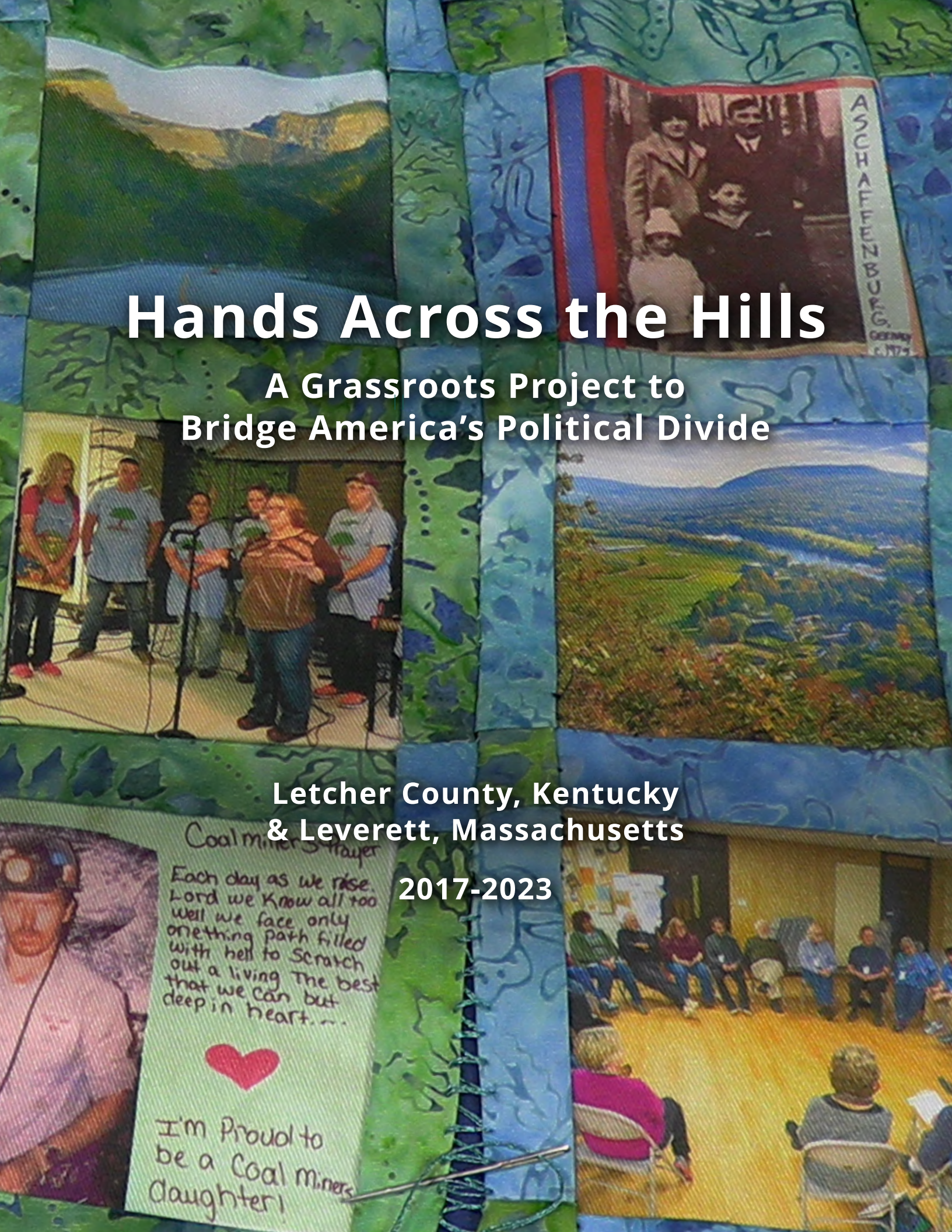


Hands Across the Hills

A Grassroots Project to
Bridge America's Political Divide

Letcher County, Kentucky
& Leverett, Massachusetts

2017-2023



Coal miner's prayer
Each day as we rise,
Lord we know all too
well we face only
one thing path filled
with hell to scratch
out a living The best
that we can but
deep in heart...



I'm Proud to
be a Coal Miners
daughter!

“I learned so much from listening to the perspectives of rural Kentuckians whose lives are so different from mine. But even more meaningfully.... on the darkest of days, when too much time on Twitter made me want to pull the covers over my head and wail, seeing the deep human connections Hands Across the Hills made across lines of difference restored my faith in humanity.”

Erica Etelson

Co-founder, Rural Urban Bridge Initiative

"The Hands Across the Hills project exemplified the best of peacebuilding in the U.S. after the 2016 election. It was not a ready model imposed on communities, but a program built by communities in Massachusetts and Kentucky to form a trusted partnership to understand and mitigate increasing polarization in the United States."

Elizabeth (Liz) Hume

Executive Director, Alliance for Peacebuilding

“Hands Across the Hills is different from any other organization or dialogue group I’ve ever worked with. The personal connections, humanity, and leadership are remarkable. I believe the wisdom embodied in so many participants will transform all our communities into better places for everyone.”

Johanna Solomon

School of Peace and Conflict Studies, Kent State University

Hands Across the Hills

A Grassroots Project
to Bridge America's Political Divide

Letcher County, Kentucky
& Leverett, Massachusetts

2017-2023

This is not a book by any one author. Like the Hands Across the Hills project itself, this book has been created out of the perspectives and voices of its participants, through a collective, facilitated process.

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Jay Frost, Gwen Johnson, Sarah Pirtle

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“I can see better by the light in your eyes.”

- from the Hands Across the Hills song

To Jay Frost, who extended his hand first

To Paula Green, of blessed memory

To Ben Fink, for his leadership

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The first dialogue circle in Leverett, MA, fall 2017. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz

Hands Across the Hills Participants

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Katelyn Caudill
John Clayton
Richard Connelly
Annie Jane Cotten
Barbara D'Arthenay
Letha Dollarhyde
Sharon Dunn
Debra Fields
Nell Fields
Pat Fiero
Ben Fink
Judi Fonsh
Kip Fonsh
Velda Fraley
Jay Frost
Mike Gover

Paula Green
Alyssa Helton
Valerie Ison Horn
Carol Ison
Kendall Ison
Gwen Johnson
Stacey Lennard
Susan Lynton
Jim Perkins
Sarah Pirtle
Debbie Roth-Howe
Rachel Sexton
Herby Smith
Dominik Spangler
Pam Szczesny
Barbara Tiner
Tyler Ward
Tom Wolff

Vision Statement of Hands Across the Hills

We are residents of Letcher County, Kentucky, and Leverett, Massachusetts, who came together in the aftermath of the 2016 election to understand each other better. We have gathered together in both of our places to take part in dialogue and cultural exchange. Though we hold diverse positions on many issues, we have learned how much we agree on — about ourselves, our communities, and the country we share.

We believe our country is not divided beyond repair. We see this as a myth that's been sold to us by politicians and mass media, to hide our nation's all-too-real economic disparities and weaken our natural solidarity. We understand that our politics, like all other parts of our lives, are complex. They are rooted in our cultures, our families, and our stories. No matter how monolithic our communities may appear, they include people with many different beliefs. And when we took the time to listen closely, we recognized each other as friends and neighbors.

We believe this is possible anywhere. But it takes work. It requires creating a space where everyone's worth is recognized, everyone's perspective counts, and everyone is ready to be challenged. It involves opening up about painful experiences, putting in the effort to understand what's foreign to us, taking responsibility for the accuracy of the information we consume, and refusing to dehumanize anyone, even people whose views we find hateful. It means loving our neighbors as they are, without assuming we can change how they think, act, or vote.

We will support each other's communities. We will overcome the influence of those who benefit from dividing us. We will speak and act for ourselves. We agree our fate is bound up together, locally and nationally, and we are committed to working side by side.

Adopted October 2019

Introduction



*Hands Across the Hills in east Kentucky, 2018. Some are holding a newspaper article about the project.
Photo by Richie Davis*

THE 2016 ELECTION in the United States exposed an underlying disconnection and estrangement among the people, and brought the nation's political polarization into the public light. Many came to perceive their fellow citizens as divided into two broad factions, roughly equal in size, with radically different political preferences and cultural experiences.

These contrasts became sharply focused in the days and weeks following Donald Trump's win. Many of his supporters believed that, at last, they had a strong leader who would respond to their needs and values, while many of his opponents struggled with shock, anger, despondency, and even mourning, convinced that the country was headed for a grim, divisive, and possibly violent era.

The deep divides exposed by the election appeared to extend well beyond politics, encompassing deeper experiences of culture, race, religion, gender, immigration, and more. Media voices on both sides all but silenced civil discourse. Even friends and family members struggled to communicate with one another, and many remain estranged to this day.

Was there a way out of this morass? Could citizens reach out successfully across the divide, find common ground, and interact in harmony?

The answer is yes. It hardly seemed possible at the start, but two disparate communities — one in liberal western Massachusetts, the other in the heart of Appalachian coal country — united to create their own solution.

In Leverett, MA, a small but committed group of local residents decided to look for ways to connect with citizens on the other side of the divide. Perhaps they could find a way to understand others committed to distinctly different beliefs.

