

# Reviving a Local Economy by Rebuilding Relationships: The Story of the Letcher County Culture Hub



**MIT D-Lab | CITE:**  
Investigating inclusive systems innovation  
**Massachusetts Institute of Technology**



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# Reviving a Local Economy by Rebuilding Relationships: The Story of the Letcher County Culture Hub

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was a year of unexpected and profound challenges for communities around the world, including urban and rural communities across the United States. The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted global and regional supply chains and shifted the dynamics of local economies with a speed and severity that took many by surprise; within a period of just one week in March, 2020, everyday household goods ranging from toilet paper to basic foodstuffs disappeared from grocery store shelves in many major U.S. cities, remaining in scarce supply for weeks thereafter. As restaurants and a host of other businesses closed their doors, and large sections of the workforce quarantined at home, disruptions in both demand and supply caused ripple effects throughout the economy, exposing the interconnectedness and interdependence of our economic lives.

Despite this sudden awakening to our interdependence, regions, cities, communities and even families across the U.S. remained deeply and bitterly divided along partisan and ideological lines, which hardened as the pandemic progressed. Throughout 2020 – the final year of the Trump presidency – the political and social climate in the U.S. was marked by intense polarization, which cast even the pandemic in starkly political terms. This polarization was further fueled by the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd Jr. in May 2020, and the ensuing protests and counter-protests that took place around the country throughout the summer of 2020. In this climate of distrust, antagonism, and social and economic rupture, commentators and citizens alike found themselves wondering if it would be possible to come back together, to rebuild frayed and fractured relationships, to find common ground and

be able to work together again. It was understood that such social and political healing would be necessary to recover from the pandemic, yet unclear how this might be accomplished in the current climate.

It was in that context that we identified the story of a small Appalachian community on the southeastern border of Kentucky – and an initiative community members created called the Letcher County Culture Hub – as a relevant example of inclusive local systems innovation with lessons that could speak to the challenges of the moment. As described in following pages, the process that created the Letcher County Culture Hub and the various community-led initiatives that have emerged from the Hub was one of repairing, rebuilding, and strengthening relationships that had become polarized over time as a result of the monolithic presence of the coal industry in this community and the region.

As an innovation process, it was a process that involved developing and introducing into use what was, from a local perspective, a novel approach to relationship-building, collaboration, and coalition-building, an approach that had not been tried there previously, but which proved effective. This approach involved a mix of deep listening practices, structured dialogues, joint enactment of new scenarios through acting and storytelling, regional learning exchanges, and small, community-led joint projects brought together into a cohesive model that worked across deep local cultural and political divides towards the identification of common priorities for local action. In the process, Culture Hub members co-developed a network of collaborations that proved capable of shifting the



local economic dynamic from one of dependency on a single outside industry – the coal industry, which had dominated the local economy for over a hundred years – towards the beginnings of a bottom-up economy driven by the needs of local residents and animated by locally-owned and managed initiatives and enterprises.

In the following chapters of this report, we describe how this process of local change-making was set in motion and developed, how it evolved into a fully co-owned and co-led community-based initiative, and what types of changes have been brought about in Letcher County as a result of this work. We start by briefly describing the research methods used to conduct the case study below, and then describe the local context that gave rise to the Letcher County Culture Hub in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 tells the story of the Hub’s development from theoretical concept to a functioning local initiative, and Chapters 4 and 5 describe the Hub as an innovative, relationship-based change-making model. This model is described first in terms of the core methods the Hub employs in its work and second on the organizational structure developed to enable the Hub’s operations and activities. Chapter 6 describes the fruits of the Hub’s work in terms of results at various levels of the local system. We conclude in Chapter 7 by reflecting on the lessons this case can offer to other communities in similar need of rebuilding fractured relationships, initiating effective collaborations across socioeconomic, political, and racial divides, and re-localizing their economies.

## Research Methods

The research that informed this report was conducted as case study research following a multiple-case case study design, as described in Yin (2018). The primary and secondary research conducted for this case study was planned and implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, between the summer of 2020 and the spring

of 2021. Given university-imposed travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, our team identified that we would need to conduct case study research for the multi-case study “Investigating Inclusive Systems Innovation” fully remotely, something that we had not previously done. In order to test the feasibility of remote case study research, we prioritized selecting a pilot case for the study in a domestic U.S. context, which we anticipated would present fewer logistical challenges related to internet connectivity, time-zone differences, language differences, and access to research participants.

The case of the Letcher County Culture Hub was selected as the pilot case in a series of cases planned to explore, test, and refine a model of inclusive innovation processes described in the paper “Understanding inclusive innovation processes in agricultural systems: a middle-range conceptual model” (Hoffecker, 2021). Using the definition of inclusive local systems innovation developed in that paper as a starting point, we identified an initial list of forty-two potential cases, which we vetted according to ten case selection criteria derived from the paper. These criteria were used in order to determine the suitability of cases for inclusion in the study overall, and for serving as our first pilot remote case. Through that vetting process, the case of the Letcher County Culture Hub was identified, prioritized, and ultimately selected as our pilot case study.

To conduct the research, we started by reviewing existing secondary sources related to the case, which consisted entirely of “gray literature,” such as newspaper articles, reports, prior case studies, and publications produced by organizations affiliated with the Culture Hub. We then moved on to conducting a series of interviews with members of the Culture Hub, prioritizing individuals who had been with the Culture Hub since its genesis and could describe in detail how

the model was initially conceptualized, implemented, and developed over time into its current form. We also prioritized speaking with all former and current staff members, as well as the leadership of local organizations that have played a key role in the Hub's inception and development. Using these criteria, we identified seven individuals as preferred interviewees, all of whom replied to our inquiries and participated in the study.

Interviews were conducted remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform when possible, and by telephone in cases where research participants did not have reliable

internet access. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and several interviewees were contacted following the first-round interviews for follow-up interviews or to provide additional follow-up information over email. Following principles of Lean Research as described in Hoffecker, Leith, and Wilson (2015) and Krystalli et al. (2021), a draft of our write-up was shared with former and current Culture Hub staff members to validate that facts and details were accurately presented and to obtain their feedback and suggestions, which were incorporated into the final draft of the report.

## 2. THE LOCAL CONTEXT

National narratives often define Appalachia by its ties to poverty, the coal industry, and the opioid crisis. The late nineteenth century marked the beginnings of mass coal production in Appalachia, spurring a symbiotic relationship that would last for more than a century before its eventual demise (Guilford, 2017). Local economies—including that of Letcher County, Kentucky—had what could be characterized as a codependent relationship with the coal industry; both the coal companies and local economies relied on one another to survive, yet this relationship was unhealthy and ultimately destructive. By the early 2010s, the collapse of the coal industry had decimated the economies of many local towns like Whitesburg, the county seat of Letcher County (Adams and Gish, 2017). Jobs in the coal industry could once guarantee people a comfortable livelihood, with some employees making nearly six-figures. The decline of the coal industry led to massive layoffs; Letcher County, for example, went from having 1,700 coal mining jobs in the late 1980s to around just 100 mining jobs as of 2019. With the region's economy crumbling, poverty and destitution drove many to opioid usage and addiction, which in turn led to swelling incarceration rates (Robertson, 2019).

Residents, however, draw descriptions of Appalachia that predate coal's arrival and its legacy. Residents interviewed for this case study describe "traditional Appalachian culture" being deeply oriented around community. Traditionally, a strong web of mutually-supportive relationships had always existed in Letcher County among individuals, epitomized in the ways that neighbors looked out for one another. According to Dee Davis of The Center for Rural Strategies, a time-tested attribute of locals in this community "is that they will take care of you." If someone had "accidentally driven their car into a ditch in front of someone else's home," the homeowners would have likely taken you in, fed

you and wanted to hear all about what your life was like (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021).

This mutual care and support exists—with interesting tension—alongside a sense of insularity in the community. Community groups and strong social ties have been formed over generations, and residents of Letcher County have been described both as wary of outsiders and as "incredibly warm and welcoming" (email correspondence with B. Fink, October 27 2021). The county's insular social structure is constructed in part by geography, as people reside in small, self-contained communities called "hollers," which are named after the small valleys carved out by creeks running up the mountainside.

The lack of road infrastructure in Appalachia resulted in these hollers being fairly isolated from each other, which in turn fostered self-reliance and dependence on family. Exploitation—like that of absentee coal mine owners—also caused residents to distrust those who did not belong to their community. While mainstream consumer culture has infiltrated eastern Kentucky, a strand of collectivism remains. Herein lies another interesting tension, between a push for individualism and a celebration of people's relationships to one another (email communication with B. Fink, October 27 2021).

### The Interruption of Coal and the Aftermath of its Collapse

The arrival of the coal industry in the late nineteenth century was an external shock for Letcher County's existing culture and infrastructure. Gwen Johnson, a long-time resident of Letcher County and founder of the Blacksheep Bakery, noted that for over a century,



Letcher County belonged to coal companies. “We had a mono-economy” that revolved entirely around coal, and local entrepreneurship was squashed before it had a chance to exist (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). The monopoly of coal dominated both the economic and social spheres of Letcher County. Its offering of two very different types of jobs – management positions and worker positions – with different salaries and conditions of work created a new kind of class stratification in the region. “Management culture” was defined by a greater amount of privilege and access to resources than “worker culture” (Duncan, 1999).

Over time, the polarizing disruption of coal culture split the population into different camps: those who benefitted from the industry and were strong proponents of it, and those who felt it to be a harmful and destructive presence socially, economically, and environmentally. Furthermore, as the outside interests of coal industry leaders began to take precedence over local community issues, areas where common ground could be found among local residents diminished (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22 2021). Bill Meade, a lifetime resident and active partner of the Letcher County Culture Hub (see Box 1), believes that strip mining has been generally beneficial for the region. For instance, he claims it has enabled the growth of Kentucky’s elk population, which he lauded as one of the largest herds in the country. From his point of view, Eastern Kentucky has one of the best wildlife programs, and strip-mining has replenished that wildlife.

While Bill hails from a management culture and expresses a positive view of the coal industry, others rooted in worker culture are far more critical of coal’s impacts. Gwen Johnson, another longtime community member who currently runs the local Black Sheep Bakery and Catering Company (see Box 2), is vehemently opposed to strip mining, despite supporting underground mining and the miners themselves (email communication with B. Fink, October 27, 2021). She believes that the coal companies were driven by “a racist

### Box 1: Bill Meade and the Kings Creek Fire Department



Bill Meade. Image Credit: Clay Wegrzynowicz, courtesy of Ben Fink

Bill began working in the coal mines and driving long-haul trucks at the age of eleven. One of seventeen children, he would haul lumber and logs after school to help look after his family, including his sixteen siblings (phone interview with B. Meade, February

1, 2021). Bill has raised his grand-nephews and a few of his great-grandchildren as well; at seventy-eight, Bill considers himself to be in great health and made a point of mentioning that he had never taken a drug, smoked, or drunk a day in his life. Bill believes that the world was created for people to access and utilize its resources; he is a major proponent of coal in Letcher County and sees it as responsible for a number of innovations including, perhaps surprisingly, Aspirin (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021).

