, the population eventually dropped below 700 people.

Like many former company towns, Dante has its own local narratives and modes of leadership that are informed by a century of interactions with extractive industry, organized labor, lay religious leadership, and distant government. Dante never had its own city government, but when coal was booming, its civic infrastructure was provided for as a Pittston operating expense. Facing the 1990s with an active local labor union on its hands and a new energy market that no longer required the same kind of workforce and infrastructure, Pittston left town.



With most of the downtown buildings demolished, Dante residents reclaimed the center of town as an outdoor public space. In this 2007 photograph, Dante Lives On, a local civic organization, hosts a cakewalk fundraiser. Volunteers donate cakes and audience members pay 50 cents to walk around a circle of painted numbers until the music stops. Whoever is standing on the right number takes home the cake; then the process starts again with a new cake. At left, Dante Lives On board members are serving up hot dog plate dinners for \$5. Photo: Mark W. Kidd

In the aftermath, it fell to volunteer organizations to coordinate the basic civic functions of Dante. Groups sprung up during the 15 years after the strike to take on work that ranged from keeping the grass mowed along city streets to establishing a town history museum, staffing volunteer emergency services, and working with engineers to design a sewer system in a neighborhood which regularly suffered from sewage in yards and streets.

Most of downtown Dante's buildings were company owned, and were demolished between the last of the strikes and the dissolution of the company in 2002. The center of town was left as an open field with a coal railroad along one side and the post office on the other. In this space, volunteers built a covered stage and instituted weekly bluegrass performances with seating on the concrete slab where the movie theater used to stand. With no restaurants in town, the various volunteer

groups in Dante took turns selling Friday afternoon “plate dinners,” which were available for delivery.

In Dante, as with many small towns in Central Appalachia, the irrepressible strands of community democracy are manifested in Rotary and motorcycle clubs, churches, school gymnasiums, and volunteer fire departments. One of the key expectations for my work in Dante was that I would serve as a professional bridge between this informal, highly active, community coalition and potential partners from outside the area (particularly larger nonprofits, government agencies, and funders) who expressed interest in supporting the town’s developing civic institutions.

Projects that involve a combination of paid and unpaid staff in key roles are common here, which affects the design of collaborative work. It was all too common for conversations between our civic organizations and potential outside partners to falter during larger projects, lacking a protocol that would support a partnership that made sense in Dante, no matter how interested both parties were in working together. My career thus began with the question: How can community development practitioners more effectively bridge the gulf between successful grassroots-scale programs and the resources intended to support them?

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN APPALACHIA

The United States has a long tradition of democratic popular arts founded on inclusion and diversity and practiced with aesthetics rooted in local culture and the voices of lived experience. MicroFest USA: Appalachia was one of four events convened by the [Network of Ensemble Theaters](#) (NET) in economically distressed regions of the country.¹ Each of the regions hosting a MicroFest—Detroit, Appalachia, New Orleans, and Honolulu—is undergoing broad cultural, economic, and demographic changes influenced by and reflected in local arts collaborations. Each MicroFest was designed in partnership between NET and local hosting organizations and artists to explore, in part, how ensemble values (defined by NET as collaboration, flexibility, transparency, mutual respect, and inclusion) are embodied in the host region’s community-based arts and in collaborations between arts and other sectors aimed at addressing issues of place.

In October 2012, nearly 70 community-based artists, cultural workers, and other agents of change convened in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Harlan County, Kentucky. NET’s purpose was to explore questions of *what this work looks like* when practiced in Central Appalachia, and *what makes it work*: in particular, to learn how broad collaborations that incorporate arts into a community’s civic infrastructure have worked to reaffirm, renew, and revitalize place. Over four days, MicroFest participants traveled to places within Knoxville and Harlan County where arts collaborations have gathered those most affected by issues in their community, using storytelling and other creative expression to describe problems and find

solutions together. The lessons learned are being documented to inspire and inform community-based practitioners working to connect art with civic life throughout the United States.

Nationally, a growing number of arts funders, researchers, and practitioners are adopting the term *creative placemaking* to bring attention to the ways that arts, culture, physical infrastructure, and economic development can be coordinated to change the demographic and economic composition of economically-distressed neighborhoods and communities.