In Letcher County, KY, another group of residents had been building relationships across their own local political, religious, and cultural divides, looking to address the economic collapse and political dysfunction that plagued them all.

In the spring of 2017, these two communities found each other. Over the following six years they talked, sang, worked, played, argued, and stayed together. This exchange project, which came to be known as Hands Across the Hills, proved that, yes, there is a way to safely and productively engage across the divide, to address stark differences, and to create enduring common bonds.

This book tells the story of how it happened.

How to Use This Book

This book, which features stories, insights, and resources from the six years of Hands Across the Hills, is intended for three kinds of audiences:

- For those wishing to learn from Hands Across the Hills to do similar projects — organizers, trainers, facilitators — this book offers resources (*including training documents in Appendix 1*) that can help with identifying key program components, planning and organizing events, and finding a place to start.
- For those wishing to study Hands Across the Hills — journalists, scholars, researchers — this book offers dozens of new, original articles and reflections by participants, as well as a comprehensive list of previously published articles, interviews, television features, and documentaries about the project.
- For those who were involved in Hands Across the Hills — participants, supporters, spectators — this book intends to capture memories, recall friendships and life experiences, and document the story of what committed citizens can do to bridge serious political and cultural divides.

For a Bridge Across Divides to be Possible:

Prior work in the communities of Leverett, MA and Letcher County, KY

A bridge is not built out of thin air: it requires a strong foundation on either side of the gap. Hands Across the Hills was forged by two community-based organizations: the Bridging Committee of the Leverett Alliance (Leverett, MA), and the Letcher County Culture Hub (Letcher County, KY). These organizations co-designed Hands Across the Hills in a way that made the work accessible to neighbors in both places and encouraged participants to extend the impacts of the project into their wider communities.

Leverett, MA: Origins of a Bridging Project

The 2016 election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States upset and confounded many residents of rural Leverett, Massachusetts. A small grassroots activist group named the Leverett Peace Commission called a meeting at the public library in December 2016, for town residents to air feelings and brainstorm paths of action to fortify the Leverett community. Two Leverett residents facilitated this meeting: Paula Green, a peacebuilder and expert dialogue facilitator, and Tom Wolff, a longtime facilitator and community development consultant; both would play a major role in Hands Across the Hills.

Several entities were established out of the December gathering. A new town-wide organization later named the Leverett Alliance would oversee committees for Community Building, Climate Action, Sanctuary, Youth and Schools, a Book Group on

A small grassroots group called a meeting for Leverett residents to air feelings and brainstorm paths of action.



The Leverett Peace Commission steering committee in January 2017: Jim Perkins, Paula Green, Tom Wolff, Barbara Tiner, and Pat Fiero (taking the picture). All would become part of Hands Across the Hills.

vulnerable American communities, and Bridging Divides. This last committee was suggested by another soon-to-be cofounder of Hands Across the Hills, Jay Frost, who imagined Leverett folks (who voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton) connecting with a community that voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, with the view of trying to understand each other's positions and reasons.

In March 2017, Frost read an article on Salon.com written by Ben Fink, a community organizer affiliated with Appalshop, a community media organization in the coalfield county of Letcher County, Kentucky. Fink, who had grown up in the Northeast and lived in the Midwest before moving to Letcher County in 2015, wrote about his work alongside residents to start a broad-based community network called the Letcher County Culture Hub, which brought together residents of various political leanings to rebuild their communities in the wake of the collapse of the coal industry. Like many in Leverett, he expressed his own distress at the election of Donald Trump, but also his conviction — based on personal experience — that residents of so-called “Trump Country” were ready, willing, and able to partner with neighbors left and right, near and far, to build a common future as active participants in democracy. He ended his article with an invitation to collaborate. Frost took him up on it.

Letcher County, KY: Creation of a Culture Hub

The crisis that precipitated the Letcher County Culture Hub took place six or seven years before the 2016 election, with the final collapse of the central Appalachian coal industry. The communities that had mined the coal that powered America for generations — already among the poorest and sickest places in the country — were left with no viable

As Letcher County residents shared their stories, they recognized how many values and dreams they shared, across divides.

source of income. In the years that followed, storytellers and producers at the community media center Appalshop collaborated with their neighbors to create new theater, film, music, and radio pieces about the search for a sustainable future. As residents shared their stories, they recognized how many values and dreams they shared, across generational, geographical, political, religious, and other divides. They began building a cooperative network they eventually named the Letcher County Culture Hub.

The Culture Hub, formally founded in early 2016, was rooted in Appalshop's multi-year partnership with Lafayette College's Economic Empowerment & Global Learning Project. The Culture Hub was founded on the principle that every community has latent assets they can turn into new community wealth (in the language of these economist colleagues), but only if they can unbind their imaginations and tell new stories about themselves.

By March 2017, the Letcher County Culture Hub included about fifteen community-led organizations — community centers, volunteer fire departments, grassroots groups, local businesses, arts and cultural organizations — working together to build a culture and economy unlike the exploitative one they had left behind. In the coming years, they would start new businesses, revive endangered cultural events, influence government and philanthropic policy, become first responders in times of crisis, build the largest non-industrial solar energy project in the east Kentucky coalfields, and partner with similar grassroots organizations from the Black Belt of Alabama to the inner city of West Baltimore.

If the coal industry had created wealth for a favored few — leaving the rest of the community exploited and impoverished — the economy they envisioned would be governed by a new credo: *we own what we make*.



Letcher County residents collaboratively envision the Letcher County Culture Hub. Photo by Malcolm J. Wilson

Timeline of Hands Across the Hills

MARCH 2016

First meeting of the Letcher County Culture Hub in Kentucky

DECEMBER 2016

Post-election town meeting in Leverett, Massachusetts, giving rise to the Leverett Alliance and the idea of bridging post-election divides

MARCH 2017

Ben Fink, a cultural organizer living in Letcher County, KY, publishes the article "Building Democracy in Trump Country." Jay Frost of Leverett reads it on Salon.com, and begins an email exchange

SUMMER 2017

After several months of working through initial hesitation and mistrust, representatives from the Leverett Alliance and the Letcher County Culture Hub commit to participate in dialogue and cultural exchange over a three-day weekend that fall in Leverett. Participants from both communities work together to come up with a name for the project: "Hands Across the Hills"



OCTOBER 2017

Residents of Letcher County travel to Leverett for the first exchange weekend



APRIL 2018

Residents of Leverett travel to Letcher County for the second exchange weekend



JANUARY 2019

Bridge4Unity, inspired in part by Hands Across the Hills, holds a 3-day dialogue and exchange visit exploring race and racism among participants of African, Indigenous, and European descent. The new project involves multiracial groups from Kentucky and Massachusetts, including several Hands Across the Hills participants, and a third contingent from Beaufort County, South Carolina (which hosted the initial 3-day event). Bridge4Unity would continue to engage communities in the three states in grassroots efforts to better understand and address the impacts of racism across their communities

OCTOBER 2019

Residents of Letcher County travel to Leverett for Hands Across the Hills' third exchange weekend



MARCH 2020

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic stops the planning of a fourth dialogue weekend in Letcher County; dialogues move to Zoom, with reduced participation

APRIL-MAY 2021

Hands Across the Hills hosts public Zoom discussions: "Guns, Coal, Vaccines and Abortion" and "Can We Trust the Government?"



NOVEMBER 2021

Hands Across the Hills hosts a three-day residential "Training in Dialogue Across Divides" in Leverett, co-led by Paula Green and Ben Fink, including participants from Leverett and Letcher County and 25 trainees from eight other states

JANUARY 2022

Hands Across the Hills incorporates as a nonprofit organization

FEBRUARY 2022

Death of Paula Green, organizer of Hands Across the Hills in Leverett and lead dialogue facilitator

APRIL 2023

Hands Across the Hills holds a second Dialogue Across Divides training, co-led by Ben Fink and Johanna Solomon of Kent State University in Ohio, including participants from Leverett and Letcher County and 19 trainees from nine other states and Washington, D.C.

MAY 2023

Hands Across the Hills' Board of Directors, in collaboration with participants in Letcher County and Leverett, determines the project has reached an ending point, and decides to dissolve the nonprofit

JULY 2023

Public closing event in Letcher County, with participants from Leverett attending by Zoom

OCTOBER 2023

Private closing event in Leverett with participants from Letcher County attending in-person

Differences Across the Hills

Letcher County, KY and Leverett, MA share a similar rural landscape, tied together by the long arc of the Appalachian mountain range. But the differences were striking — rooted in stark contrasts in income and opportunity driven by western Massachusetts’ function as a hub of higher education and east Kentucky’s complex history as a center of two extractive industries: timber and coal mining.

The participation in Hands Across the Hills from each area was also different, with the Kentucky side recruiting from an entire county and Massachusetts drawing from one small town. Participants from Leverett, MA universally opposed Trump, reflecting their town’s overwhelming “blue” majority, while participants from Letcher County, KY were more diverse in their votes and political views, making that group more “purple” than their county overall.