During the 1980s, a thirty-something Bill Meade and his brothers built the **Kings Creek Fire Department** by borrowing \$200,000 USD; he thanks the mining industry for enabling their loan (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). The station was established on December 27, 1982. In 1992, another building was added with a gym for children; this was the first of its kind in the area. Soon, this became a space to host “weddings, funerals, everything in the world” (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, October 19, 2020). The fire department is the area’s first responders; the closest hospital is forty minutes away in Virginia (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14 2020), and the state highway department is far away as well. At 78, Bill goes on response calls even at two in the morning to help with an overdose, to put out a fire, or to clear a road after a storm (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, October 19 2020).

## Box 2. Gwen Johnson and the Hemphill Community Center

Gwen Johnson is currently the volunteer manager of the **Black Sheep Bakery** and a member of the board for the **Hemphill Community Center**, a former coal camp that was built to house miners. Prior to the founding of the Black Sheep Bakery, volunteers and staff from the Hemphill Community Center catered and baked cakes and pies to raise money for the center's operations. Now, the Bakery, as a social enterprise connected to the Center, generates revenue that funds the center's operations.



Gwen Johnson. Image Credit: Malcolm J. Wilson, courtesy of Ben Fink

Gwen Johnson runs the center and catering company, which she has designated as a “hate free zone” that proudly showcases a Black Lives Matter sign. Gwen is passionate about social issues and hasn't been shy to share her opinions with the community. She once posted an article featuring a quote from Dolly Parton – “Why do we think our little white asses are the only ones that matter?” – with the caption, “all the more reason to love Dolly.” For weeks after, she was forced to hide the comments, some even from local preachers. “If some of those people who commented on the post were Christians, then I was an airplane pilot,” she observed.

The Black Sheep Bakery employs previously incarcerated people, recovering addicts, and people who were once employed by the coal industry. Gwen was inspired to employ those with addiction and drug court records after her nephew was about to emerge from four years of incarceration with no job prospects (personal correspondence with G. Johnson, March 22, 2021).

agenda,” and described how they segregated most of the region, and even “segregated graveyards.” Despite workers in the tunnels getting along with one another, coal companies oppressed workers by separating and alienating them from one another. This, she says, is the “divide and conquer approach.” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

Gwen believes that coal was an extractive industry, since the companies were owned by “absentee owners” who “were invested in their companies, but not invested in the people.” “All of the wealth got hauled away in the coal train” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). At the height of its power during the early twentieth century, the coal industry was financing many enterprises in the county including stores and movie theaters. A coal severance tax provided funding for parks and recreation, for the senior citizen center, and the fire department. Coal companies also financed churches in the region – according to Ben, they paid for “a century's worth of pastors” who were careful not to encourage social change. Anyone who advocated for workers' empowerment and unity would be fired to quell any interest in unionizing among workers (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). Gwen Johnson, who is deeply religious and committed to prophetic work, spoke of being kicked out of three different local churches for her views – views informed by a spirit of iconoclasm – which also influenced the founding of the Letcher County Culture Hub (email correspondence with B. Fink, October 27 2021).

At the height of its dominance during the mid-twentieth century, the coal industry created a mono-economy and with it, a culture of dependency, guaranteeing that the eventual collapse of coal would deeply impact the region. Massive layoffs in the 1990s only exacerbated the region's widespread poverty, which had existed even when coal was booming. One third of Letcher County now lives below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). “We were in a place of despair,” Gwen lamented, “It's been like a nightmare.” This despair, in turn, has driven many in Letcher County towards opioids, resulting in a full-blown opioid crisis and with it, rising

rates of incarceration. Bill says that people may come into the fire department “complaining about a backache” in order to access drugs. Older people in the county are adopting their grandchildren, whose parents are battling or have passed away from addiction issues. Only a few hours prior to an interview for this study, Bill received a call during his shift at the fire department notifying him that a twenty-two-year-old woman had an overdose, which, Bill says, “just breaks your heart.”

The culture of the region had traditionally made residents skeptical of outsiders; this skepticism, however, began to mark the interactions between locals as well. With the coal industry’s collapse, scarcity in the region drove organizations to compete rather than collaborate (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020). Community organizations moved towards more transactional relationships with one another (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). Community leaders’ motives were ruled by desperation and a survival instinct (email correspondence with B. Fink, October 27, 2021), which led to more individualism as people tried to keep their businesses afloat in a sunken economy.

Some organization, however, saw potential in the web of existing community groups for a different way of relating and collaborating (see Box 3 and 4). Beginning in 2014, staff at Appalshop, a local promoter of arts and culture with decades of recognition on the national and international stage (email communication with B. Fink, October 27, 2021), started to hypothesize that this web could serve as the foundation for the local economy’s revitalization. Genuine collaboration between entrepreneurs, community leaders, and non-profit organizations could enable wealth-creation within a community.

By harnessing their social structure and revaluing cultural assets, Letcher County began to revitalize their local economy, which had been decimated by the coal industry’s collapse. This process involved tapping into existing cultural practices, recognizing latent cultural assets, and building relationships to create something more permanent than the coal economy from the ground up.

### Box 3: Cowan Community Center:

Cowan Community Action Group was founded in 1964 during the War on Poverty. The group has been a longtime partner of Appalshop for five decades, and is informally known as Cowan Community Center, the name of the building where the group meets. The center has offered childcare for the past fifty years; it had the first garbage service in Letcher County until the county took on this responsibility (email correspondence with V. Horn, March 23, 2021). It is a quintessential local community center—its many program offerings include a theater program (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29 2020) and Grow Appalachia, which teaches residents how to grow their own food (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020).

### Box 4: Appalshop

Founded in the fall of 1969 as a community film workshop, Appalshop promotes arts and cultural development in the region. The organization encourages residents to produce narratives that accurately reflect the spirit of Appalachia and has had several divisions to support this work over the years, including radio, film, and archival media. In 1975, “the film-training workshop had twenty full-time employees and annual funding of \$1 million” (Appalshop). Its theater division, **Roadside Theater**, has a long legacy of producing externally-facing work that involves and amplifies the voices of the community.

Appalshop’s critiques of the coal industry were a component of their work, which garnered criticism from those in the coal mining industry. While there is evidence supporting the perception of Appalshop as being leftist and elitist (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3 2020), it also provides undeniable public goods to the whole community, including a space where children can learn how to play the fiddle and neighbors can host radio shows on the community radio station.

# 3. THE SEEDS OF THE CULTURE HUB ARE PLANTED

The person who brought the idea of a “culture hub” to Appalshop was Fluney Hutchinson, an economist originally hailing from Jamaica who now runs the Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. From 2014 to 2019, Hutchinson and his students engaged in a consultancy with Appalshop to discuss how Appalshop could catalyze grassroots economic development in the area. This relationship was facilitated by Dudley Cocke, then Artistic Director of Roadside Theater, who met Hutchinson in 2010 (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21, 2021). Hutchinson’s work exposed Appalshop to the concept of a “culture hub,” a network of organizations that can catalyze a community’s ability to recognize latent assets and turn them into community wealth (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020).

A year into the consultancy between Appalshop and Lafayette College, several funding opportunities materialized, offering a timely opportunity to experiment with putting Hutchinson’s theories into practice for the first time. In July 2015, Appalshop received a \$450,000 grant from Artplace in America focused on reviving culture-driven work in the region (Barret, 2019). Shortly thereafter in 2016, the National Endowment for the Arts provided Appalshop and Roadside Theater with related grants totaling \$75,000 to promote the creation of murals and other visual artwork in the towns of Eastern Kentucky (Buchsbbaum, 2016). Then, in 2018, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation awarded Appalshop \$112,500 to continue its place-making work, which proved instrumental in laying the groundwork for the emergence of a project called Performing Our Future.

This group of grants that Appalshop received were broadly for “creative placemaking” work (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020) and intended “to help organizations do more of what they do” (phone interview

with G. Johnson, October 29, 2020). Appalshop imagined developing a network of relationships and partnerships through which the deliverables of the grants would be accomplished (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21, 2021). Informed by the consultancy with Lafayette College and the idea of a “culture hub,” Appalshop used these new grants to set in motion a process of local development that led to the creation of what would become the Letcher County Culture Hub. This process involved tapping into existing cultural practices, recognizing latent cultural assets, and rebuilding local relationships that had been strained and in some cases severed by the divisive influence of the coal era.

A catalyst of this process of regeneration was the new staff member that Appalshop hired to manage the recently-awarded grants, Ben Fink. Originally from the Northeast and with a background in theater, community organizing, and teaching, Ben was encouraged to apply for the job, listed as “Creative Placemaking Project Manager,” by a colleague at Roadside Theater, where Ben had been working informally since the end of 2014. In his capacity as a writer and researcher with Roadside, Ben had been working on an off-Broadway show that Roadside was producing in collaboration with Pregones Theater, a Puerto Rican theater company in the Bronx. Prior to his interview with Appalshop in October 2015, Ben had never set foot in eastern Kentucky, but he was drawn to Roadside’s approach and emphasis on “externally-facing work.” (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020).

Ben viewed the job opening with Appalshop in Letcher County as an opportunity to practice and expand Roadside’s principles of Community Cultural Development, which promised to catalyze real economic development. He believed that organizations that

were not accountable to their communities would end up doing what was “trendy” in the eyes of other institutions and national funders and media, but may be inequitable and unsustainable locally. Ben saw the job title and description as embodying the tension between the logic of institutions (manage the grant, line up the partners, produce the deliverables) and the true needs of communities: come together, share stories and build relationships, and do the work that emerges. Still, he recognized a project manager was necessary to manage Appalshop’s grants (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3 2020).

When Ben interviewed at Appalshop, he let them know clearly that while he would love the job, he was not a “project manager.” He had always considered himself to be an “organizer, in the populist tradition,” and he was clear that that was what Appalshop needed to expect of him. While he promised that the grant deliverables would be fulfilled, Ben let his supervisors know that his methods were unconventional. Part of the project for which he was hired involved Roadside Theater making a community play about the future of Letcher County featuring a multi-generational narrative in the words of the residents. The project was flexible enough to allow Ben to direct some of the funding as he saw fit (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21 2021), and he envisioned the play as a vehicle to build relationships with people, identify community leaders, and local centers of power (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3 2020), which was a key element of Hutchinson’s “culture hub” model.

## The Culture Hub Model: From Theory To Practice

The central administrative division of Appalshop, CORE, collaborated with Fluney Hutchinson and the Lafayette College team to create a multi-year, organization-wide strategic investment plan, which the recent “creative placemaking” grants would align with and help support. For the ArtPlace grant, which required grantees to

designate a specific geographic area to work in, they chose Letcher County, which has a population of about 22,000 people (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21, 2021).