In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.

In turn, these creative locales foster entrepreneurs and cultural industries that generate jobs and income, spin off new products and services, and attract and retain unrelated businesses and skilled workers. Together, creative placemaking's livability and economic development outcomes have the potential to radically change the future of American towns and cities.

From [Creative Placemaking](#), Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts Consulting, published by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2010.



In 2010, Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts produced a seminal report on this trend in community development. As depicted in the report's diagram, *creative initiatives* take place in the middle of the creative placemaking process, once the problem has been already defined in economic development terms. Creative placemaking metrics, as they are being applied by short-term (one to

two-year) funding programs such as [ArtPlace](#), ask “how can local arts increase economic activity and property values?”

The civic priorities of community-based arts instead emphasize establishing a civic and creative infrastructure that is capable of taking on a variety of projects, including economic development, by involving a broad cross-section of the community, then identifying new ways to leverage local and external resources and expertise. Developing community-based local arts initiatives often means establishing new local coalitions or broadening existing ones. Rather than being assembled to execute a single arts project and then being disbanded, local partnerships that incorporate arts, social services, civic organizations, and public sector participation have the capacity and flexibility to sustain ongoing civic discourse throughout a community. With this infrastructure in place, communities can identify and prioritize local issues, and develop new, creative solutions in an ongoing way.

The conceptual tensions between creative placemaking programs designed with economic development objectives and the practice of community-based arts surface throughout MicroFest. MicroFest asks: What lasting difference is community-based art making and how do we know? The social justice and civic capacity building outcomes of the collaborations MicroFest is visiting offer an important lens to understand the responsibility of the “creative” in placemaking in Appalachia.

Appalachia, as federally-defined, stretches from New York to Mississippi. Central Appalachia lies loosely between northern West Virginia and southern Tennessee, a region industrialized and intensively populated as railroads made their way into the mountains as early as the 1850s in east Tennessee and the 1900s and 1910s in the coalfields in southern West Virginia, southwest Virginia, and eastern Kentucky.

Railroads opened up access to new reserves of coal, timber, and later, natural gas. The physical infrastructure required to support labor-intensive extraction booms for these resources, from company housing to coal tipples for loading railroad cars, is the backdrop for highway travel here. The experiences of the people who have come, gone, or stayed during the region’s waves of immigration and outmigration are likewise the shared history for the stories we tell about our communities and our families in the coalmining areas of Kentucky. Some of these same economic forces have been at play in Knoxville, even as its early railroad access and manufacturing industries give Knoxville its own cultural and economic contexts for creative placemaking.

KNOXVILLE: CROSSROADS

Downtown Knoxville’s architecture, like many cities in Appalachia, evokes these regional boom-bust economic cycles. The most recent wave of new construction

here is distinctive though—a grid of outsized buildings, bridges, and roadways connecting into the center of town were built to support the beleaguered 1982 World’s Fair (themed “Energy Turns the World”). At the intersection of interstate highways and World’s Fair infrastructure, priorities for supporting a downtown arts district are emerging from new dialogue between city government, the nonprofit arts community, and local businesses such as the restaurants and breweries that now dot Gay Street in the city center.

[Carpetbag Theatre](#), an ensemble founded in 1969, is housed in the Emporium Center, a newly-renovated former furniture store on Gay Street that is now home to nine arts and culture organizations and nine artists. In this new space, Carpetbag Theatre continues a long-term commitment to a mission that embraces local aesthetics and a charge “to give artistic voice to the issues and dreams of people who have been silenced by racism, classism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.”

Community arts was not the first or even the second intended use for the building, but after other possibilities encountered barriers, the city government was willing to consider a plan to provide shared infrastructure for local arts. Liza Zenni, executive director of the Arts and Culture Alliance of Greater Knoxville, explained the ensemble’s catalytic role in downtown revitalization efforts, “Great cities are open and curious, but in the past, the city of Knoxville has not embraced those values. The work that is done here by Carpetbag Theatre is helping change that.”