Numbers do not define a community, but they do offer useful context:

LETCHER COUNTY, KY	LEVERETT, MA
<i>2016 Election Results:</i>	
80% Trump , 17% Clinton	79% Clinton , 15% Trump
<i>Median household income:</i>	
\$38,466	\$105,833
<i>Poverty rate:</i>	
29%	9%
<i>Education:</i>	
13% have a bachelor's degree or higher	63% have a bachelor's degree or higher
<i>Employment:</i>	
40%	62%
<i>Median Age:</i>	
43	49
<i>Racial makeup:</i>	
97% white ; 2% multi-racial; any other racial identity is less than 2%	87% white ; 8% multi-racial; any other racial identity is less than 2%
<i>Population density:</i>	
Rural (64 people per square mile. Total population: 21,548)	Rural (82 people per square mile. Total population: 1,865)

Except for election results, numbers are from Data USA, 2022.

1.

Starting Points

“We Don’t Understand These People...
and They Don’t Understand Us”

WAS IT EVEN POSSIBLE to create unity in the chaos that followed the 2016 presidential election? When a small group of progressive voters in Leverett, Massachusetts formed a “bridging committee” a few weeks after the election, they started by looking close to home, trying to talk with Trump voters in their own communities, to no avail. Eventually they found a partner in an unlikely place — a community in far-off Kentucky where people had been struggling to come together across their own divides.

Hands Across the Hills was born from an article from Kentucky, offering a chance to collaborate, and an email from Massachusetts, attempting to make good on that offer.



Theater games during a Hands Across the Hills exchange visit. Photo by Roswell Angier

“ Leverett being a very progressive community, many of our residents were angered, we were depressed, we felt helpless. We thought, what are we going to do? How can we deal with this?

Jay Frost • Leverett, MA

Radio interview May 7, 2018

“ I felt like there was a kind of a pause in all of my personal connections with people that voted differently than I did, and a pause inside myself to where I hardly knew how to approach any conversation, afraid that it would go to the Donald Trump conversation.

Nell Fields • Letcher County, KY

Radio interview March 1, 2018

“ We really wanted to meet face-to-face, and heart-to-heart, to be able to talk to folks who had voted very differently than us. People would come up to us even a year later and say, *Did you change their vote?* And we finally said: it was not about changing the vote. It was about trying to understand what caused the vote.

Sharon Dunn • Leverett, MA

Podcast interview Sept. 1, 2022

“ I knew it was a conversation that needed to be had. So I just got my courage up and said, okay, I'll be one of the ones who stands out and speaks up. And yeah, there were folks in our group that were very afraid that we would not be heard and that we would not be accepted. And the thing that I kept worrying about was that maybe they wouldn't be able to forgive us for voting for President Trump.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Radio interview Nov. 28, 2018

Seeking Common Ground in Massachusetts

By Jay Frost • Leverett, MA; published as “Leverett Group Seeks Common Ground” in the Greenfield Recorder (MA) October 5, 2017

Like millions of Americans, I was devastated by Donald Trump’s electoral college win in November 2016. During the days that followed, I encountered many others — friends and strangers alike — who felt the same way.

However, rather than dwelling on my negative response, for the first time in my life I decided to become involved politically, something beyond simply participating in local demonstrations. I wanted something with impact, an effort that would deliver direct, recognizable results while moving forward in what I anticipated (correctly) would be difficult times.

So a week or so after the election, when the Leverett Peace Committee called a meeting to discuss ways in which our local community of Leverett, MA might respond, I decided to attend, along with about 70 like-minded neighbors. I am not generally one to speak up at these gatherings, but early in the meeting, I came up with the idea of connecting with a community where a lot of people voted for Trump in some type of exchange project, to find common ground and move forward together.

Meeting participants agreed that this was a good idea. That night, we created an organization called the Leverett Alliance, which organized itself into six volunteer committees.

I joined the “bridging” committee, headed by Dr. Paula Green, a co-founder of the Leverett Peace Committee. Green has worldwide professional experience in peacebuilding, inter-group dialogue and conflict resolution. The bridging committee’s assignment was to explore the exchange concept.

To test the waters, we tried to connect with Trump voters in Leverett and neighboring communities. That didn’t work out. We did participate in a formal dialogue session with

**For the first time in
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members of the Pioneer Valley’s Muslim community, with Green as facilitator. This was a meaningful learning experience for everyone who participated.

Still, the bridging committee refused to let go of its initial objective: To connect with a community with political and cultural experiences different from our own.

In March 2017, I came across a fascinating web article entitled “Democracy in Trump Country” [see below]. The author, Ben Fink, was at that time a leader in a community organization called Appalshop. He lived in Whitesburg, Kentucky, the seat of Letcher County, in the heart of Appalachian coal country.

Fink’s article talks about the emergence of political power in the rural communities. It also explains Letcher County’s response to the election and how Appalshop brings together rural people from a variety of backgrounds through music, drama, film, and storytelling. The article concludes with a call for other communities to join in their efforts.

I took Fink’s cue and emailed him with Leverett’s “partnership” proposal. He responded enthusiastically, and after several telephone conferences, our group from Leverett and a group from Letcher County embarked on a unique cultural exchange and dialogue program.



A dialogue among Hands Across the Hills participants, Spring 2018. Photo by Richie Davis

Building Democracy in 'Trump Country'

By Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY; published on BillMoyers.com March 10, 2017 and in Salon March 25, 2017

A lot of people don't believe me when I tell them Letcher County, Kentucky, is one of the most open-minded places I've ever lived.

I might not have believed it either, before I moved here a year ago. I've spent most of my life in cities and suburbs, and I arrived with all the assumptions you can imagine about Central Appalachia and the people who live here.

But if you've been here, or to similar places, you know how wrong those assumptions can be. Yes, some people fly Confederate flags. One of them, down the road, used to share a front lawn with an anarchist environmentalist, and they got along fine. Yes, my northeastern accent sticks out. And as long as I'm open about who I am and interested in who they are, I've found almost everyone here is ready to open up, take me in and work together.

Letcher County went 79.8 percent for Donald Trump. He won every county in Kentucky, except the two that include Lexington and Louisville. Around 3 a.m. on election night, I woke up in a panic as three celebratory gunshots from next door shook my house.

The next morning it was hard to get out of bed. Was this still the same loving, open-minded place where I went to sleep last night? Did I belong here anymore?



Bill Meade. Photo by Clay Węgrzynowicz

My phone rang; it was Bill. Bill is fire chief in one of the remotest, poorest parts of the county. He and I had worked together a lot over the past year, most recently on a project to get energy costs down at the county's cash-strapped volunteer fire departments. Bill and his crew do a lot more than fight fires; they look after sick neighbors, get food to hungry families and otherwise work day and night to take care of their community, for no pay.

Still, Bill isn't your average partner for a social justice-oriented nonprofit. He's a former logger and mine owner. He's campaigned for some of the most right-wing candidates in

the area. And his interactions with public officials have been, well, colorful.

I let the phone ring. I didn't think I could talk to Bill that morning. He was going to be happy and peppy — he'd just won, after all — and he'd ask me how I was. What could I say? I'm doing bad, Bill. Four-fifths of this county just elected someone really scary.

Finally, I called him back.

He greeted me as always: "Why hello there, young feller! How're you this morning!" I hesitated: "Honestly, I'm not doing great."

Turns out he wasn't either. His close friend and longtime secretary was dying of cancer — and without her help, he'd need a few more days to find the power bills I'd asked him for. I told him of course, take the time you need, and that I was very sorry to hear the news. She would die a few days later.

I work at the Appalshop — originally short for "Appalachian Film Workshop." We were founded in 1969, with funding from the federal War on Poverty and the American Film Institute, as a program to teach young people in the mountains to make films. A few years later, when the government money stopped, some of those young people took it over and re-founded it for themselves.

Ever since, it's been a grassroots multimedia arts center: a film producer, theater company, radio station, record label, news outlet, youth media training program, deep regional archive and sometimes book and magazine publisher. It's put the means of cultural production in the hands of local people.

At the Appalshop, we work with stories. Stories are how we learn, how we make meaning out of our lives, how we understand who we are and what we can do, individually and together. The story of Appalachia, as told in so many reports from "Trump country," tends to be pretty depressing: broken people, victims of poverty and unemployment and addiction, clinging desperately to a divisive and hateful politics as their last hope.



Appalshop. Photo by Stacey Lennard

My phone call with Bill, like so many other moments I could describe, hints at a different kind of story. A story suggesting that even after Election Day, we might not be as divided as we think. That even those who feel like we “lost” the election could ultimately win, together. And that if what we’re doing works here — listening to each other, caring for each other, working with each other on common ground toward common goals — it might work in other places, too.

One thing that’s different about Appalshop, compared with a lot of nonprofits, is we don’t do “community engagement” or “community outreach.” We aren’t looking to “help” or “save” the community. We are part of the community, no less and no more. One day, several months into my job, my boss pulled me aside and told me to stop starting sentences with “I’m not from here, but...” “You are from here now,” he said.

Of course, not everyone else from here loves what we do. I hear the term “Appalhead” now and again; I’m told it was real big five years ago, at the height of the so-called “Obama War on Coal.” It’s easy to call out the misinformation behind the label. No, we’re not all from New York and San Francisco; more than half of us grew up here. No, we’re not marching in liberal lockstep; our staff meetings can involve heated political debate. And no, we don’t hate coal miners, but industry executives and their political allies would like folks to think we do.