The notion of a “culture hub” was a new iteration of Fluney Hutchinson’s work, so its development in the context of Appalshop’s work in Letcher County required translating conceptual ideas about how the Hub should work into practice. The model, as envisioned by Hutchinson and Appalshop, involved finding existing “community centers of power” and collaborating with them to strengthen them and connect them with each other (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). These community centers of power are organizations “of, by, and for all the people in a community,” and are “as diverse as the communities they represent.” They make it possible for residents to “tell their own story instead of letting others speak for them, act together across differences instead of succumbing to divisions, and build and own their community’s cultural and economic wealth” (email correspondence with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). Both Ben and Fluney believed in “meeting communities where they’re at” (phone interview with B. Fink, October 6, 2020); communities would lead the projects that would make up the Culture Hub’s work.

The process envisioned for the Hub’s development can be described as follows (and depicted in Figure 2). Using a “roots to shoots” metaphor, cultural revitalization is seen as the shoot or the flower, which start “with a seed.” The seed is the process, and in the case of the Culture Hub, the process involved people from different walks of life and of different viewpoints and positions coming together to share stories and build mutual interests. Those who think that they share little in common, who may historically perceive themselves as “enemies,” are provided an opportunity to get to know one another. This seed of authentic relationship-building across differences lets roots grow – the roots referring to new and deepened relationships between people – and these people tell stories about themselves, which allows them



# PUTTING THE “ART” AND “CULTURE” IN COMMUNITY DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT

**CULTURE** is how people make meaning together, through their shared intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material traditions and features.

**ART** (or “cultural work”) is a deliberately crafted expression of culture.

Art and culture play **THREE KEY ROLES** in community driven development:



## **PROCESS** is the starting point...

Grassroots cultural work — story circles, community plays, and more — creates the conditions where communities work across differences and learn to speak and act for themselves.

## ...**PEOPLE** nourish the work and make it grow...

As communities start speaking and acting for themselves, they begin to re-imagine and re-define themselves — by telling their own stories, building their own power, and recognizing the value inherent in their culture.

## ...and soon **PRODUCTS** sprout up.

Once communities can speak and act for themselves, build collective power, and recognize their own value, they can start turning that value into community-owned wealth of all kinds.

Graphics from [pngtree.com](http://pngtree.com).

Figure 1: The Culture Hub’s “Root to Shoots” Model. Image Credit: Roadside Theater (Appalshop), courtesy of Ben Fink

to imagine and do what once felt impossible (see Figure 1). Fluney calls this the process of “unbounding the imagination” (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). Only then can the shoots and flowers — the marketable art objects, performances, local businesses, and more — flourish effectively and sustainably.

Fluney Hutchinson also thinks that organizations require an “opposition-ness” to be effective parts of a culture hub. “It does not mean that you are a contrarian nor a partisan,” Ben laughs. “Opposition-ness” recognizes that individuals and organizations oriented toward serious change will necessarily stand in opposition to the status quo, which will then require a degree of

conflict and controversy. Change is necessary to better the economic realities of an area, but those benefiting from the current order may resist such change, creating dynamics of opposition (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020).

In the case of the Letcher County Culture Hub, the Hub was not intended to imply that Letcher County is transitioning from “coal to culture,” but rather that it was uncovering and building on the existing culture of the area. From Ben’s perspective, while what Bill Meade calls “coal culture” is not sufficiently inclusive or democratic, it is still a type of culture. The coal economy in Appalachia represents the kind of development that



relies on telling people to “sit down and shut up” (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). The Hub was envisioned as a process to transform that culture towards one of relationships built on mutual respect and interdependence, to build self-sufficiency within the community.

## The Culture Hub Model Takes a Life of its Own

This basic idea for a culture hub as envisioned by Hutchinson and Appalshop began to take a life of its own as Ben took the new job at Appalshop and added his own way of thinking to how the work of his position had been conceived. Before his work in Letcher County, Ben organized with faith, labor, and homeless organizations in Minnesota and Connecticut; he also taught and trained instructors at the University of Minnesota, where he had received his PhD in Cultural Studies. Ben drew on his organizing experience and pedagogy as well as his background in directing youth theater to inform his work in Appalachia, which he saw as an opportunity to engage in true populist practice. For him, as for Roadside, that meant grassroots work engaging directly with your neighbors, identifying and working towards a common goal.

Ben was critical of conventional approaches to culture-driven development, which he saw as putting on “cute art shows and pop-ups” or pushing externally-conceived projects to create “entrepreneurial businesses.” Too often, these were top-down, institution-driven initiatives without deep roots in community life. He likened this process to someone taking a tree, “plopping it on a piece of land, and expecting it to grow without doing any digging or putting in any work to figure out where to situate it” (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). The community typically doesn’t care about these kinds of projects because they were not involved in developing them, and as a result these initiatives end up being “one and done” without creating lasting, sustainable impact (ibid.).

Ben set out to implement the Culture Hub following a different approach that placed relationship-building with diverse members of the community as the central strategy. He brought with him a very particular approach to relationship-building that, according to others interviewed for this case study, was effectively able to transcend differences and build bridges between factions within the region. According to Dee, a longtime resident of Letcher County who spent three decades working at Appalshop, Ben was an expert at putting people at ease. Regardless of whether someone was a frontline worker dealing with overdoses, a cultural creative working at Appalshop, a progressive or a Trump voter, Ben was able to engage in a way that made them feel equally valued. Ben would disarm people by introducing himself bluntly and humorously as a “Communist Jew from the Northeast,” said Dee (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021). His self-deprecating and self-effacing manner allowed him to break the ice and build meaningful relationships between Appalshop and community members involved in “coal culture,” a difficult yet essential step towards healing the divisions that existed in the community and laying the groundwork for the possibility of joint work towards local economic and cultural revitalization.

The animosity between some coal miners and Appalshop had existed as long as Appalshop had, from its first years in the early 1970s. People affiliated with these groups refused to dialogue and resented one another. Bill Meade, who was involved in the trucking and coal industry, once loathed Appalshop; he remembers how Appalshop as an institution always gave the impression that coal people were like “outlaws” rather than workers “just trying to make a living” (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). Appalshop’s criticism of the coal industry and strip mining drew significant criticism as well. Some implicated the “hippie” founders of Appalshop, who were vocally against coal, in the coal industry’s collapse. One miner angrily disparaged Appalshop on an online forum, saying, “I do not take lightly to having my career being put on the line because you think these mountains are pretty and you’ve never

had to put in a hard days work to provide for a family” (Semuels, 2015).

Ben’s relationship-building work through the Culture Hub managed to move people past these longstanding divides (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021). Through Ben, Bill believes that Appalshop stopped seeing him as “something to fear” despite his involvement with the coal industry, and for his part, Bill found that Ben “was one fascinating man” towards whom he found himself warming up (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). Because Ben was an organizer at heart, he knew how to talk and build bridges with people who were uninterested in Appalshop’s work – its “sworn enemies,” as Dee Davis put it.

Ben had reached out to Dee, from The Center for Rural Strategies, in October of 2016 to ask for Dee’s mentorship, and in doing so became the first person from Appalshop to reach out to him since Dee’s own time at Appalshop, where he had worked from 1973 to 2001. From their first interaction, Dee noticed that Ben was not easily deterred. Dee did not understand “what made Ben tick” (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021), yet recognized his ability to get people together who were “opposites” and use his presence at one type of cultural event to mobilize participation in other events as well – even on the same night as a University of Kentucky basketball game! Ben was very task-oriented and particular, and “he wasn’t going to fail once he got started.” While Dee believes that many people seek out conversations to “talk about themselves,” he felt that Ben was always genuinely interested in Dee’s advice and productively interacted with Dee (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021).

From the outset of his work with Appalshop, Ben focused on building relational bridges and introducing as many people as he could to the nascent Culture Hub work (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020). On his second day in town, in November of 2015, Ben

met Valerie Horn, who directs the Cowan Community Center, a longstanding local organization that her parents had founded (email communication with B. Fink, October 27, 2021). The Letcher County Farmers Market was hosting the Gourd Awards, which awarded painted gourds to community organizations that participated in the Farmers Market and related food-and-farm projects. Ben accepted Appalshop’s award on the organization’s behalf, and Valerie recalled his words as profound, moving, and inspiring. “He spoke about people across the country one day looking to Whitesburg and Letcher County as a model to base their own work upon. They would look at what would be happening here, and he was full of confidence and certainty about this” (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020). When she learned about the grant funding from Artplace America, Valerie represented Cowan Community Center as a community partner on the grant (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21 2021).

*“He spoke about people across the country one day looking to Whitesburg and Letcher County as a model to base their own work upon.”*

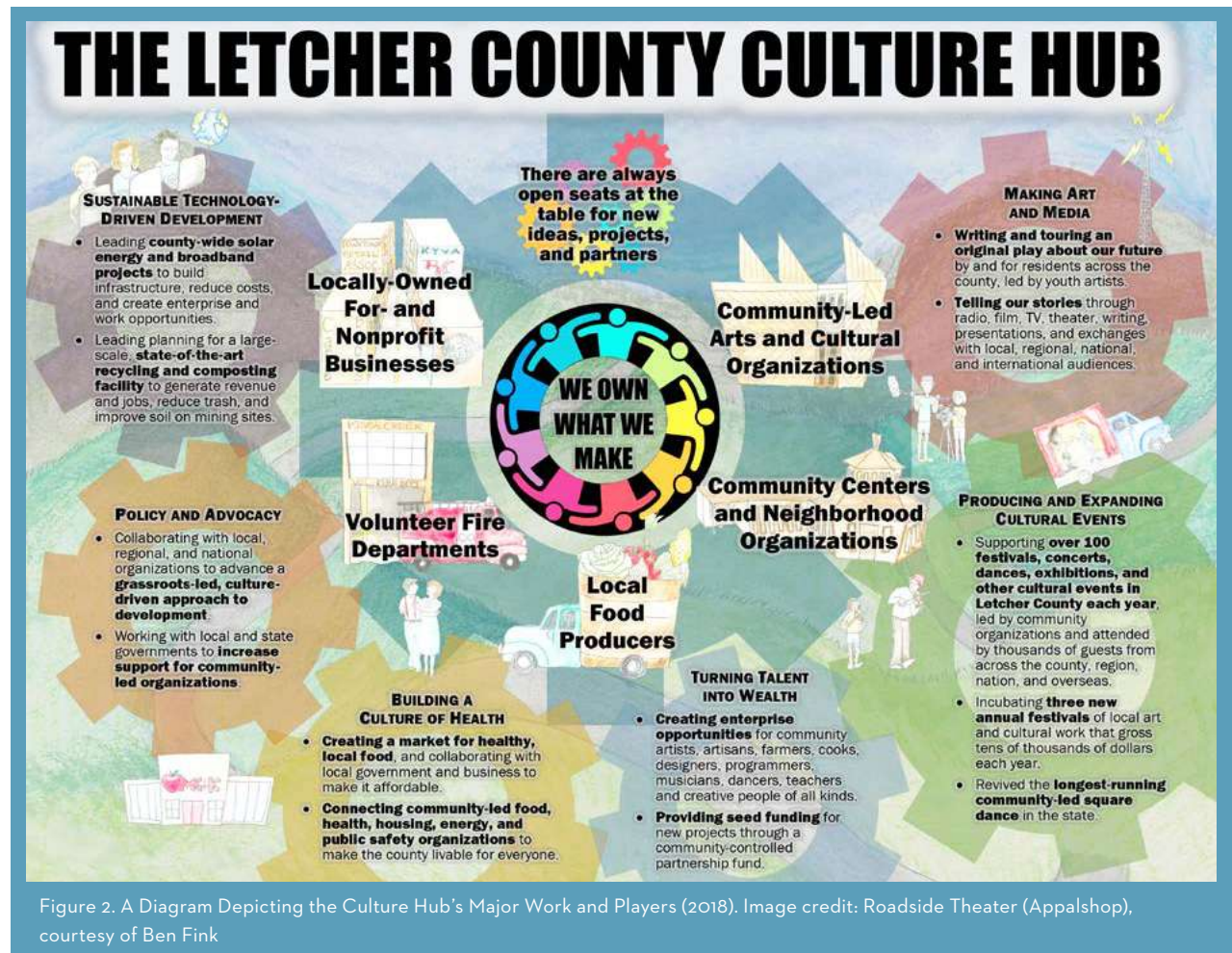
The King Creek Volunteer Fire Department, headed by Bill Meade, was perhaps surprisingly another one of the first local organizations to join the Hub (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). Bill Meade connected with the Hub through his sister Nell Fields, president of Cowan Community Center, who had long worked closely with Appalshop (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). Once apprehensive about Appalshop and its animosity towards coal workers, Bill credits Ben as helping to “break the ice” between the two groups, and soon Bill and the Fire Department became active participants in the Hub.