Cross-sector Collaborations panelists, left to right: Terry Holley, East TN Foundation; Julie Graham, Union County Chamber of Commerce; Kelle Jolle, Carpetbag Theatre; Shawn Lindsey, Public Works Dept., Athens, TN; Carlton Turner, Alternate ROOTS. Photo: Lisa Luevanos

MicroFest began with a performance of Carpetbag Theatre’s new play, *Speed Killed My Cousin*, written by Linda Parris-Bailey, directed by Andrea Assaf, and supported by the National Performance Network. The play tells the story of two generations of veterans, and the ways race and gender shape the experience of war and the return from war. The play’s

development process brought together area veterans organizations, including mental health providers, with ensemble members. This feedback loop shaped Carpetbag Theater’s portrayal of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’s toll on soldiers and their families and provides a framework for post-performance conversations that encompasses the aesthetic, social, and clinical aspects of the play as it tours.

Later, upstairs at the Emporium Center, MicroFest convened a panel of civic leaders and artists from east Tennessee along with arts policy leaders to pose the question, “How can arts and culture enhance cross-sector collaborations and community development?” The conversation that ensued emphasized the necessity of key local advocates who can negotiate between arts, government, and business in order to successfully incorporate community-based arts into community development and other civic processes. Without a common vocabulary to underpin the values of community collaboration and the resources and expertise to commit to coalition-building, this work is prevented from reaching its potential scale and is often discontinued should these key advocates leave a project. Structuring partnerships to equitably incorporate volunteer leadership over the long-term is important in any community coalition-building, but it is particularly important in economically distressed communities where many or all of the local partners rely on volunteer staff.

The most accurate vocabulary to describe place-based arts and local community development priorities is based on the experiences and expertise of those most affected by local issues, rather than on a particular development outcome, such as economic development. The process of discovering and articulating a local vision and narrative for working together supports broad local participation and makes it possible for community coalitions to take on development projects and funding that do have a narrower focus, without compromising the priorities or values of the coalition.

In order to make its bridge-building expertise available on a broader scale, the community-based arts field must make proven methodologies, training, and mentorship available to support artists and other community practitioners entering into civic practice. Artists must be able to connect with members of other sectors, including government and funders, in language that clearly communicates the role of community arts collaborations in supporting local democracy. Carlton Turner, Executive Director of [Alternate ROOTS](#) and an arts policy leader, summed up the feeling in the room that the lessons learned from successful community-based arts practice should be applied more broadly in the United States.

I want to talk about this work as *cultural transformation*. Not just about creating another job or bringing in a few more dollars, but transforming the culture. Arts and culture can validate, and help build an analysis that allows evolution and the cultural transformation to happen. Within institutions, art is seen as product instead of a resource. The arts must connect to health and wellness, and to the validation of the personal story. The arts develop critical thinking skills, but today arts are being taken out of school systems in poverty line communities, which are often communities of color.

Art and Food Justice

In addition to developing and producing its own new plays, Carpetbag Theatre works in partnership with other artists and non-arts organizations to support projects through a residency process designed to honor and elevate community voices and knowledge. One such partner is the [FISH Hospitality Pantry](#), a food pantry located in Mechanicsville, a working class neighborhood on the north side of Knoxville. Homelessness has been a chronic issue in Knoxville, and the influx of refugees from hurricane Katrina further stressed limited low-income housing. Limited public transportation prevents people from getting to grocery stores, and Mechanicsville is considered a [food desert](#). FISH Hospitality Pantries is the largest provider of food relief in Knoxville. Four volunteer-run pantries throughout the city provide food to more than 30,000 people every month.

The collaboration between Carpetbag Theatre and the FISH Hospitality Pantry has culminated in the development and performance of a musical play, *The Hungry Heart*, created by the pantry and based on the stories of its volunteers and patrons. The cast, some playing characters based, in part, on their own experiences, performed several scenes in the gym of the former Beardsley Junior High School.



[Beardsley Community Farm](#), Knoxville, site of MicroFest's Art & Food Justice session.

Photo: Sherrine Azab



MicroFest participants at [Beardsley Community Farm](#), Knoxville

Photo: Cory Tamler

The action of the play centers on a crisis the organization experienced when limited resources prompted contentious discussion about whether to institute “means testing” in order to ensure that the pantry’s patrons were demonstrably needy before receiving donated food. With an organizational culture built on equity and respect and designed “to blur the lines between givers and receivers,” the question of means testing could have become an existential crisis for their work.