Still, if I lost a well-paying job when a mine shut down, and I saw people who claimed to be from my community raising money to make a film about how awful strip mining was instead of doing something to try to help my family, I’d probably be resentful, too. That resentment, I think, is a lot of what this election was about. County by county, the electoral map of the whole country looked a lot like Kentucky. Urban went Clinton. Rural went Trump. Rural won.

We can keep ignoring or ridiculing the resentment my neighbors feel, and calling them ignorant and otherwise illegitimate for the ways they think, talk and act. And we’ll keep getting the same results.

Or we can listen and try to understand where they’re coming from, even when we don’t like it, and see what we can build together.

For those of us who don't like how the election turned out, we're left with two choices. We can keep ignoring or ridiculing the resentment my neighbors feel, and calling them ignorant and otherwise illegitimate for the ways they think, talk and act. And we'll keep getting the same results. Or we can listen and try to understand where they're coming from, even when we don't like it, and see what we can build together.

If we want to understand the power in rural America and how it can be organized differently, first we need to know — who's got it? Who, exactly, has been doing the organizing?

Because either way, in this election we learned that rural people have power. Whether we like it or not.

The work I do is rooted in the Popular Front of the 1930s, when people came together across all kinds of differences to build power and fight against fascism. They understood power very simply, as organized people plus organized money. Since then, some organizers in this tradition have added a third term: organized ideas.

That's the formula I use every day:
Power = Organized People + Organized Money + Organized Ideas.

If we want to understand the power in rural America and how it can be organized differently, first we need to know — who's got it? Who, exactly, has been doing the organizing?

The answer is, as usual: not us. The bigotry and violence of the Trump campaign wasn't the product of our people, money or ideas. My neighbors may not be up on the latest social justice lingo, but they are not hateful.

No, the organizing took place far away. What we get, on both sides, are the bumper stickers, the prefab identities sold by the people with power to make us feel powerful — even as they use our power for their own benefit.

During the election our county was full of "Trump Digs Coal" signs, but the week afterward the top headline in our newspaper *The Mountain Eagle* was: "Don't expect jobs mining coal soon, McConnell warns." Again, though, if you're a coal miner who lost your job and you're convinced Obama is to blame, it makes sense that a sticker on your car could make you feel better. Like you're fighting back.

The bumper that gives me hope, though, is the one parked in front of our building the day after the election. It had a "Make America Great Again" sticker and a sticker for

WMMT-FM 88.7, the community radio station run by Appalshop, which broadcasts news and music across central Appalachia and streams worldwide. WMMT has 50 local volunteer DJs, from all political positions.

Including Old Red, who hosts the First Generation Bluegrass show on Thursday mornings. He plays great music, has a terrific radio personality, and likes to make fun of Al Gore on the air. When I hosted a show last summer, I went on right before him.

One morning I played “Pride,” a haunting song by Ricky Ian Gordon about a gay man discovering he has AIDS and finding home in the uprisings of the mid-1980s. Near the end of my show Red came into the studio, as usual, and put down his pink bag. “I heard that song you played while I was driving in.” I took a breath. He continued: “I don’t know a lot about this stuff. I think I know what ‘L, G, B, T’ means, but I’m not sure about ‘Q, I....’ Can you help me?”

When Red steps into that studio, he feels safe enough to admit he doesn’t know something, and learn. Even about a sensitive topic, and even from someone like me. Because that studio is a place Red knows he belongs. He gets to broadcast his music, his voice and his ideas, whatever I or anyone else might think of them, to five states every week. Just like scores of other people — including relatives of folks locked up in nearby prisons, who call in to our weekly hip hop show “Hot 88.7 — Hip Hop from the Hilltop and Calls From Home.” We can’t always see them, but they are part of our community, too.

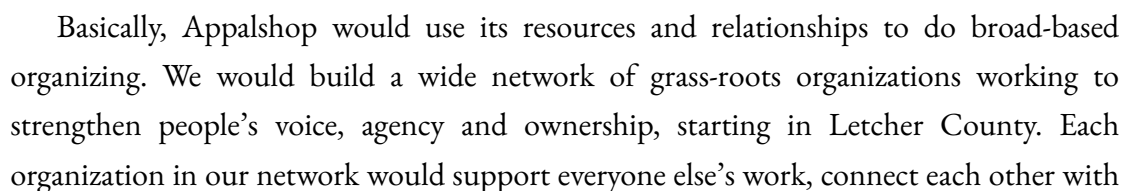
A few years ago, with the coal economy on its last legs, a new generation of Appalshop leaders started working with a Jamaican economist named Fluney Hutchinson. Fluney has done development in poor areas across the world, sometimes with the International Monetary Fund.

But he doesn’t work through loans, austerity and government takeovers. He works, basically, through organizing. Or as he puts it: “Strengthening the capacity of residents to *exercise voice, agency and ownership* over their community affairs is essential to their ability to create communities that they value.”



Old Red on the mic at WMMT-FM 88.7, the community radio station run by Appalshop. (Facebook photo)

This is what we came up with:



resources, plan projects to bring value and wealth into our communities, and bring together organized people, money and ideas.

What does this look like? It looks like a remote community center getting the support to reopen the longest-running square dance in the state of Kentucky, with guests from around the state and around the country.

It looks like the county volunteer fire departments, led by my buddy Bill, working together to start an annual bluegrass festival that made \$10,000 in its first year.

It looks like starting Mountain Tech Media, a new cooperative for-profit corporation, under Appalshop's roof. And at the same time, working with our regional community and technical college to start a certificate program in tech and media skills — to create a complete community-based pipeline to employment for young people in the area.

It looks like people and groups of all kinds coming together and recognizing that we have power, and together we can build more. That we don't have to wait to be saved. That we can create markets on a scale to attract the attention of investors — and keep the value of those investments in our community.

It looks like a certain drink at the new Kentucky Mist Moonshine, Letcher County's first legal still, run by a Republican businessman who's now a close partner in the Downtown Retail Association we helped found. It involves apple pie moonshine, cider, a little sour mix, cinnamon, sugar and apples. They call it the "Appal Head."
(They made me a free one recently; it was delicious.)



The Kentucky Mist Moonshine distillery. Photo by Stacey Lennard

And it looks like the young girl who recently came to a painting party hosted by our youth media institute. She said she'd wanted to come for a while, but she was nervous because she didn't know anyone. Before she left, she left a note with the Institute's director: *"Thank you, Kate. I have this feeling and I just can't explain it. But this feels like home."*

At the start of 2017, Appalshop is 48 years in (and still learning, of course). But I think we're onto something. When we work together to make places where we all feel like we

belong, we can feel safe enough to open ourselves to people and ideas we might otherwise fear. When we build a culture and economy based on shared agency, voice and ownership, we can live with dignity and own the value we create. That's what we're imagining here in Letcher County, Kentucky.

Can a project started in Letcher County go nationwide? We're ready. Want to work with us? Let's talk. We like visitors. Above the doors of our local library, in the words of Letcher County author Harry M. Caudill, is our standing invitation to all:



Photo courtesy of Lafayette College/Clay Wegrzynowicz

Jay Frost, from Leverett, responded by email to Ben Fink's article:

From: Jay Frost
Date: March 25, 2017 at 11:11:01 AM EDT
To: Ben Fink
Subject: Democracy in Trump Country

Hi, Ben ...

Since the November election, I have read scores of articles -- and three books -- in search of an understanding of (1) how rural white voters could possibly support such a vulgar, dystopian presidential candidate; and (2) what can I do to help find common ground with citizens in flyover country to help heal wounds and move forward together to address the issues that (if you read the headlines) divide us.

Your Salon article is, by far, the best of the lot. And I am responding not only to express my appreciation but to answer your call to action in the concluding paragraph.

Let me back up a bit ...

I live in the small rural town of Leverett, Massachusetts (pop. 1,700). I live out in the woods, on a dirt road, yet only 15 minutes from downtown Amherst and the UMass campus and a half-hour from Northampton. If you lived in CT, you probably recognize this area as a bastion of progressive expression.

Both Amherst and Northampton are sanctuary communities and have been identified by ICE as among nine cities in Massachusetts that are "non-cooperative." We are proud of that designation.

**What if we [Leverett]
could establish a 'sister-
city' type of relationship
with a community in the
rural heartland?**

Leverett went something like 79-17-4 (Hillary-Trump-Bernie/Stein; I wrote-in Bernie) -- precisely the OPPOSITE of Letcher County. Most folks in Leverett reacted in horror and shock at the outcome.

About a week after the election, the Leverett Peace Committee called for a general meeting at the town library to discuss ways in which might turn our negative energy into positive action. About 70 people attended. During the meeting, I came up with a brainstorm and expressed it somewhat as follows:

We are obviously at polar opposites. Still, we all have common goals and needs — decent incomes, access to affordable health care, a livable environment.