Each group that joined the Culture Hub invested the seed money that they received from Appalshop, which was funded by Appalshop’s place-making grants, into projects that could generate additional revenue

needed to sustain themselves and grow as centers of community life (see Figure 2, which details the Culture Hub’s development goals). In February of 2016, the Fire Department used their seed money to help revitalize a bluegrass festival in the area, which celebrated mountain music as the roots of bluegrass (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). In July, a follow-up Summer Festival was put on. The Carcassonne Community Center had the oldest square dance in Kentucky, and used the seed money they received to revive the square dance in April 2016, an event they continue to hold every month, complete with stands that sold food, t-shirts, and other merchandise (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

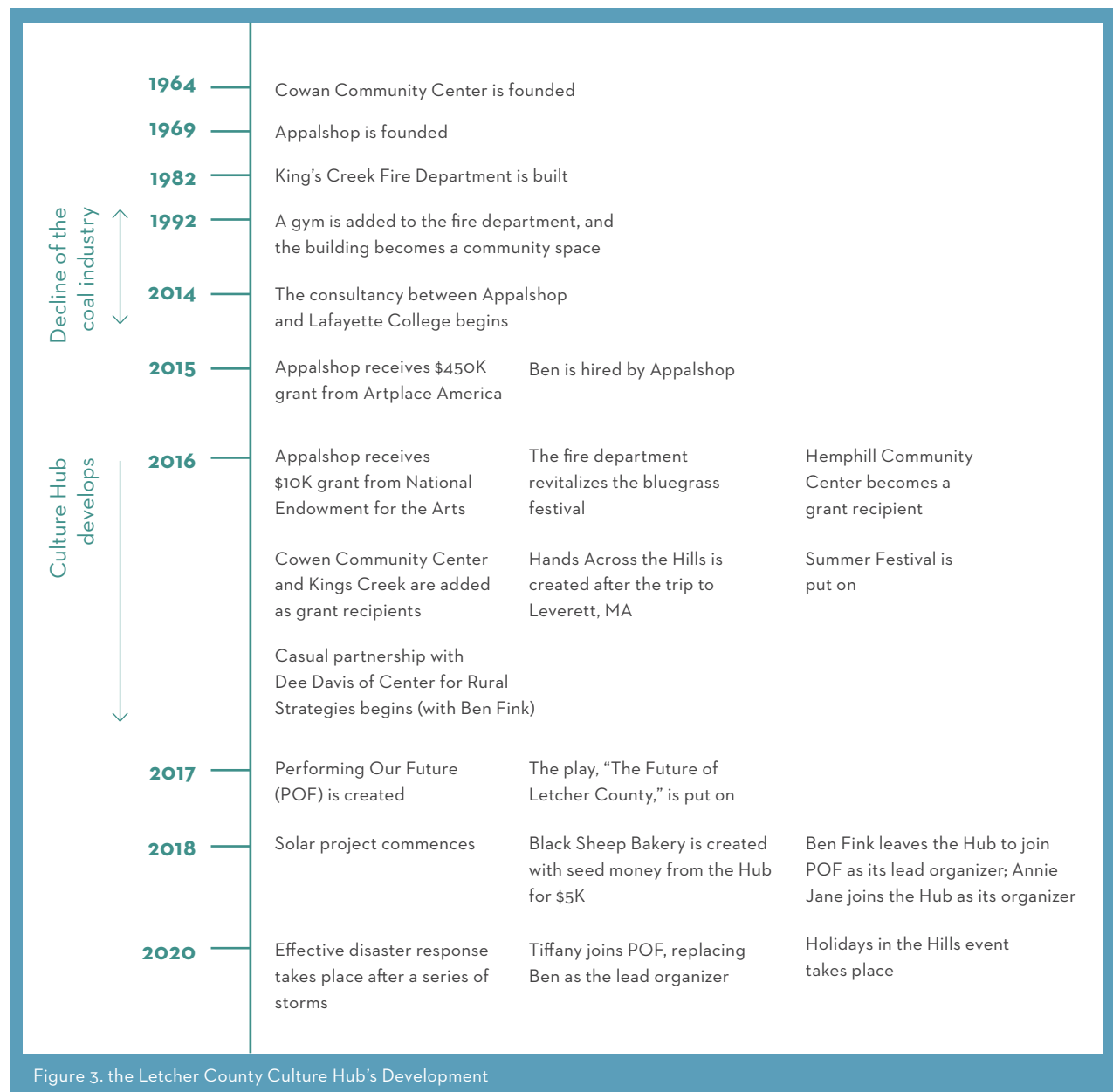
Seeing this burgeoning cultural and economic activity in the community, other local organizations began to join

the project. In early 2016, Gwen received an email from a friend noting that “there was a man who had some money” who would be attending an upcoming music event (phone interview with G. Johnson, November 3, 2020). “He was a guy by the name of Ben Fink.” Gwen saw the various organizations that were already identified as receiving grant money from Appalshop through the Culture Hub work, and advocated heavily for Hemphill Community Center to be a recipient as well. She recalls saying, “Where’s the Hemphill Community center? Get us on there!” Hemphill Community Center soon signed a memorandum of understanding with Appalshop and began receiving seed funds, which they used to launch a new catering company that would grow into the Black Sheep Brick Oven Bakery. The receipt of seed grant money formally established the Hemphill Community Center as a part of the Culture Hub in March 2016.



The community organizations, like Hemphill Community Center and others, that received seed funds from Appalshop ended up becoming partners in a new local organization of their own collective making, the Letcher County Culture Hub. As initially envisioned by Hutchinson, the Culture Hub became a forum for grassroots leaders – like Valerie Horn and Gwen Johnson, who were central in their community-led organizations – to unify by recognizing their potential for collaborative work and rediscovering latent assets in the community

(phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). By mid-2016, the Hub had begun to be seen by community members as an organization distinct from Appalshop, despite Appalshop continuing to invest the money and staff to sustain the organization (see Figure 3). For his part, through his work with the Culture Hub, Ben discovered that Letcher County was teeming with latent cultural assets that the community could build on moving forward (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).





# 4. THE CULTURE HUB'S METHODS

Ben states that the most important part of the work is maintaining relationships “beyond projects,” because these relationships are resources for future projects. He believes that development goes wrong when you attempt to build relationships with people

*“Development goes wrong when you attempt to build relationships with people only when you need them for something specific.”*

only when you need them for something specific. When Ben came into Appalshop, he began to build relationships with community leaders who would become

eventual Culture Hub partners. While some at Appalshop claimed that they’d always had these relationships, many of these community leaders did not agree with that statement. Ben remarked that “having community leaders sign a letter endorsing Appalshop for a grant” was not enough to constitute a relationship. Here, Ben empha-

sized the importance of defining relationships—were these transactional relationships or transformative relationships? (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). Ben worked with Appalshop to meet people where they were at as a starting point for building long-lasting relationships (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21, 2021).

Dee looks at the Hub’s work as a way to “get as many people’s stories in the mix as possible.” He scoffed at the idea of the “Appalachian narrative,” saying that “people use narrative to mean whatever they need it to mean” and that “narrative” seeks to serve funders. He continued by saying, “we are storytelling creatures, and... we will learn from these different attempts to tell our story, to tell stories that are instructive, stories that make us laugh, and stories that scare us. [Storytelling] is the best way to learn and break down barriers” (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021).



Culture Hub celebration at Cowan Community Center. Image Credit: Chana Rose Rabinovitz, courtesy of Ben Fink



A Culture Hub story circle in progress. Image credit: Malcolm J Wilson, courtesy of Ben Fink

Annie Jane reflected on how national issues are often interwoven into local conversations. The Hub inspired the creation of and currently belongs to a national and multi-racial partnership, Performing Our Future, which has encouraged people to wrestle with issues around race and class. Annie Jane was impressed by how intentional these conversations are, how people are willing to confront these issues head on. The stereotypes of “poor white Eastern Kentucky communities” are constantly being blown out of the water; the region is far more nuanced and complex than people believe it to be (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). This exemplifies one of the Hub’s core methods of work and strength: its ability to create productive dialogue across differences.

## Story Circles: Deep Listening Across Difference

Story circles is one method used by the Culture Hub to create a stronger community through dialogue. The methodology of the story circle has its origins in the work of the Free Southern Theater, the theater wing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in their work in Louisiana and Mississippi during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1980, Free Southern Theater ended and was revived as Junebug Productions. Through collaborations between Junebug Productions and Roadside Theater over the past thirty years, the modern form of story circles was created (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21, 2021).



Tiffany Turner, who took over for Ben in 2020 as the lead organizer for the national coalition Performing Our Future, describes story circles as letting you “gain knowledge of who you’re actually around” (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020) and practice being “fully present” and “giving your undivided attention” to each other. Story circles are initiated with a specific prompt, which serves as the topic around which the circle will be called. Once a prompt has been created, people are invited to attend the circle on a voluntary basis.

Much of the recruitment for the Story Circles comes via word-of-mouth or through advertising in local publications and on social media groups. While twenty to twenty-five percent of the population does not have internet access, internet users can call upon others whom they know would be interested in a story circle’s topic. This in turn creates a conversation with people who are all intimately familiar with the topic. Depending on the topic, a given story circle can be created for a specific set of invited guests or open to anyone from the community. In either case, community networking ensures that there is high turnout. In occasion, outside partners like PolicyLink have also partnered with the Hub to sponsor a story circle and have provided monetary incentives for people participating (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020).