In *The Hungry Heart*, Knoxville is portrayed as a national crossroads where the network of interstate highways brings new people and languages into contact with rooted rural and urban Appalachian

cultures. *The Hungry Heart* speaks in the diverse voices of community members as they try to communicate across language, cultural, and class boundaries while

waiting in line for food or distributing it. The play’s program notes include the FISH Hospitality Pantry’s Principles of Hospitality. One of these—“The hungry themselves should decide how often they need help with food.”—embodies the consensus that emerged from the conflict in the play.

We asked the cast of *The Hungry Heart*, “Why theater?” The pantry’s director, Beth Carroll Hunley, responded that song and dance are natural spontaneous occurrences at FISH Hospitality Pantry, so theater was an obvious vehicle for the group to express itself. Having first built a shared narrative during the play’s creation, *The Hungry Heart* has now entered into the second phase of its life as the cast offers a series of vignette performances throughout Knoxville to spark conversations that lead to new ideas and action to address hunger and poverty.

“The main thing is getting the story out to people. I never thought about being an organizer, but once I got in there, it started to change my life,” said Kathy Cannon, explaining her history with the FISH Hospitality Pantry. Kathy first entered the FISH Hospitality Pantry as a food recipient, then became a volunteer staff member, and is now a performer in *The Hungry Heart*. “We can talk about hunger as statistics, but if you want to change hearts, people have to feel it,” says Hunley.

[Grow Appalachia](#), a community agriculture program that works across a number of counties in the Central Appalachian region, is designed with an awareness of economic justice and social justice issues that impact its participants. But according



“Strawberries” scene from *Farms and Fables*

Every time we harvest a head of broccoli and send it home with a customer, we have a negative nutrient balance, having removed a positive nutrient from the farm. In some capacity, this nutrient needs to be added back into the farm in order for us to effectively grow another crop of broccoli...

Stacy Brenner, Give Meat a Chance

This meditation from a first-generation Maine farmer was gathered during collaborative scripting between artists and farmers for [Of Farms and Fables](#) (subtitled “A play about the people who bring you food”). Presenting at MicroFest, *Of Farms and Fables* project leaders, Jennie Hahn and Cory Tamler of Open Waters Theatre Arts, demonstrated their play creation process in which professional and nonprofessional artists worked 15 hours per week on local farms. A comprehensive blog provided a record of the process, including photographs and reflections on story circles conducted with farming families. “What we were doing with *Of Farms and Fables* was helping people rediscover food source and process, demystifying food. The same thing is needed for art—to demystify art and make it widely accessible. The two movements can learn from each other.”

to executive director David Cooke, the key to its success is that, “From the start, I refused to make Grow Appalachia a poor people’s program, because immediately you stigmatize it.”

In many of the areas where Grow Appalachia works, geographic distance between participants makes community gardens impractical. “Families might live 20 or 30 minutes from town, and have a budget of one tank of gas per month for errands.” In these rural counties, it often doesn’t make sense to set up a centralized community garden where all participants work. Instead, Grow Appalachia partners with local social service organizations to reimagine and rekindle the disappearing tradition of large-scale household gardens. Grow Appalachia provides a scaffolding of support including access to top-of-the-line tillers and other equipment, expert horticultural advice, and help with labor intensive periods of the growing season. The model is designed to fill in gaps wherever they occur locally.

It only takes two generations for a tradition to be lost. We had the opportunity to design Grow Appalachia from the ground up to rekindle an agricultural tradition, family-by-family, on a multi-county scale, which meant finding out which elements were missing. There was a time when someone with a good tiller would go up and down all the roads in town, hiring out their tiller and labor to help get everyone’s gardens started. So that’s the first thing we buy when we start working in a new area, the best tiller available, then we reestablish that role.

David Cooke, Grow Appalachia

In the first year of Grow Appalachia, one important change was implemented when it became clear that participants in the pilot projects were disinterested in starting farmers markets to sell the produce, preferring instead to share what they grew widely among friends, neighbors, church members, and coworkers. Grow Appalachia recognized the potential of this alternative model, which also serves to get fresh food to those who need it most. By adapting to local economic and cultural contexts

and shifting the definition of community agriculture to include community agricultural practices such as sharing the harvest as well as sharing plots of land, Grow Appalachia yielded more than 134,000 pounds of organic food for nearly 3,500 people in 2011, its third year. More than 400 families now have gardens.