"We are obviously at polar opposites with the rural communities in the Heartland who swung this election to Trump. Still, we all have common goals and needs -- decent incomes, access to affordable health care, a livable environment, etc., etc. But we 'eastern elites' don't understand these people, and they don't understand us. You all are familiar with the concept of 'sister cities.' Amherst has a sister city in Japan. What if we [Leverett] could establish a 'sister-city' type of relationship with a community in the rural heartland to help find common ground and move forward together?"

This proposal got a big round of applause, and subsequently several of us volunteered to form a "bridging committee" to explore possibilities. We quickly encountered several obstacles, among them, "Why would a bunch of folks who voted for Trump want to listen to us eastern elitists who 'know better than everyone else?'" A couple of us in the group with friends and relatives on the other side also expressed the fact that these people are "impossible to reason with -- it's not worth the effort."

So we turned our efforts to more modest endeavors, and we have currently scheduled a "listening" event with members of the area's Muslim community -- 15 participants on either side. We will participate under the direction of Dr. Paula Green, a member of our committee with extensive worldwide experience in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Each side will complete a two-hour training session before the listening event. We plan to pursue this effort wherever it may lead.



*Leverett residents who participated in Hands Across the Hills.
Photo by Tom Wolff*

Getting back to the original purpose of the bridging committee -- the concept of a sister city and your call for action ("we like visitors"): I am thinking of the idea of Letcher County and Leverett MA as possible "partners," or at least "communicants" in the effort to achieve common understanding.

Maybe this triggers some thoughts or suggestions on

your part. We have an active shape-note [hymn singing] community up here in our Valley (among many other circles of musical interest) and maybe there is the possibility of a couple of "exchange concerts" to be held in conjunction with facilitated listening/bridging events. It looks like you (or someone from Appalshop) and Paula might function capably as co-facilitators.

There are certainly other approaches to consider.

Let me know what you think.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Jay Frost
Leverett MA

PS. This is just a "feeler" inquiry. I am not writing on behalf of the bridging committee at this time. If there is a positive response, I will share it with the committee before proceeding further.

Ben's response to Jay's email:

From: Ben Fink
Date: March 25, 2017 at 11:55:28 PM EDT
To: Jay Frost
Subject: Re: Democracy in Trump Country

Hi Jay,

It's great to hear from you -- thank you so much for writing, and I'm really glad you liked the piece. I have indeed spent some time up your way: my cousin and her family live in Northampton, and I've sung many times with folks from your shape note singing community!

I'm very interested in your proposal. I think your argument about common goals and needs is right on -- and I would suggest we probably share some basic cultural values and traditions, too. And I think there are a lot of people here who would indeed be interested in listening to people there, as long as we do it right; as I said in the story, in my experience the (often accurate) stereotype of coastal elitists who "know better than everyone else" is easily broken, once it's clear that there's a mutual interest in learning from each other and working together. Obviously there are some people (on

In my experience the (often accurate) stereotype of coastal elitists who "know better than everyone else" is easily broken, once it's clear that there's a mutual interest in learning from each other and working together.

all sides) who aren't interested in this kind of work -- due either to an overdeveloped sense of self-protection or to cynicism, fatalism, or opportunism -- but I've found that those people are in the minority. Honestly my worry would be more the reverse, that people from up there would be too quick to judge people here...but that may just be *my* unfair prejudice!

In any case, I'd love to see what we can put together. At the moment I, too, am just writing as myself, but we have a Culture Hub partners' meeting on Tuesday night, and I'll gladly float this idea; if folks are interested, we can set up a working group and go from there. I'll also run this by some other Appalshop staff, local business owners, and the mayor of Whitesburg

(maybe the most logical sister city for Leverett) and see who might be interested. And a shape note singing dimension to the project would be wonderful; we just missed the big Western Mass convention at the start of March, but we'll be hosting an all-day singing down here at the end of August...

I'll be in touch again soon with more ideas and questions. But if I drag my feet, please do not hesitate to give me a kick in the rear. It would be so great to make this happen.

Yours,
Ben

Ben Fink
Appalshop, Inc.
91 Madison Ave.
Whitesburg, KY 41858



An early meeting of the Letcher County Culture Hub. Photo by Malcolm J. Wilson

“ It made for an interesting thing that Jay had drafted that email as one liberal, if I may, to another liberal — and then Ben read it aloud at a Culture Hub meeting.

And there were folks around the table who burst into tears because emotions were really high. And there were folks around the table who did not vote for Trump. And there was just, well — you all remember the climate then? I mean, it was rather chaotic here too. Because we were kind of mystified that it turned out the way it did.

You know, I thought Jay’s idea was another ‘save the dumb hillbillies’ ploy that we’ve had for decades, because we’ve been painted as ignorant and barefooted and lazy people, and inhospitable. So I thought it was some more of that. But I’m willing to talk to anybody about what I think or what the constituency here thinks. And so after an email was drafted and *heavily* vetted, to make sure that everybody’s thoughts were having input into it, it was sent back to Jay Frost wanting to know more.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Podcast interview Sept. 1, 2022

Response to Jay from the Letcher County Culture Hub — after a month-and-a-half of internal discussion and vetting:

From: Haley Hatfield
Date: May 15, 2017 at 2:58:12 PM EDT
To: Jay Frost
Subject: Sister City - Letcher County Culture Hub

FIRST: Jay, thank you so much for being patient with us. I'm Haley Hatfield and I took on the responsibility of responding to you and I was not as punctual as my usual self due to business travel. Hope to hear from you soon!

Dear Jay,

Thank you for taking the time to reach out to folks here in Letcher County about your ideas for unity surrounding the recent presidential election. Ben presented your email to us (Letcher County Culture Hub partners) for discussion and feedback.

We want to avoid the labeling of the Letcher County Culture Hub as being either for or against Donald Trump... we are all South Eastern Kentuckians undivided.

There is a question that comes to mind with this proposal in regards to "sister cities" - is your bridging committee specifically looking for one particular city within Letcher County or would they be interested in an exchange with Letcher County as a whole? Every city within the county is unique and has its own set of subtle but meaningful cultural differences.

The idea of becoming a "Cultural Partner" might be more appealing than becoming a "Sister City" when thinking in terms of a county wide project. The idea of sharing concerts, plays, or discussion meetings might be the most interesting and productive when it comes to understanding each other. In the Culture Hub, we work best by supporting each other's work and would love to share the support with your cultural [*sic*], as well.

If possible, we would like to keep the exchange focused on what makes us different and similar through highlighting our culture while you highlight yours. We want to avoid the labeling of the Letcher County Culture Hub as being either for or against Donald Trump, and would not want it to take on any identity as a political group

regardless of how the majority of our population voted - we are all South Eastern Kentuckians undivided.

It is best if we would not be solely identified and labeled as being "rural voters who support such a vulgar, dystopian presidential candidate". If we were to develop a relationship based on the previous statement as the only criterion it would only add to further the negative stereotype most of the nation has of us as a people and which we are actively attempting to dispel as an organization.

**There are so many
rich layers to what
makes us "us" just as
there are so many
rich layers to what
makes you "you."**

Perhaps a conference call would be one means of starting the communication. Possibly two to three members of the Culture Hub, and an equal number from Leverett [could] discuss possibilities, and have questions and answers, with many of the questions already prepared. It could have the potential for generating a lot of positive will for both areas, but we would need assurance that we, again, would not be portrayed as uneducated people voting against our own interests. Our culture is deep and strong with much more than voting results to speak of.

There are so many rich layers to what makes us "us" just as there are so many rich layers to what makes you "you" and we would be thrilled to learn what those are within a cultural context.

We are looking forward to your response and if your group is interested in a conference call.

Best,
Haley Hatfield and Carol Ison
on behalf of the Letcher County Culture Hub

“ I’m retired, as much as I’m ever going to retire, I guess — and more community involvement was one of the things I always wanted to do. When I talked with Nell about this project, I said, *Well, Nell, I don't know if I have anything to add.* She said, *Letha, you have one thing, in that you don't care to be honest about the tough stuff. If they asked you a question about, oh, your income, you're not ashamed of it.* Honesty was one of the things that Nell said that they were really looking for, since it was actually going to take people from probably the lowest income, to more of an upper — way upper income from what we, you know, and how they deal with things and how they see things. And it just sounded like something I wanted to be a part of.

When it all boiled down, it was not just the politics, but the where you live, your income, your background that has much to do with it, or more. And most things are just, well, you tell the public what they want to hear. And we were told: *no, you go to Massachusetts and tell them the truth.*

Letha Dollarhyde • Letcher County, KY
Phone interview March 7, 2024

“ I was pretty active in the community, in the organizing scene, I guess. And so a few of them reached out and asked me to participate. I was thinking that it might be beneficial for Letcher County. If we could make connections, be it financial or whatever, some networking connections, I thought that would be a good opportunity for that.

I was in a weird spot politically. I was really frustrated with the way that politics had been discussed, and navigated in the community. With myself and my family and friends, it was just really hard to talk about politics rationally and without passing blame or judgment or anything. I think that was the first presidential election that I was able to vote in, and it was a very heated one. With a lot of folks in my family, you don't talk about your politics. It's like money. You don't ask people how they vote. You don't ask people how much money they have. So it was interesting to me that we were going to have these open discussions and dialogues surrounding politics and how and why we were voting.