Once the story circle begins, no one apart from invited guests are allowed to enter the space. Once the prompt is read, everybody in the circle sits silently (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). On their own time, someone volunteers to speak first and to share a story in response to the prompt. No one is allowed to interrupt the storyteller by talking or asking questions. A moment of silence occurs after each person’s story, and then the person to the storyteller’s left begins to tell their story, also in response to the prompt and the stories they have already heard.

This is an exercise in intentional listening, as participants in the circle focus on and critically engage with the

storyteller’s story rather than think about their own in advance (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). The person who reads the prompt will close the storytelling portion of the circle, and discussion then commences. Tiffany says from her experience that the “crosstalk is rarely negative;” rather, people speak of their admiration for another person’s bravery or a realization that despite seeming different from the outside, they shared similar life experiences with someone else.

The story circle prioritizes listening skills and peer learning and aims to help people feel less alone (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). Topics have ranged from “grandparents’ experiences in raising their first grandchild” to “when you thought community may not work” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). While anyone can call a story circle, there is a specific methodology used to create these spaces, which includes the practices described above. Therefore, “you may want to be in one before you call one” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Story circles are often used as a way to ground the Hub before decision-making processes, as it is helpful for people first to hear and understand others in a deeper way. As a methodology, story circles are “central to our work. They’ve always proven themselves to be profound” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).

The biggest conflicts have emerged, in fact, between individuals who were newest to the process. These people had not engaged with the formalities nor understood how story circles functioned, and therefore they weren’t familiar with the group expectations nor the commonly agreed upon behavior (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020). Bill has enjoyed most of the story circles he has participated in. Story circles are about a story that affects you or how it affected the community; he loathes when people try to set agendas through their story or direct people on how they “should be” or what they “should do” (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). After difficult conversations, someone checks in and follows up with participants

(Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). However, Valerie attributes the general lack of tension to how clearly the parameters around these conversations have been set.

## The Play: Enacting Changed Relationships

The play developed by Roadside Theater was another tool that bridged local divides, as Roadside envisioned that it would. Bill Meade, who is a vehement coal proponent and Trump supporter, was one of the lead actors in the play. Prior to this, he refused to set foot in Appalshop because he was radically opposed to the organization. Ben laughed about the irony that the person who finally broke that impasse after 50 years, namely himself, was a “self-described Communist Jew from the Northeast” (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). While Bill had never been in a play in his life, he agreed to participate after Ben asked him. He was initially reluctant but now marvels at the play’s success, which has been put on several times across Letcher County and as far away as West Baltimore.

The play, titled, “The Future of Letcher County,” was meant to represent how “people who were once indifferent to things came together.” Bill said that people really enjoyed his and Gwen’s roles in the Baltimore production – she was a moonshine lady in Baltimore while he was “an old hillbilly.” Nell Fields, Bill’s sister who is “far more liberal than him,” also participated in the play. “It was a play which really depicted the way things are” (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). Because of Bill’s involvement with Appalshop, the organization has expanded their membership, attracting people who might not have otherwise joined (*ibid.*). People know Bill’s politics and his former opposition to Appalshop, so they see the fact that he is now working with Appalshop as contributing to breaking the ice between a conservative and liberal organization (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1 2021).

Without the constant and consistent dialogue fostered by the play, story circles, and informal relationship-building efforts, Ben doesn’t believe the Hub would be possible.

## Building Bridges Beyond Whitesburg

The Hub has engaged in dialogue, not only within Whitesburg, but with communities across the nation. Tools like story circles and playmaking have catalyzed other partnerships and projects intended to overcome differences. One of these is the Hands Across the Hills initiative, a partnership that stemmed from an article Ben wrote entitled “Building democracy in Trump Country.” This article reflected on the aftermath of the 2016 election and how it was received locally; what felt like a loss for Ben felt like a win for Bill, as Ben was a self-described leftist in a county that voted 79.8% for Trump (Fink, 2017). Through his reflections following the election, Ben realized that divisive external actors should not be allowed to distract from the Culture Hub’s goal of organizing and empowering rural communities.

Yet to at least one community in the more liberal state of Massachusetts, the politics of Letcher County’s residents remained baffling. Following the publishing of Ben’s piece, he received an email from a resident in Leverett, Massachusetts – a town that had voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton – who had read his article and wanted to understand how anybody could vote for Donald Trump. The resident of Leverett ended his email with an unusual proposal: that Leverett and Whitesburg become sister cities.

This email was read aloud at a Culture Hub partners meeting, where both Clinton and Trump supporters sat side by side. Just a few days after the election, “emotions were running high” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). Gwen had intended to vote for Hilary Clinton, until Clinton swore to “put coal miners out of

work” and called her community “deplorables.” She chose not to vote. This email from Leverett fascinated her, she said that initially, Hub members remained cautious. “We feel like we’ve been exploited for decades by the news media, photographers, and journalists who come to our area and depict it as truly the worst of the worst. I was concerned it was going to be more poverty porn” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). She helped draft a response with several others, declaring that Whitesburg wanted no part of a project that would indulge that same tradition – but if their intentions were as stated, residents in Whitesburg would consider it.

This email exchange sparked six months of preparation for a cultural exchange trip. Conflict resolution expert Paula Green whose services were engaged to help mediate the exchange, remarked that “this was no casual meeting. We had endless correspondence and Skypes and phone calls. We had prepared all sorts of community events, we had music and dance and drama and art, and so we had a very full and rich and safe agenda prepared for everybody, and we know how much fear there was even with all that” (Young, 2018). A few months later, eleven community leaders from the Culture Hub traveled to Leverett, Massachusetts. This visit allowed people from Letcher County to stay in homestays, where Gwen said she felt like “the have-nots have met the haves... they’re pretty affluent there. Most of us are not” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). However, the hospitality was wonderful. While the dialogues that were facilitated during the trip became quite heated at times, Gwen found them rewarding (ibid.).

During the visit, an assembly was organized at a local elementary school that involved about three hundred people. There was a Question and Answer session

afterwards between Leverett and Letcher county residents, mediated by Paula Green (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). They participated in dialogues over the course of several days, with many taking place over lunch. The conversations between residents of both towns more often than not highlighted their similarities rather than their differences. This experience of connecting across differences to encounter unanticipated similarities enabled one woman from Letcher County, upon returning home after the trip, to speak to her brother again after they had stopped talking due to a painful political divide. Another participant in the exchange, who had contemplated moving out of Appalachia, decided to stay in Whitesburg after connecting with community members in Letcher County. Kip Fonsh of Leverett said about the experience: “I learned in our work together that when you are talking, you are not listening” (Dunn and Clayton, 2018).

In addition to providing members of the trip with new tools for repairing and re-building relationships back home, the Hands Across the Hills initiative helped catalyze more alliances between the Culture Hub and national organizations, including coalitions like Performing Our Future, which has connected the Hub to towns and cities in Alabama, Wisconsin, and Maryland. Just as story circles are meant to bridge perceived differences through sharing common experiences, these cross-cultural exchanges have allowed rural and urban communities from various regions of the United States to learn what they share in common and gain insight into their differences. This structured approach to dialogue also ensures that communities are understood by other communities as non-homogenous, which is a part of the kind of narrative ownership the Hub hopes to cultivate.

# 5. THE CULTURE HUB ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

The Culture Hub formed and grew by organizing existing community-based groups, following in the tradition of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation, which focuses on “broad-based community organizing” (BBCO) that aims to build “organizations of organizations” (personal communication with B. Fink, March 21, 2021). A formalized organizational structure for the Hub emerged belatedly; initially, there was no governing body for the Hub. Rather, the representatives of each partner organization acted like a “think tank” for the Hub. They would identify and discuss problems and opportunities in their communities, and how the Culture Hub could work to address these problems and take advantage of these opportunities (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19 2020). The Hub is guided by the principle of “we own what we make,” creating an inclusive economy and culture for the community by the community (See Figure 4).

Ben says that the Hub’s lack of a hierarchical leadership structure is an intentional part of its design, following the principle of “no more structure than you need.” Ben emphasized that the work starts with relationships; a growing web of relationships enables the creation of projects, and joint work on projects builds organizational structure as it is needed to enable the work. This is a different approach from institutionally-driven work where the organization creates the structure and sets the priorities and then follows up with attempts to “engage” the “community” in the organization’s pre-set agenda (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020).

The process for new partners to join the Hub is quite flexible and starts with a growing web of relationships and project-based work. Once individuals engaged with other organizations have gotten involved in the

Hub’s work on a practical basis and expressed interest in joining the Hub, existing members will discuss making them formal partners (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Community leaders who join the Hub engage in formal and informal meetings, monthly partners meetings, and yearly retreats that provide an opportunity for evaluations, reflections, and strategy-creation (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020).

In terms of organizational leadership, the Hub has no board, “no chair or secretary or vice-president or president”, says the Hub’s current organizer, Annie Jane. All Culture Hub partners are “collectively responsible for moving projects forward” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021) and do so in monthly partners’ meetings attended by representatives of all partner organizations within the Hub. These meetings are used to identify, introduce, discuss, and move forward with new opportunities. Their meetings also inform the partners on what structures they need and how to go about building what they need. They push forward an “organizational” direction, and serve as a key mechanism for collaboration within the Hub.

The Leadership SubHub, established in late 2017, includes a smaller number of partner representatives, chosen by the partners for renewable, one-year terms, who meet on a more regular basis to provide guidance to the group and make smaller-scale decisions. The Leadership SubHub, Bill says, makes it easier to get things done because they can make a decision without having the whole Hub vote on a decision (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021), which proved particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite having this smaller leadership group, the Hub is not separate from the community or “engaging” the

community; rather, it is made up of community members themselves who are active participants in shaping decisions and policies that will influence their own lives.

The partner organizations in the Hub now number eighteen community organizations, including several volunteer fire departments, local businesses, and community centers (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020) (See Figure 5). Appalshop currently only engages with the Hub through resource-support; all the decision-making power has been relinquished to the Culture Hub partners themselves (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Other organizations, namely funders or investors, do not have a role in the Hub’s leadership or in decision-making; rather, they offer solely financial support to implement projects (phone interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020).

In terms of organizational decision-making, the Hub makes decisions by consensus; the partners will vote

with a thumbs up (I support the proposal), thumbs down (I cannot be part of the Hub if it takes up the proposal), or thumbs sideways (I am skeptical of the proposal but willing to go along with it) (personal communication with B. Fink, March 19, 2021). During the pandemic, the Hub transitioned from in-person meetings to meetings over Zoom. Bill does not have Zoom but will call in on a phone. The Hub’s consensus-based decision-making process is not attempting to force a false uniformity of thinking amongst its members; rather, this deliberative process is designed to encourage the free expression of difference of opinion, which leads to more productive and revealing conversations that serve to deepen connections over time.

There are always differing views on the way forward because the Hub functions as a connective tissue linking the community together without forcing one right or wrong ideology. For instance, the Hub’s motto of “we own what we make” does not resonate as strongly with

untrue because “everyone can’t own what they make.” Others recognize this reality while standing behind the motto as an ideal towards which the Hub is working: the end of an exploitative local economy.