Just as community storytelling methodologies begin with lived first-person stories as a way of finding the larger narratives of a community, these food justice programs in rural places emphasize the self-sufficiency of the individual and the family as a way of establishing a community-wide infrastructure for sharing agricultural practices and the food itself. Matthew Glassman, executive director of [Double Edge Theatre](#) in rural Ashfield, Massachusetts, described how his theater company is learning from localization advocate Helena Norberg-Hodge’s concept of *human economies*, in which social connection and connection to one’s environment are paramount in equitable community development. Double Edge Theatre was based in Boston when it decided to purchase a disused 105-acre dairy farm in a rural part of their state as a retreat and rehearsal space. “Double Edge Theatre relocated to the foothills of

western Massachusetts seeking autonomy. Once we made Ashfield our home, we realized that the rural location was instead a new prism for seeing how interconnected our work is with the place where we live.” Over the last 15 years, Double Edge has begun to renew the agricultural potential of its land, while the increasing curiosity of neighbors prompted the creation of a public performance space and performance season at the farm.

HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.

A lot of people who visit and even some that live here haven't seen as much of Harlan County as you're seeing [during MicroFest.] ... In the 1940s, Harlan was the third most populous county in the state. At its peak, the county had 80,000 people. This was one of the most dramatic areas for labor strikes and so it's been a place of interest since the '20s and '30s. So, people visiting this area to study and learn about what's going on here isn't new. Since I've been here it seems every month there's a new Ph.D. student passing through working on their dissertation.

Robert Gipe, coordinator of the Higher Ground project,
[Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College](#)

A paradox of living and working in coalfield communities is that public space is often hard to find, despite swaths of open land and a great inventory of unoccupied buildings left vacant due to outmigration. Most of the open land and natural resources are part of massive parcels owned and managed by distant corporations. Individually held property like houses and retail spaces are often tied up in complex, undocumented, multi-party heirships in which the current owners may not be known or reachable.

Our first night in Harlan County was hosted by the Eastern Kentucky Social Club (EKSC) in downtown Lynch. U.S. Steel built Lynch in the early 1900s to house the labor force required to mine coal used in its steel production. At one time a city of 10,000, Lynch is now home to fewer than 1,000 people. The

Social Club is based in a former school building, where MicroFest participants enjoyed barbeque and joined the audience in the gym for a performance by local musicians singing and playing in new and traditional forms.



The Mt. Sinai Spirituals perform at the Eastern Kentucky Social Club. Photo: Lisa Luevanos

The Eastern Kentucky Social Club is a national network of black eastern Kentuckians, including former residents and their families, which began holding regional and national reunions in the 1970s in response to outmigration from the coalfields.

The federal Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) uses a classification system to monitor the economic status of Appalachian counties. The system indexes economic status via three indicators: three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate. Eastern Kentucky has the highest occurrence of [ARC distressed counties](#), the agency's lowest economic classification, which corresponds to rankings in the lowest 10 percent of the nation. Harlan County is among Kentucky's distressed counties.

During coal booms, company towns were often much more racially diverse than other parts of this region as recruiters brought out-of-state and immigrant workers together in close quarters with local Appalachian miners. Few historically black neighborhoods and company towns still exist in the coalfields but, in addition to the chapter in Lynch, there are 10 other EKSC chapters across the U.S.

MicroFest participants were lodged in two different places in Harlan County; one group is at the School House Inn in Benham, a former public school that has been converted into a hotel, banquet, and meeting space. The other group traveled to Bledsoe, where we stay in dorm rooms at the Pine Mountain Settlement School. The settlement school, an 800-acre missionary endeavor serving this area before the county public school system was established, is now an environmental education, community agriculture, and conference center.

The next morning, we talk about how many reclaimed school buildings we have visited, and will continue to visit on our trip. "School consolidation is also a major issue in Detroit." "It's part of the Chicago teachers strike as well." MicroFest has been welcomed into many spaces and places in Knoxville and Harlan County; it is remarkable how many of them are former schoolhouses.