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY
Phone interview Feb. 20, 2024

2.

Preparations

How a Vision Became Reality

PREPARING FOR THE THREE EXCHANGE WEEKENDS — in Leverett in fall 2017, in Letcher County in spring 2018, and again in Leverett in fall 2019 — blended two principal methodologies: intergroup dialogue and cultural organizing. In addition, participants in both communities planned activities to welcome and get to know each other, share each other's cultures, get to know each other's neighbors, host public events, make food and dance and music together, and spread the word through local, national, and international media.



*All Hands Across the Hills participants meet each other the first morning of the first exchange, October 2017.
Photo by Kip Fonsh*

“ We designed a three-day weekend because one cannot sit in a dialogue circle all day for three days; that's not humanly possible or productive. And I based it on the international work that I did, where the dialogue was embedded in cultural exposure. We had art, music, dance, theater, sightseeing, potlucks, homestays, all the kinds of things that would truly expose our community to them and have them understand who we are.

Paula Green • Leverett, MA
Podcast interview June 13, 2018

“ ‘Cultural organizing’ means organizing based on making stuff together — and taking seriously the way we make meaning together. Working together, based on what you want to build together, is what we did, both locally in the Letcher County Culture Hub, and then in Hands Across the Hills — as opposed to what's the deficit that you want to fix.

The question I've gotten a lot is, How did you get Trump voters to be a part of this? How did you get people on the right to be a part of this? And the answer is: we didn't start with dialogue.

In East Kentucky, we [at the Letcher County Culture Hub] had been doing this work for a year before, primarily around co-creation: going to that community center up at the top of the mountain and saying, ‘What are you looking to do?’ and them saying, ‘We're looking to revive our square dance,’ and us saying, ‘Let's do that together.’

Suddenly [people on the right and left side of the political spectrum] are at the same table together — not because we're here to have cross-partisan dialogue, but because if we don't support all of our community centers, they're all going to die.

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY
Public talk held online March 10, 2021

The Work Behind the Scenes

Planning the First Weekend of Dialogue and Cultural Exchange

October 2017 in Leverett, Massachusetts

After initial hesitation and some mistrust, several representatives from the Letcher County Culture Hub committed to participate in dialogue and cultural exchange with the bridging group of the Leverett Alliance. Leverett members then began planning in earnest for a visit by Kentuckians in October 2017.

One important learning of this earliest stage of the project was how crucial it was to find a willing, skilled leader on “the other side.” Leverett was fortunate to find such a person in Ben Fink, who though Connecticut-raised, had earned the trust of many east Kentuckians during his time organizing with and living among them.

One important learning of this earliest stage of the project was how crucial it was to find a willing, skilled leader on “the other side.”

It was clear from the outset that Paula Green would be the leader of the Leverett Bridging Committee. A trained psychologist, Green had over thirty years’ international experience holding dialogues between opposing sides in post-conflict regions including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Myanmar, Rwanda, and Israel and Palestine. She had founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding in Amherst, MA, and the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures program at the School for International Training Graduate Institute in Vermont. She now turned her attention to polarization in the United States. It was she who took the lead, without success, in finding local Trump supporters to engage in dialogues closer to home.

Once the connection to Letcher County had been made, planning began in spring 2017 for an October gathering. At the request of Letcher County participants, the first gathering was held in Leverett.

Together, Letcher County and Leverett group members devised a name for the project. Leverett participants first suggested the name “Hands Across the Divides,” but the Letcher County contingent suggested it might be better to start with what the two communities share. Inspired by Letcher County resident Jill Hatch, who had grown up in Massachusetts, the group recognized “we’re both from hill country” and decided on “Hands Across the Hills.”

Paula Green envisioned a three-day weekend, which would include:

- Homestays — Kentuckians would stay in members' homes, fostering intimacy and warmth
- Getting-to-know-you games
- An art project focused on family of origin to serve as the basis for the first dialogue; Leverett artist Judith Inglese led an exercise in which each participant created and contributed a square toward a collective paper "quilt" of stories
- Theater games and exercises to serve as ice-breakers and facilitate bonding, and to explore tough issues in a different way
- Three in-depth dialogues, carefully designed and sequenced
- Involvement of the larger community, including a community forum at Leverett Elementary School with presentations by both groups about their cultures, a local chorus concert, a welcome by town officials, and a facilitated question-and-answer session with a potluck lunch to follow
- Evening community potluck, followed by contra dancing and shape note singing
- Free time, to rest, and for Kentuckians to join host families in their activities
- Music jam (optional) as a final activity



A paper square in the "quilt" of family stories that participants created in fall 2017.

Subcommittees formed to undertake separate tasks:

- Programming: Along with Ben Fink representing the Kentuckians, Paula Green planned the program for the three-day weekend and devised the guiding dialogue questions.
- Talent: Green recruited volunteer specialists for the weekend: an artist to help with art projects, a theater professor, and a videographer to record dialogue

sessions (with sensitivity to confidentiality). Green also recruited two writers and a songwriter to join as members of Hands Across the Hills.

- Homestays: Various Leverett participants volunteered to host Kentuckians in their homes
- Logistics: A subcommittee lined up venues to hold events, as well as necessary equipment, such as microphones, speakers, and a slide projector
- Food: Hiring caterers where appropriate, and taking care of details related to potlucks
- Fundraising: Participants raised funds from local institutions, and some Leverett participants made contributions as well. Several local businesses provided food and other services free of charge.
- Communications: A small team of Leverett participants created news releases for media distribution; lined up feature articles for local newspapers; assisted colleagues with op-ed columns; and established a website (with email capability), posting all media articles and writing blog posts. Outreach to media began in mid-September 2017 and was largely responsible for the turnout of over 300 people to the Community Forum at the Leverett Elementary School in October 2017.



Kip Fonsh of Leverett (left) and Herb E. Smith from Letcher County, playing "human bingo." Photo by Garrison Greenleaf

Ongoing Communication with the Public *Throughout the project*

Several participants in Hands Across the Hills from Leverett were tasked with communicating the project's activities: building the website, curating content, and scheduling regular email blasts. Paula Green and Jay Frost wrote the project's first op-eds in fall 2017,



Documenting the activity leading into the first dialogue: an art project about family stories. Photo by Kip Fonsh

Hands Across the Hills representatives appeared on local radio talk shows, on NPR, in university classes and churches, on national TV networks, in Holland, on Arte TV in Europe, and in a newspaper in Tokyo. *Time Magazine, The New Yorker, The New York Times, and The Boston Globe* all wrote about Hands Across the Hills.

and a local weekly newspaper published a long feature article. So started a continuous local communication effort that over the next several years reached a larger and larger audience.

Both Leverett and Kentucky participants regularly made themselves available to give talks and media interviews, and eventually the group agreed on a protocol: whenever possible, someone from each community would be present. Hands Across the Hills representatives appeared on local radio talk shows, on NPR, in presentations to university classes and churches, on national TV networks, in Holland, on Arte TV in Europe, and in a newspaper in Tokyo. Participants wrote dueling op-eds on difficult topics, appearing in both communities' local newspapers. A western Massachusetts

newspaper reporter, Richie Davis, received a Pulitzer Center grant to cover the project. In the years to follow, *Time Magazine, The New Yorker, The New York Times, and The Boston Globe* all wrote about Hands Across the Hills.

This continuing outreach told a story that many people, local and national, seemed to want to hear: that people are not defined by their vote; that people of different sides can listen to each other and empathize with one another; and that we have more in common than we might think.

Planning the Second Weekend

April 2018 in Letcher County, Kentucky

A second weekend, in Letcher County, was always part of the plan. Letcher County participants proposed that the visit coincide with an already-planned celebration of the Letcher County Culture Hub, which by that time had grown into an alliance of nearly twenty local organizations committed to building community power and wealth through sharing stories and building on cultural assets. The celebration, planned for April 2018, was the Culture Hub's first public event since its founding in March 2016 and was

essentially its “coming out party” to the wider local community. Fink suggested that incorporating the Hands Across the Hills weekend with this celebration would connect the Leverett visitors with a broad swath of community residents and activities — and at the same time, would demonstrate to local Letcher County residents the reach and connections of the Culture Hub. Fink and the other Letcher County Hands Across the Hills participants planned a robust agenda of activities for the weekend.

This proposed schedule met with some resistance. Paula Green, in particular, expressed concern that too much focus on connecting with the wider community and its cultural activities could take time and focus away from the kind of intimate structured dialogue that defined the first weekend in Leverett. That concern had merit: the first weekend in Leverett included three formal dialogue circles facilitated by Paula Green, but during this second visit there was only one such session: an extended series of dialogues on the final afternoon and evening. Earlier in the weekend, however, two other forms of dialogue were facilitated by Ben Fink and other ensemble members of Roadside Theater, the theater wing of Appalshop. On the first day, Fink facilitated a story circle, a methodology developed by Roadside Theater that offers participants the chance to listen deeply and respond to others’ personal stories and often discover unexpected common ground. On the second day, during the Culture Hub Celebration, everyone attended a reading of Roadside Theater’s new play, “The Future of Letcher County,” which included an extended facilitated discussion with the actors and other local residents.