The Hub’s broad-based, organization-of-organizations model means that individuals who do not represent any organization can get lost. One example Valerie gave was a person who once worked at a government agency, the Letcher County Recreation Center, and changed jobs to work in research elsewhere. Following her transition to a new job, she found it difficult to meaningfully engage with the Hub in her role as an unaffiliated individual. Here, Valerie seemed to highlight an issue with individual contribution and participation being valued. She believes that





despite its county-wide inclusivity, she feels like it can be easy to “feel like the Hub is all about Whitesburg” (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020).

To that issue, the Hub is currently discussing whether they want to formalize new membership. Bill has mentioned a desire to have more local businesses engaged in the Hub. While business owners are interested in the Hub’s work, they have been reluctant to get involved with the Hub in the past because there has been a lack of clarity on the Hub’s future (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Representatives from the local government, while not members of the Hub, do

sometimes partner with the Hub. However, Ben makes sure to note that the Hub members are the ones reaching out to engage with local representatives from the government.

“The institutions aren’t engaging the community – the community is engaging the institutions” (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). The Center for Rural Strategies also serves as a resource to the Hub on how to fundraise and work with communications and media (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021).

*“The institutions aren’t engaging the community – the community is engaging the institutions”*

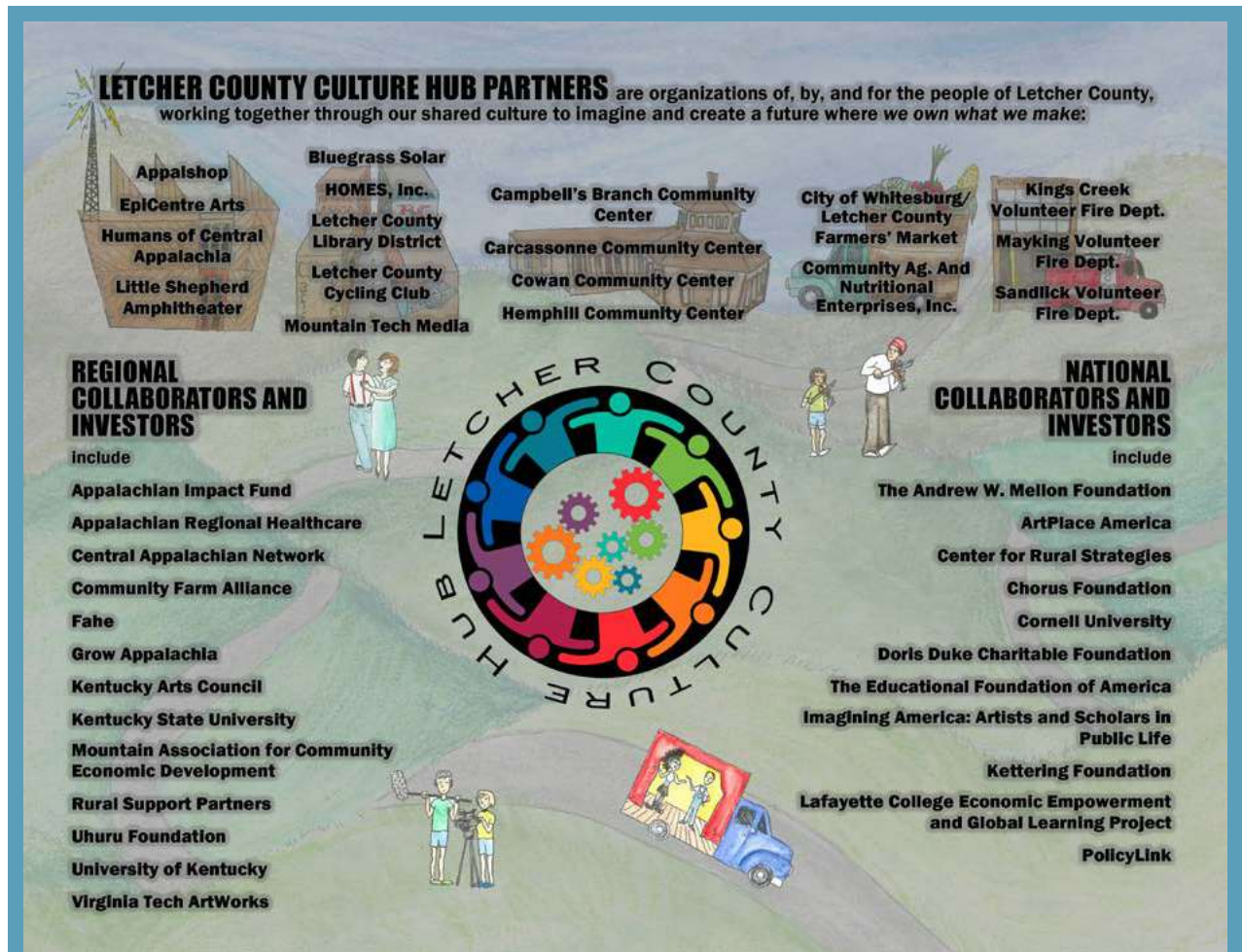


Figure 5. A Visual Representation of Current Culture Hub Partners. Image Credit: Roadside Theater (Appalshop), courtesy of Ben Fink



## Staffing the Hub's Work

In terms of staff, the Lead Organizer is the Culture Hub's only paid staff position. Previously created and filled by Ben Fink, the role is now filled by Annie Jane Cotten (phone interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). At the end of 2018, Ben left the day-to-day Culture Hub organizing work to work for Roadside Theater as the lead organizer of the national coalition Performing Our Future (POF), where he worked until October 2020 (phone interview with B. Fink, March 21, 2021). Annie Jane was already quite connected to the Hub as she lived across the border from Kentucky in Southwest Virginia. Her work as an herbalist led her to meeting and befriending Gwen. Furthermore, she lived with people who worked for Appalshop and had been friends with Ben and had known about Appalshop's work for years (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Ben thought she would be a good candidate and in October 2018 she was hired into the role (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).

Annie Jane's work has always involved community empowerment and community autonomy. Her prior job as a program manager for a forest protection group required her knowing how to navigate group decision-making processes as well as how to maintain and manage various relationships. She believes "her background in mutual aid and community engagement" lends itself well to this work (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). While she felt that her transition into the role was "bumpy" and "difficult," she noted that the job was a welcome challenge for her (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).

As an organizer, she began to introduce more structure and formalized framing around the Culture Hub's work. She also wanted to promote transparency around

finances and group decision-making. She first wanted to ensure that people had access to basic things like contact information for one another. Recently, she has started bringing financial reports to the Leadership Hub meetings, where they set their priorities for the year (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).

While Ben prioritized focusing on broader ideological tasks or specific projects, Annie Jane is more intent on establishing procedures for the tedious and "nitty-gritty" parts of the work. This inevitably means she holds a more administrative role where she works on figuring out the budget or group-fundraising (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). As a lead organizer, she wants to also make sure people have access to resources and opportunities. She often asks herself "if she is at the rudder or at the helm," and she "always wants to be at the rudder." She is guided by her determination that the Hub must have full power and agency over determining their – "our" – future. "These people aren't separate from me," she says. "I live with these people, I work with these people" (ibid.).

Annie Jane believes that her role has continued to emphasize leadership, promote development and transparency, and create good conflict-resolution practices. She thinks the Hub's work occurs "through doing, through gathering and organizing." Oftentimes, that's how issues have been identified. So if an issue arises such as getting broadband internet, a small group forms and works on this. It's self-organizing as needs arise, and the energy and interest accompanies this desire to accomplish goals (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Annie Jane stresses the idea that she shouldn't do anything she wasn't asked to do and that the projects the Hub initiates must be community-driven and authentic.

# 6. RESULTS OF THE CULTURE HUB'S WORK

As the Letcher County Culture Hub has coalesced and grown from an initial handful of organizations in 2015 to around twenty members by early 2021, the impacts of this deep and intentional relationship-building work have started to become apparent to those involved. Using the metaphors provided by Culture Hub members of “roots to shoots,” the work invested in facilitating meaningful and authentic dialogue and building relational bridges between community members can be seen as “roots,” which over the past several years have grown a solid core structure in the form of the more formalized

organizational relationships that comprise the Culture Hub (see Figure 6). This new relationship infrastructure has, in turn, sprouted a number of “shoots” consisting of specific joint projects, each of which is generating its own streams of economic and social benefits in the local community.

Culture Hub members interviewed for this case study all acknowledged that the types of home-grown initiatives that are now becoming possible in Letcher County could not have been achieved without collaboration

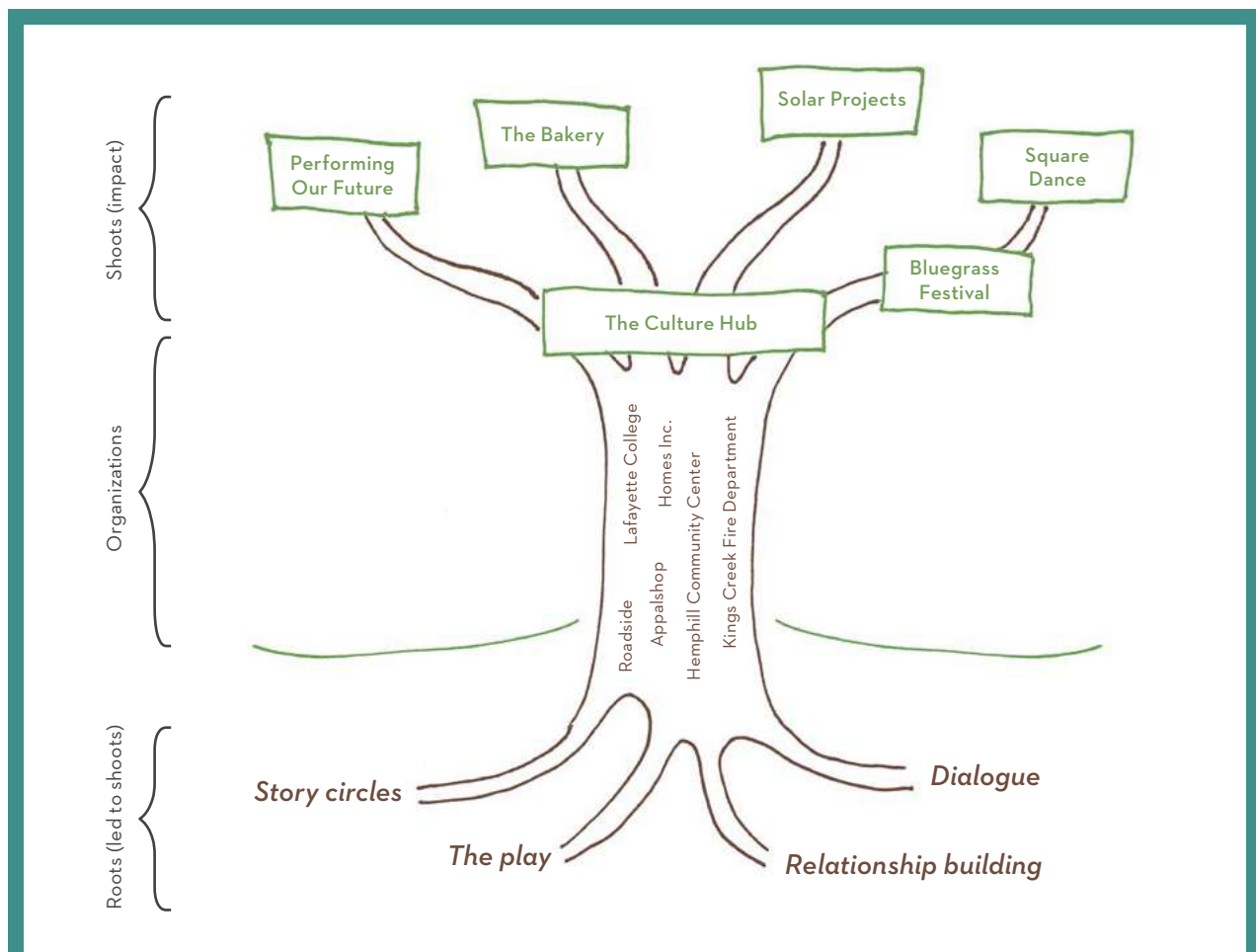


Figure 6. The Culture Hub's Successes visualized from "Roots to Shoots"