Finding Higher Ground

Family and community conflicts about land ownership and land use, including the political and economic forces driving Appalachian outmigration, are among the themes of *Talking Dirt*, the latest play by the [Higher Ground project](#) in Harlan County. Higher Ground, based at Southeast Community and Technical College, has, to date, developed a cycle of three plays from a multi-decade story gathering process, creating a body of dramatic work that speaks to the challenges families and communities are confronting in their area.

Higher Ground's large ensemble casts are comprised of volunteer performers from throughout the county. During MicroFest, the cast of Higher Ground performed [a mash-up of their three plays](#): *Higher Ground*, which uses the metaphor of floods in

Harlan County to tell the story of the region's prescription drug abuse epidemic; *Playing with Fire*, which tells stories of coalmining and the changing coalmining industry; and *Talking Dirt*, told in the voices of young people torn between staying in the mountains and leaving their homes when a coalmining company wants to buy their family's land. The Higher Ground plays create an open forum for discussing the important issues facing Harlan County residents while also creating opportunities for project participants to form ties that extend beyond the work of developing and performing theater. In the words of one cast member, "if it wasn't for this project, I wouldn't know half of the people in this county that I know."

In an [interview with Kentucky Educational Television](#) during the run of the first Higher Ground play, participant and staff member Theresa Osborne related the story of how Harlan County conversations about prescription drug abuse shifted. "On the first day of rehearsals, Jerry Stropnick, the director, asked those whose immediate family had been affected to gather in the middle of the performance space. Then, he asked those whose extended family had been affected to form a ring around that circle. Then, those with friends or acquaintances that had been affected formed a second ring. Out of about 70 people there that day, only three or four remained in the original crowd." Theater created a safe and collective space for common ground to be revealed. Drug abuse was no longer something discussed only privately among families and in newspaper arrest reporting, it was the topic of a community conversation about what to do to confront the problem together.

Rural Funding and Philanthropy

Nationwide in 2010, metropolitan counties received \$1,519 per capita through federal economic and community development programs, compared to \$929 per capita in nonmetro counties, a cumulative difference of over \$28 billion. Before the economic downturn, \$30 billion was distributed annually by private foundations in the U.S., approximately \$100 million of which went to rural development. [Charles Fluharty's February 2012 statement to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry](#) provides additional context and analysis on the impact of these factors on rural communities.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's (NCRP) report, [Fusing Arts, Culture, and Social Change](#), indicates that the greater a funder's stated commitment to the arts, the less likely they are to prioritize marginalized communities or advance social justice. Eleven percent of total annual foundation giving in the United States, more than \$2.3 billion in 2009, is awarded to nonprofit arts and culture. Arts and culture organizations with budgets greater than \$5 million represent less than 2 percent of arts and culture groups, but received 55 percent contributions, gifts, and grants in 2009.

These disparities are echoed in a [2012 report from the NCRP](#) finding that only 15 percent of environmental grant dollars are classified as benefitting marginalized communities, and only 11 percent are classified as advancing social justice strategies.

Like many of the arts collaborations MicroFest visited, the Higher Ground project has used its particular creative forms—story gathering, play creation, and performance—to enact what Imagining America’s [Curriculum Project Report](#) defines as *community cultural development*: “self-directed development strategies, where members of a community define their own aims and determine their own paths to reach them, rather than imposed development, which tends to view communities as problems to be solved by bringing circumstances in line with predetermined norms.” The latest Higher Ground play will be staged in unoccupied buildings throughout the county as part of a process to design new community spaces, bringing residents together to imagine a new future for real estate that has been inaccessible for public uses. One such facility is the old high school in Evarts, Kentucky, with a population of approximately 1,000.



Higher Ground Performance at MicroFest. Photo: Lisa Luevanos

When Harlan County began consolidating its public schools, Evarts residents got organized in order to protect their high school. But despite making what Robert Gipe, coordinator of the Higher Ground project, described as “every legal maneuver,” Evarts did not keep its

school. Evarts is a community with a proud history of activism and sense of itself as a distinctive place, captured potently in Barbara Kopple’s Oscar-winning 1976 documentary film, *Harlan County, U.S.A.* The film prominently features the Evarts Multi-Purpose Center, a community-owned and managed space at that time, where key union meetings took place during the strikes *Harlan County, U.S.A* depicts.