On the first day, Fink facilitated a story circle, a methodology developed by Roadside Theater. Everyone attended a reading of Roadside Theater’s new play, “The Future of Letcher County,” which included an extended facilitated discussion.

Other Culture Hub-related activities included dinner at the Hemphill Community Center, featuring live music and dancing and the Center’s first-ever Shabbat observance, in honor of the many Jewish visitors from Leverett; and a visit to the Whitesburg/Letcher County Farmers Market, sponsored by the Cowan Community Center. Leverett visitors were invited to a community breakfast held by the Shriners, where the visitors offered a presentation about Leverett and Hands Across the Hills and answered questions from locals. A visit to a closed coal mine in neighboring Harlan County drove home the

importance of coal in the area's culture, economy, and identity. A local church invited Hands Across the Hills for dinner. Visitors from Leverett traveled many miles with their hosts from Letcher County: gathering at a local pub, attending a church service, visiting two community centers, meeting the mayor of Whitesburg, visiting the library, traveling by bus to Harlan County, touring Appalshop's facility, and sampling (legal) moonshine at the Kentucky Mist Moonshine distillery. The emphasis during this visit was cultural exchange, meeting Letcher County residents where they live, work, worship, and play.

Third and Final Weekend

October 2019 in Leverett, Massachusetts

The final weekend repeated many elements of the first exchange: homestays, a public event, potluck meals, dialogues facilitated by Paula Green, a time for sharing music. But this time, the scale was smaller and the dialogue was deeper. A story circle unexpectedly surfaced stories of family violence that revealed deep common ground between participants. And during a theater exercise where pods of three people produced short original plays at warp speed, at least one participant remarked that she fully lost track of who was from Kentucky and who was from Massachusetts.



Theater exercises, fall 2017. Photo by Roswell Angier

3.

Dialogue & Cultural Exchange

“They Were Very Brave to Come Here”

BEFORE MEETING EACH OTHER, many Kentuckians expressed apprehension based on their preconceptions of liberal New Englanders, and many Leverett participants confessed their own concerns about gun-toting “red state” voters. Through six years of dialogue and cultural exchange, including three three-day whole-group dialogue and cultural exchange weekends, several smaller informal visits, various spinoff projects, and untold numbers of emails, phone calls, and Zoom meetings, participants from both places came to know and understand each other.



Breaking the ice for a group dialogue in Leverett, October 2017. Photo by Garrison Greenleaf

“ We were so welcomed. And the surprise that I got was that Leverett was pretty rural. I think that, for me, somebody who hasn't traveled a lot, my image of people that live away is always in the cities. The cities are what you see on TV and what you hear stories about. So to find that Leverett was a very rural community was really a pleasant feeling. It was very comforting to me, it felt like home.

Nell Fields • Letcher County, KY

Radio interview March 1, 2018

“ I knew that our Kentucky guests would be frightened. They were very brave to come here with their stereotypes about who we are, and to stay in our homes, which is a very intimate thing to do. And so I tried to match carefully which Kentucky person came into which Leverett home, according to interest, age, etc. And then I invited all the Leverett people to start with emails or phone calls, to help people feel welcome. So that already helps soften it. Additionally, I trained our Leverett people in basic communication and listening skills. We didn't start with a blank slate, we started with a kind of nurturing environment that would bring people together with a little more ease. So we were predisposed to like each other.

Paula Green • Leverett, MA

Community television interview Nov. 28, 2017

“ I was just so blown away by the fact that Debbie just opened her beautiful home to us, and just turned us loose, and just went out and did her thing, and took naps. And we just had free rein in the house. And I kept thinking, oh, my God, how does she know that we're not going to carry out her things? You know, because of the opioid crisis. This used to be a community where nobody locked their doors. When I was growing up, nobody locked their doors, and everything was just fine. But not so since the opioid crisis. The hospitality and the love that we were shown in Leverett just set us at ease. Because we felt loved.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online Feb. 10, 2021

Kentucky Group Gives Western Mass. a Lesson On Coal Country

By Karen Brown; first produced for New England Public Radio, which is now known as New England Public Media, Nov. 1, 2017

After the last election, many people felt inspired to mend the country's deep divisions. So when a group of liberal activists in Leverett, Massachusetts, learned that a more conservative community in Letcher County, Kentucky, was open to a cultural exchange, they started to organize.

Several months later, 11 residents of eastern Kentucky piled into a rented van and drove 15 hours north to stay with host families for a three-day event, billed as "Hands Across the Hills."

At the midpoint of the weekend, about 300 people crammed into the Leverett elementary school auditorium for a public forum. The opening singalong featured lyrics written expressly for the exchange:

"Before we met you, we pictured your faces, we studied your names, planned where you'd stay... and we're taking a chance, to join and sit down together..."

Once underway, Leverett organizer Paula Green admitted some awkward truths at the heart of this project.

"We're known in the media as left-wing, East Coast, intellectual elites, so we're trying to change that a little bit," she said.

While Leverett and Letcher County are both rural, Leverett went overwhelmingly to Clinton, Letcher County was a Trump stronghold.

Green introduced the Kentucky group — a mixture of liberals and conservatives — and as Gwen Johnson, the daughter of a union organizer, explained: "We're all from coal country, that's one thing for sure. But we all have different backgrounds. Some are



Abigail Morris (left) from Amherst, Mass., with Alyssa Helton from Whitesburg, Kentucky, at a public forum in Leverett. Photo by Karen Brown/NEPR



Teens from Kentucky and Massachusetts share stories of their lives. Photo by Karen Brown/NEPR

educators, some are a lot of other things — positive things!"

The southerners were far outnumbered by the Leverett crowd, which — judging from the sea of gray hair — were mostly Baby Boomers.

But next door in the cafeteria, a group of high schoolers from Kentucky and western Mass. had skipped out on the formal program to talk about their lives.

The Kentucky teens were fascinated by the northern enthusiasm for ultimate Frisbee, which, in Letcher County, is "mostly hitting each other in the face with a Frisbee," according to Allysa Helton, 17.

The Massachusetts teenagers were curious about the southern tradition of pageants. Helton was wearing her sash for winning first place in the World Miss Teen Kentucky Tourism pageant.

"I have my crown with me. Do you guys want to see it?" Helton said, to much approval from the locals.

And while they knew politics had been the trigger for this event, that wasn't their focus.

"I'm probably the most politically active person in our high school," said Abigail Morris, of Amherst. "Like days after the election, I organized like a 400-person walk out solidarity march, but at the same time, when we met up this morning, we weren't immediately like, 'What are your political views? Tell me about climate change and abortion.' We were talking, like, people things, and teenager things, and we were joking around and being human."

That said, they had been absorbing some lessons about each other.

Alex Sciaruto, a young Massachusetts environmentalist, was starting to understand why coal country has different priorities.

"They don't like they're blowing up mountaintops there, but at the same time, in order for them to survive and put food on the table, they have to blow up those mountaintops," Sciaruto said.

"We're trying to spread the message that, you know, we're people too," Helton added. "And we have reasons as to why we casted that vote. It's basically because of our economy."

Among the adults, the most sensitive conversations happened privately, in meetings closed to reporters.

"There's been tension, and there are underlying questions," said Valerie Horn, who works for the Letcher County Farmers Market. "The [Leverett] group has been very gentle, and very careful, to allow a degree and level of trust to be built."

In the process, some of Horn's views about Massachusetts changed after she met Leverett residents born to Holocaust survivors and refugees.

"Their parents, having [fled] countries, left everything to begin with nothing," she said. "I admit that was a bit of an eye opener for me. I sort of felt like people here had no problems."

Stacey Lennard, one of the Leverett hosts, said she first joined the exchange to understand why someone would vote for Trump. But now she just wants to get to know them, and maybe eventually join forces on issues like education or clean water.

"I mean, deep down, I hope they vote differently," Lennard said. "But I can't pretend to say I'm going to have an effect on that or even want to try. That's a hard question for me to even grapple with."

Part two of this rural exchange happens in April, when about a dozen Leverett residents pile into their own rented van and drive 15 hours south to Kentucky.



Members of the group who participated in the first exchange — minus the youth contingent from Kentucky, who were somewhere else at this moment. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz

Connecting with Red State America: Reflections from a Meeting Between Western Mass and Eastern Kentucky

By John J. Clayton, excerpted from a piece published in The Valley Advocate, Jan. 16, 2018



Arriving at the Leverett Town Hall late at night after a long journey by van, the Kentuckians lead the group in the traditional Appalachian song “Bright Morning Stars” before retiring to hosts’ homes. Photo by Kip Fonsh

First Steps

The Kentuckians arrived late Thursday night at Leverett Town Hall, and were shepherded to the homes of their hosts. Next morning songwriter Sarah Pirtle strummed her guitar and led us in the song she wrote for us. In early afternoon we plunged into an art project about our families and their history.

Then came our first main event: our first facilitated dialogue — two and a half hours in a circle — about family.