and teamwork amongst the various organizations and individuals who have learned how to work together through their work with the Culture Hub. While prior to the Culture Hub's work, people and organizations in Letcher County were working in an isolated and more individualistic way, "now, we share the resources and work together to acquire resources. Generally, we now work together for the common good," in a way that looks beyond individual differences in worldview and politics (which still remain) in order to change the community in concrete ways that address local needs (interviews with V. Horn, October 28, 2020 and A. Cotton, January 26, 2021).

The concrete changes that are occurring in the community are providing tangible evidence that after so many decades of dependence on outside employers and economic forces, it is in fact possible for Letcher County residents to "own what we make." While there had previously been a sense of powerlessness among local residents, particularly with regard to economic activity, the early results of the Culture Hub's work are building optimism that re-growing a community-owned economy is possible. Now, "they all (community members) want to see things grow—businesses, partnerships, communities grow," (interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). The following sections describe these areas of growth in more detail.

## Strengthened Relationships

Prior to the Culture Hub's conception, community leaders had often admired one another, but rarely associated with or knew each other. "Although we were glad for one organization's success, we were a little bit jealous because we were all vying for the very same entertainment dollars—what few there were on Friday and Saturday nights" (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). As a result of their work together through the Culture Hub, existing relationships between long-standing community organizations were

strengthened, and new relationships were formed between organizations and individuals who were not previously working together, including those with prior animosities. This expanded and strengthened relationship infrastructure (See Figure 7), which was developed through the methods of dialoguing and joint work described in the previous section, laid the foundation for economic and cultural empowerment in Letcher County.

As a result of new relationship infrastructure, resource sharing is now the norm; businesses and organizations support each other and attend each other's events. "We've all come to know that we're stronger together at the end of the day. You know that you can't accomplish alone as an organization what you can accomplish as a group" (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). Even Bill, who previously would never engage with Appalshop, can now proudly discuss the Hub's accomplishments. As he says, The Hub does so much in such a manner "you can't just point to one thing" (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021).

## A Shift in Cultural Self-Perception

These new and stronger relationships have also started to shift the culture of dependency in Letcher County, as Culture Hub members now have direct experiences through their work together of owning what they make. The Hub has allowed the county's people and communities to have agency over their assets and economy as well as agency over their stories. Letcher County once had a "bounded imagination" in understanding what they were capable of. They "did not own what [they] made, because what [they] had was prescribed to [them]. It felt like being in prison" (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). With the county's "imagination becoming unbounded," they are more able to see the full array of possibilities and opportunities.

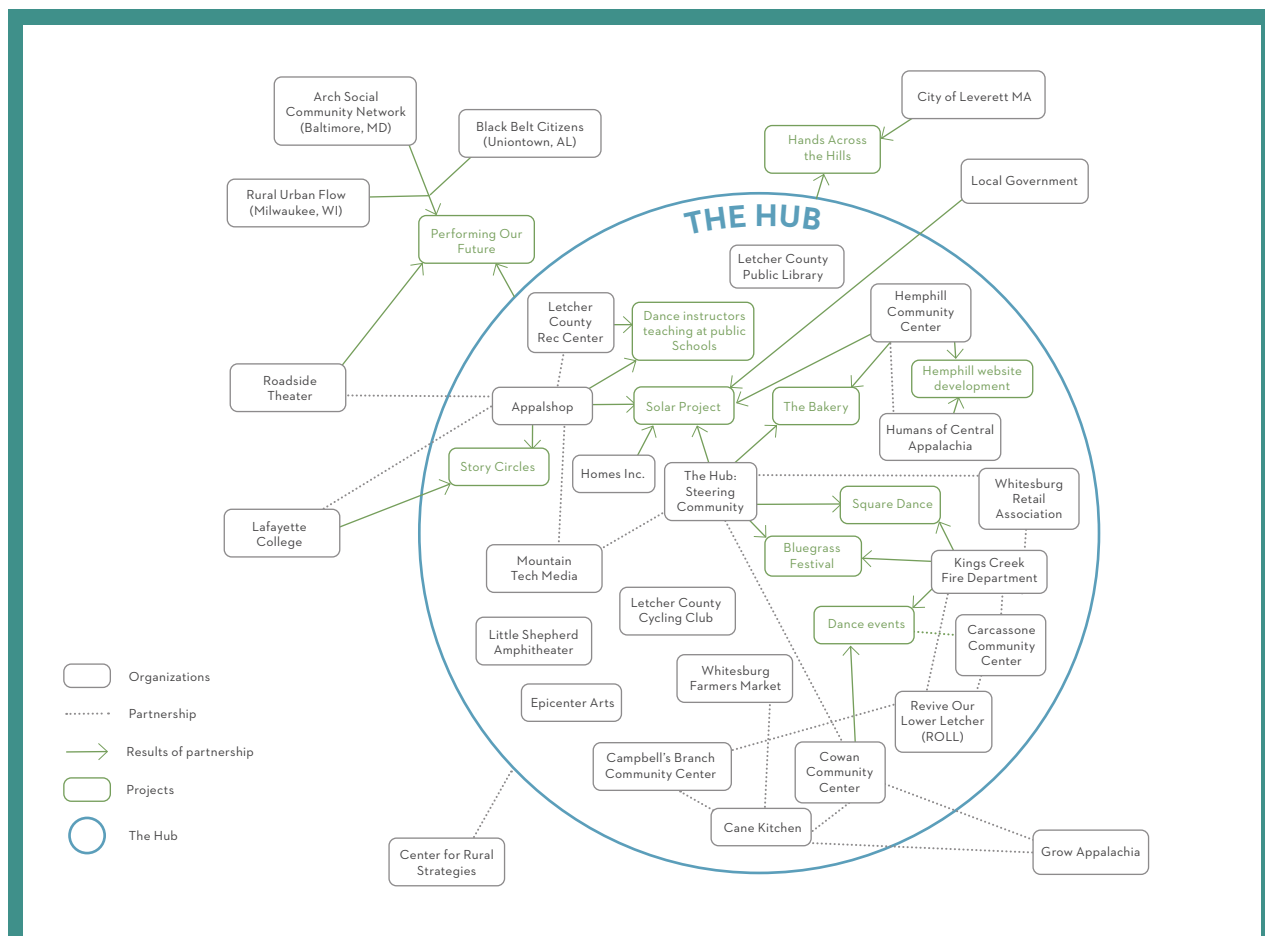


Figure 7. New and Strengthened Relationships Resulting From The Hub's Work

Dee recalled that with the advancement of globalization, “rural people began to identify with what the community did for a living, but really more what it once did. We used to be farmers, we used to be loggers. We used to be coal miners, we used to work at the plant down the road. In a country where everything turns on identity, it’s important to have those ways to describe yourself. And I think in some ways, we were divided by coal mining and coal politics. But that wasn’t our true culture. Our culture was looking after each other, sharing a meal, looking after somebody’s kids when the parents are sick. That’s more of the traditional culture here” (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021). Through the work of the Hub, the county has

revived and built on their traditional culture, both in their relationship infrastructure as well as their revitalized cultural traditions like the bluegrass festival and square dance.

## New Community-Led Projects

The Hub has also helped launch specific projects that emerge from the initiative of Hub members and the web of relationships and engagements the Hub facilitates. One such project, which might have seemed improbable in coal country, was a local solar project. This project began because nonprofit organizations in Letcher



Square Dance at Carcassone Community Center. Image Credit: Malcolm J. Wilson, courtesy of Ben Fink

County were dealing with crippling electric bills that were far higher than those facing private residences. Gwen decided to canvass coal miners about their opinions on solar. “I got them a beer and said, ‘Hey boys, let’s talk about a solar project at Hemphill Community Center. I want to know what you think.’ And we talked about it, and they said ‘...the gravy train has pulled out. And we got to find a new way. And if you can get those things [solar panels] on top of the building, then by all means do so’” (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

The Culture Hub hosted a campaign to raise the funds; Appalshop raised \$400,000 and other partners in the Hub raised an additional \$50,000. Ben also mentioned how important local government was in bringing about the solar project. The project required twenty-year leases on some of the county-owned buildings, which was made possible by the county chief executive who Ben says is “the only Republican I’ve ever voted for in my life.” While Ben disagreed with many of his political positions, he was responsive to Culture Hub partners

in a way that the Democratic candidate was not (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). The first round of the solar project is currently finished and running, with three Culture Hub partners solarized: the local housing non-profit HOMES Inc., Appalshop, and Hemphill Community Center. It’s “saving people money all day” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).