After the Evarts school closed, the same organization which had operated the Multi-Purpose Center bought the high school. The collaboration with Higher Ground will revive and reconceive the school as a civic space. It is also intended to support lasting change by building fundraising coalitions in the area that incorporate young leaders who intend to continue to participate in community development work once the Higher Ground performance project is complete.

A Scene from Higher Ground

Dorothy and Adam are an elderly couple.

DOROTHY: I'd had a quarrel with him. I was going to take everything I thought was mine. I put everything in one room and when he came back from the mine I said, "Adam, I've got everything in this one room that is mine. I want you to go in there and see if there is anything that belongs to you." So, he walked in there with me and he just knocks my feet out from under me and puts me up in his arms and said, "This is all I need."...

DOCTOR TOM: I'm writing you a prescription for pain.

ADAM: Am I gonna be able to work again?

DOCTOR TOM: I'm writing you this prescription for pain. Take this medicine and do those exercises.

ADAM: Nothing ever hurt as bad as those exercises. Sometimes the cure is worse than the hurt, hunh, Doc?

DOCTOR TOM: This medicine will kill your pain. *(And DOCTOR TOM is gone. The RECEPTIONIST is now with him.)*

RECEPTIONIST: We like for you to pay right when the doctor sees you.

(ADAM pays, not much in his wallet. She turns from him, steps out. Immediately the PHARMACIST is there. ADAM presents his prescription to the PHARMACIST.)

PHARMACIST: Did your doctor tell you about this stuff?

ADAM: He said it was for pain.

PHARMACIST: It is, but take care with it, don't take any more of it than you have to.

ADAM: I don't take aspirin any more than I have to.

(PHARMACIST hands ADAM his bottle of pills. ADAM turns, the PHARMACIST vanishes, and ADAM is now at the DRUG STORE CASHIER counter that has appeared right behind him.)

ADAM: *(as he pays.)* I can give you some now, and the rest when Dorothy gets paid.

DOROTHY: As good as this medicine is, he likes to eat when he is taking it. Rehab exercises build up a hefty appetite. Pretty soon there are lots of appetites cause this particular medicine's got a great big hook in it.

As the song begins, we see a line of patients by the DOCTOR. He sits and writes out prescriptions. More and more and more money, in wads of bills and bank bags pile up around the doctor.

IN CLOSING

The MicroFest initiative comes at a time when nonprofit arts funders and the leadership of our federal arts programs are calling for new pilot projects and demonstrations that reflect how the power of arts and culture works to create economic change. Many communities and neighborhoods in Appalachia have already experienced the potential of the arts to amplify local creativity and expertise and direct those resources towards the most important issues that we face together. There is ample evidence that community-based art can work in a lasting way to develop and support coalitions for social justice and community development. The most pressing question I ask myself as an artist and organizer in Central Appalachia therefore becomes: How can we learn from and support this work on a much wider scale?



Robert Gipe with MicroFest participants at Old Evarts High School. Photo: Lisa Luevanos



Mark W. Kidd is Communications Director for Roadside Theater, an ensemble theater company at Appalshop in rural eastern Kentucky that is committed to creating a body of new Appalachian plays and to the advancement of theater as a popular art form that addresses the pressing issues of our time in the voices of those most affected. His work for Roadside includes co-creation of a new web platform, Art in a Democracy, designed to support collaboration and resource sharing among community-based practitioners inside and outside the arts. Mark is a 2012-2013 participant in the Theatre Communications Group's New Generations: Future Leaders program and serves as a representative to the Central Appalachian Regional Network, a group of diverse organizations working to identify and advance policy issues important to their six-state region. His prose has appeared in *The Daily Yonder* and *The Kentucky Cover*, and his poems have appeared in *Still*, *Qarrtsiluni*, and the *Clinch Mountain Review*.

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¹ Essays from MicroFest: Detroit by Michael Premo and Eddie B. Allen, Jr. can be found on the [Animating Democracy](#) web site and on the [NET](#) website.