Another project with a strong economic component that grew out of the Hub’s focus on supporting initiatives with community ownership is The Black Sheep Bakery. The idea for the bakery came from events at Hemphill Community Center, during which members of the Hemphill Community Center would cook over a fire and serve food to those who had gathered. This sparked dreams of the community center having a brick oven that could cook pizza and bread (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). During a visit by a funder related to the work of the Hub and Appalshop, the funder approached Gwen and asked her about her “wish list” for funding. Soon after that conversation,





The Black Sheep Bakery's Brick Oven. Image Credit: Malcolm J. Wilson, courtesy of Ben Fink

the Hemphill Community Center received a check for \$15,000 from the Culture Hub to finance the brick oven (Davis, 2018). USDA Rural Development also provided grants to fund the bakery. Community members broke ground on the oven in February 2018 and the Black Sheep Bakery became a social enterprise soon thereafter, in June of 2018 (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

Hands Across the Hills, the ongoing cross-partisan, cross-regional dialogue exchange with Leverett, Massachusetts – which Tiffany terms a “learning exchange” – inspired the name for the bakery (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). During the first visit, people from Leverett showed people from Letcher County popular local places. One of these

places, which had also supplied lunch one day of the dialogue, was the Black Sheep Deli (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). Gwen mentioned that she had always “felt like the black sheep in my family.” Everyone else agreed, so they reached out to the staff from the Massachusetts bakery to see if they would allow them to use the Black Sheep name in their new local bakery in Letcher County. The team from Leverett loved the idea and sent the Culture Hub members merchandise featuring their logo. These sister bakeries with their shared name symbolized the new relationship that these two towns and groups of very different people had developed with one another (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

The Bakery, apart from serving delicious pizza and baked goods, serves an important role in helping Letcher County address its addiction and incarceration crisis by hiring formerly incarcerated people. This addresses a critical need in Letcher County, where the high number of people struggling with addiction results in a similarly high number of drug offenses and people with prison records, which represent a serious barrier to employment following release or sentencing by the Letcher County Drug Court. Gwen Johnson, who heads the Bakery, was inspired to employ formerly incarcerated people after her nephew was unable to find a job due to his prior incarceration. Because the Drug Court has a work requirement, she decided to intentionally make “a place willing to forgive and willing to train folks who are searching for acceptance and work. Hemphill Community Center believes these folks are a latent asset of the community” (Davis, 2018). “Before, we had all these people sitting in jails due to addiction. Now there is a way to hire them,” she says (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

In addition to providing much-needed jobs to a hard-to-hire population, the Bakery is doing what all small, locally-owned businesses do: creating economic ripple effects in the local community through its procurement and everyday operations as well as the profits it



generates. As a social enterprise connected directly to the Hemphill Community Center, the bakery gives all profits it makes to the community center, which are used to pay the center's employees and keep the center open and offering a variety of activities and services to the community. The Bakery also sources locally and generates revenues to pay its vendors, so there is "this little ecology of finance growing around the Bakery project" which did not exist before (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

## New Regional and National Coalitions

The Hub has also helped create several coalitions connecting Letcher County to other places around the country. Hands Across The Hills is the partnership which emerged between Leverett, Massachusetts and Letcher County. The heated dialogue created great friendships, and the towns continue to engage with each other's happenings. "Before, they told us they 'viewed us as cardboard cut-outs'... it's not so easy to dismiss people when you know them," said Gwen Johnson, who participated in the exchange (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020). The national Performing Our Future (POF) coalition, including the Hub, was founded in 2018. The other delegations include Black Belt Citizens in Uniontown, Alabama; Rural Urban Flow in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and the Arch Social Community Network in Baltimore, Maryland. These organizations, and the Performing Our Future coalition itself, are built according to many of the same practices and principles as the Letcher County Culture Hub, and took the Culture Hub as their initial model (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). According to Tiffany Turner, the current lead organizer for POF, the initiative is less about defining or redefining who they are, as it is about "revealing who we are behind the stereotype" (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020).

Rather than focusing on national and divisive issues, Performing Our Future focuses on identifying community needs, supporting community centers of power and finding ways to address those needs by pooling resources or fundraising. Tiffany says that she appreciates how Performing Our Future prides itself on "not being trend-followers... we want to make sure that we stay true to our core beliefs, which is building a community on what we make. So it's kind of like the world is following us... And it's something that no matter what happens, no matter who's president, no matter who's your senator or who represents you, this is still something that the community needs (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020).

The Culture Hub "gets at the core of what is happening in our country right now. We are forging a model of how people can overcome divisions that we've been taught are insurmountable, which is a sick narrative" (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). The Hub has "started breaking down barriers, encouraging people to work as a community and to move beyond labels and stereotypes. In some ways, the Culture Hub enriched life in the community and tried to bring people together to work across lines as a community" (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021). As people began to have conversations with one another, they realized they were willing to work beyond their differences in order to change the community and build together (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). This dialoguing and co-creative work has created strong relationships that have built a strong infrastructure; even disagreements cannot rupture the structure.

Ben believes that the Hub's biggest impact has been showing people, communities, and organizations who saw themselves as detached and without allies and friends how many allies, connections, and collaborators they actually have. This network stretches locally – as Ben said, one can't underestimate how many commu-

nities within a small rural area can be divided against each other—and nationally with partners in places like West Baltimore, the Black Belt of Alabama, Western Massachusetts, and Wisconsin (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). Collective power has allowed organizations that were once more isolated and individualistic to work with one another, to share resources in pursuit of communal wealth (phone interview with V. Horn, October 29, 2020). As Valerie says, “people feel their work is more valued” when working in a group of collaborators as opposed to working as an individual (phone interview with V. Horn, 2020). “We now work together for a common good and we recognize the better one organization does, the better we all do. The Hub has helped build relationships, trustworthiness, and dependability” (ibid.).

## An “Unbounded” Collective Imagination

Annie Jane described the Hub as creating “honest, integrated, generative, communal, and mutually-beneficial” relationships (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). The approach is to address “needs for the community, by the community” and do it in a way that is not about transactional relationships (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020). There are sectors of the population that still do not engage with the Hub. However, many have become involved through knowing Bill. Initially, if the coal industry was for something, Appalshop was against it; if Appalshop was for something, the coal industry was against it. “Neither of us wanted to give in.” But according to Bill, this animosity has since lessened (phone interview with B. Meade, February 1, 2021). Financial enterprises like the Black Sheep Bakery are providing employment and bringing revenue to the town (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021). Annie Jane believes that their work, more than any project she knows of, is very broad and far-reaching. The Hub “engages people from various racial demographics, socioeconomic backgrounds,

and political views” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021).

Dee thinks the work is “imaginative.” It is not fettered by pessimism or past shortcomings; rather, it manages to remain hopeful and optimistic and is built on values that connect people. “It’s a practice built on thoughtful theory” (phone interview with D. Davis, January 22, 2021). The solar project may be the biggest physical accomplishment, but more importantly it represents the idea of unbounded imagination (phone interview with B. Fink, December 3, 2020). People’s ambitions have grown. Their sense of the possible has grown. Their confidence and trust in one another has grown (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). In early 2020, storms raged through the area alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability of community members to respond to the disaster was made possible by their increased trust in one another, their “ability to move and leap together.” She believes that the “community at large is more agile because the Culture Hub makes a space for more agility” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). It has created a connected network of people and installed structures in place for how money and other resources can flow in the community.

With the disaster response, community members could easily harness and redistribute resources as a collective quickly. This effort involved Annie Jane, Valerie, and Bill standing in a circle in the Appalshop parking lot with masks on early in the COVID-19 pandemic, trying to figure out how to get \$3,000 worth of groceries out to the community (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). Because everyone in the Hub represents the larger community, no one stands alone; Bill and his friends at the Fire Department redistributed groceries while Gwen worked with the local grocery store to ensure that gift certificates were available and could be safely picked up. Meanwhile, Valerie was cooking meals to feed hundreds of people (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26, 2021). During the pandemic, there has been discussion on how to build things that

will be useful even after the pandemic; for example, they've managed to fund the construction of a pavilion at Hemphill that can be a gathering space for the community (phone interview with G. Johnson, October 19, 2020).

Strong community centers of power like Hemphill/Black Sheep, CANE Community Kitchen, and Cowan Community Center serve as safe spaces for people and as reminders of the resources people can access (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14, 2020).

The Hub is overcoming around nationally divisive but non-local issues by promoting concrete joint work on local issues. Through this joint work, they are figuring out how to break through political and racial barriers and creating a model that is “prescient of the moment” (phone interview with A. Cotten, January 26 2021). Ultimately, the “unbounded” vision would be to see healthy community centers of power in all communities across the United States – the model of a Culture Hub in every community (Zoom interview with T. Turner, October 14 2020).

# CONCLUSION

Poverty tours of Appalachia, which have been conducted by journalists and presidents for decades (Stine, 2019), have solidified a collective understanding of the region as largely white, poor, uneducated, backwards, lazy, and racist. Books like the best-selling memoir *The Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) furthered this monolithic depiction of Appalachia, arguing that success cannot be found in Appalachia, that it is a place one must leave behind. The region is often characterized deterministically: poverty and despair are inevitable and inescapable. Residents of Letcher County who we spoke with for this case study affirmed that economic devastation, health epidemics, and stagnant economic opportunities are certainly a reality for the region. And like many towns and regions across the United States, Letcher County has struggled in recent years with heightened racial tensions, mistrust in large corporations and government alike, and intense political polarization.

Yet through their work together on the Culture Hub and how they told the Culture Hub's story, they emphasized that these regional challenges are not, in fact, intractable. Rather, the work of the Culture Hub illustrates that it is possible to work across traditional divides to identify cross-cutting local priorities and take effective, inclusive, multi-stakeholder action to address them. Similarly, it is possible to envision and create new, bottom-up local enterprises owned by local residents who play by their own rules—for example, in hiring hard-to-hire employees—in a place where the local economy has been dominated by an external industry and then left in ruins when that industry withdraws. It is possible to revitalize lost or dying cultural traditions, to shift how people see themselves and their neighbors, and to build productive working relationships between longtime adversaries, even if there are plenty of points on which they still disagree.

The story of the Letcher County Culture Hub not only illustrates that this is possible in Appalachia, it also offers lessons on how to approach doing this work, which hold insights for other communities facing similar issues of polarization, economic decline, and crises in self-perception and cultural identity. As described in this case study, one key to the Culture Hub's success stemmed from an authentic and ecumenical approach to relationship-building. This approach was exemplified in how Ben Fink initially approached the work of developing organizational partnerships for the Hub and in how the Hub members facilitated dialogue both within their community and beyond it. Another key to the Hub's success lay in the realization that many of the community's apparent divisions were externally sown, first by the coal industry and later by opportunistic national political and social movements.

In the spirit of grassroots work, Hub members deliberately stayed clear of these highly charged national debates and remained disciplined in their focus on local assets, challenges, and priorities. Tapping into existing community cultural traditions that were widely shared, such as bluegrass music, square dancing, local food and cooking, and the work of local organizations, they re-kindled the community connections and local cultural pride that were historically characteristic of Appalachia, leveraging these assets to start achieving visible successes for the local community. Successes like a once-improbable solar project that could lower crippling energy bills, and a new local business that could provide employment to formerly addicted and incarcerated people. Successes like a play, which provided a tangible outlet for a new local narrative to be constructed, enacted, and shared with others beyond Whitesburg, as well as a new national coalition, *Performing our Future*, inspired by the Culture Hub's work.

These tangible successes – the “shoots” of the Culture Hub’s deep-rooted activities – served to reinforce the effective processes of joint work from which they resulted. Processes of active, curious, and open-minded listening, of discovering and connecting across differences rather than avoiding or papering over them, of exploring and re-defining a local, strength-based narrative and sharing that within and outside the community, and of identifying local consensus priorities are all powerful tools for change-making with applicability beyond Kentucky. In a future of increased exposure to economic and climate-related shocks, the

ability of communities to “unbound their imaginations,” reclaim and tell their own stories, re-envision themselves and what they are capable of, and join forces across difference to get things done may prove to be essential capacities for locally-led development. In what many see as times of unprecedented divisiveness at the community and even family level in the United States (Lauter, 2021), the relationship-based approach to local community and economic development demonstrated by the Letcher County Culture Hub offers a powerful and relevant set of practices from which to learn.



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