Common to all of us was deep love of family; common to all of us was a heritage of oppression. Kentuckians were oppressed by coal companies and had family memories of deprivation, sickness, and death. Some from Leverett had family memories of persecution in Europe — relatives murdered who couldn’t flee. It’s interesting that half of the Leverett group and the leader of the Kentuckians are Jews, children or grandchildren of immigrants seeking refuge. These family memories of escaping Europe were surprising and powerful for the Kentuckians as they were for us. The memories redefined the meaning of “immigrant.”

I told the story of my Jewish grandmother letting her sick neighbor borrow her passport while she herself hiked with a guide over the Carpathian Mountains into Romania, where she retrieved her passport and rejoined her family. Those who stayed in Moldova were wiped out in the First World War and in the Holocaust.

While telling a story about her family's survival, one woman from Leverett started to cry. Most of her family was murdered in the Holocaust. Later, a woman from Letcher County said she'd always been afraid of immigrants and refugees but had never met one. Now that she had, she believed she would never close her heart again. We'd all "known" what families have gone through, but hadn't known with the heart: the commonality of injustice and suffering.

We didn't speak about politics, not all afternoon. As far as I can remember, the T name was never bruited. Watch out, I said to myself. As we grow more comfortable the divisions will appear. But by the end of the afternoon, for me, at least, a kind of magic had occurred: the Kentuckians had become transformed. It was as if I'd re-invented, reimagined, the people I'd met earlier. Instead of being strangers I was respectful toward, they became colleagues, fellow workers. They didn't even look like the people I'd met earlier. The differences that we were going to bridge — well, where were they? We felt like a single group. A search for agreement? That seemed artificial. We were connected more powerfully — sorry if this sounds simplistic — at the heart.

But was this connection at the heart enough?

Going Public

All along, our intention was to share our endeavor with the Pioneer Valley and we created a program for that Saturday morning at the Leverett Elementary School. This included presentations by our guests about Letcher County and from Leverett about our small town, singing by the Leverett Community Chorus and a chance for the public to talk with our Kentucky visitors over potluck lunch in the school cafeteria.

**The memories
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I told the story of my
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into Romania.**



Valerie Horn tells of her work with the farmers market in Letcher County, KY. Photo by Kip Fonsh

We had no idea how many people would come to meet the Kentuckians. Fifty? A hundred? We photocopied 150 programs, which was well over what we thought we'd need. We set up folding chairs, which quickly filled up. Then found more folding chairs, and those filled up. Finally we set up all the chairs we could find, and still many had to stand. There were almost 300 people in the gym. Everyone — we, the Kentuckians, even the audience itself could hardly believe this huge turnout on a bright autumn day. A chord was struck ... we hardly knew what to call it.

We learned much that morning. Our guests spoke with passion and honesty, and the audience listened. The Kentuckians had to cope with the mines and the closing of the mines, with terrible poverty and the destruction of the land. Similarly, our part of Massachusetts had to cope with the many mills and the closing of the mills, with tobacco growing and the diminishment of tobacco. But Leverett and the Valley were fortunate — we had new life given us by the growth of four colleges and a university. Nothing in Letcher County has replaced coal.

I think the most powerful moment that morning belonged to Gwen Johnson of Kentucky, whose uncles and father died in mining accidents. “When the coal business began to crumble, I knew we were going to take a bad hit,” she said, “because trash collection, senior centers, and other county services are paid for by coal severance tax. They shut down our senior citizens centers... they pulled all the dumpsters from across the county, so there’s no place to bring our debris. . . I’m thinking, ‘Oh my god, what are we going to do?’” When she voted in the last election, she didn’t like her choices — felt dirtied coming out of the voting booth — but couldn’t desert her people.

When we gathered for a feast of potluck lunch, the Kentuckians were literally mobbed by Valley residents eager to talk with them. One Kentuckian exclaimed, there was a lot of unexpected love in the school that morning!



Letha Dollarhyde of Letcher County, KY speaks in Leverett. Photo by Kip Fonsh

An Explosive Moment

That afternoon, we held our second closed dialogue, and Gwen once again took the floor. She said that when she sees a loaded coal truck or a coal train passing by, she's happy. Happy for the jobs. Coal, she said, might make a comeback — it was needed, wasn't it, when there was a war. At other times the need dropped away, and mining dropped away. Herb E. Smith, a filmmaker from Appalshop, reminded us that jobs in mining demanded courage and gave dignity, camaraderie, and a reasonable wage. "Miners do something real; they make something." Yet they also spoke of the dangers and exhaustion of mining work.

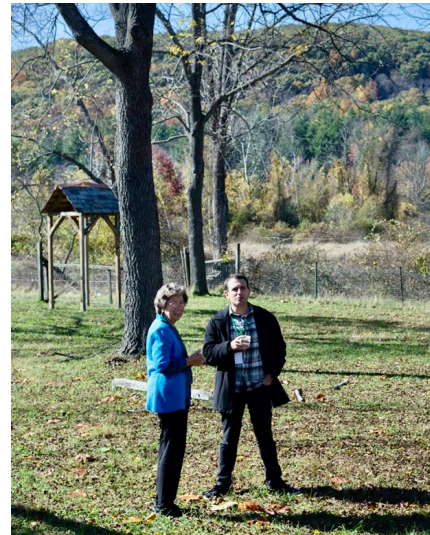
The contradictions were evident.

Now our dialogue facilitator Paula Green deepened our discussion. She said it made her very sad to hear that at a time when coal mining was becoming less profitable and was intensifying climate change, the only option the people from Letcher County could imagine was work in coal mining, oppressive work that poisoned the water, destroyed the land, and killed miners — slowly with black lung or all at once in an accident. War? Are we willing to have a war in order to bring back jobs? Is coal really the only option people can imagine?

It was an explosive moment. We had looked to Paula, a peacebuilder, to help us through what we thought might be difficult conversations, and here she was attacking coal in front of our Kentucky guests. I was sure that now gloves would be off, and we'd get down to painful, difficult talk.

But people spoke to each other with honesty and respect. We spoke the truth of our experience. Truth balanced against truth. Yes, the people from Letcher County acknowledged, they were exploited, were oppressed. We've read about the company stores, about wages given to the miners only in scrip. *I owe my soul to the company store*. Yes, coal is less economically viable than it was. But it's all they have.

We understood the felt need of people in Kentucky to support their people. On the one side, someone said, her left hand cupped, was the long-term possibility of destructive



Facilitators Paula Green and Ben Fink take a break between sessions, fall 2017. Photo by Sharon Dunn

climate change; on the other, her right hand cupped, the immediate need to pay for food and rent. How, she asked, could they vote for someone who said she was going to “put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business”?

Communal physical activity, fun, was a welcome break from the intensity of the dialogue that afternoon.



Contra dancing after potluck supper in Leverett, 2017. Photo by Roswell Angier

Of course, Hillary Clinton said what she said about mining in a context: she wanted to create other jobs — better jobs, green energy jobs — in Appalachia. But all that Kentuckians heard — heard over and over on TV — was her single sentence: she was going to get rid of coal, get rid of mining jobs.

And what other jobs were available now? Minimum wage jobs at MacDonald’s? It’s easy to be a liberal here in Leverett. If we, in Leverett, needed jobs in coal in order to put food on the table, our priorities might be different.

On Saturday evening we brought food for potluck to the basement of the Montague Common Hall and contra danced upstairs. More than a hundred people came to eat, dance, and participate in shape-note singing. Communal physical activity, fun, was a welcome break from the intensity of the dialogue that afternoon.

A Wall Removed, and Another Journey to Make

During the third and final session of dialogue on Sunday, I realized that somehow we’d changed. We were hardly “other” to each other. We’d gotten past political agreement and disagreement, past issues of class, of stereotypes. We’d done so, it seemed, not by avoiding hot-button topics but by seeing one another surprisingly deeply — seeing one another as individuals, not only as representatives of a culture, of a social group. We listened to each other. We weren’t debating.

Monday at dawn after a windstorm the Kentuckians left, with gifts we gave them, with snacks for the road.

I feel we've already made some political change and created a model for change. For years we've been suckered in. "Enemies" — who aren't rightfully enemies — have been created in America. To divide us into enemy camps, to encourage us to have contempt for one another, serves the interests of some powerful people very well. Personal change is fundamental to deep political change. If we can export the process we're going through, export it all over America, we'll have begun to make a new nation. We may continue to have different political positions, but we won't fear and despise each other, won't stereotype, caricature each other. Generosity, openness, love — these are not only attributes of personal relations; they define, we hope, the basis for a new politics.

Paula Green put it this way: "We're seeing the face of the other, and that's where change happens."

Here in the Pioneer Valley so many folks contacted Hands Across the Hills to find out how our entire October weekend turned out that we held another public event in December. Over 120 people came to hear our experiences and reflections and to ask us questions. So many expressed interest in learning how to facilitate bridging dialogues that Hands Across the Hills is sponsoring a three-session training series with Paula Green in January, which immediately filled with 30 participants.

Hands Across the Hills is planning our late April trip to Whitesburg, Kentucky, with hope in our hearts as we meet more Kentucky folks and learn about their lives. What will we find when we make our reciprocal visit? We will be welcomed by the Kentuckians whom we know ... but what about others in Letcher County? We will carry the hopes of the Pioneer Valley with us. We all look for hope, for action to overcome despair, for connection with fellow Americans.

John J. Clayton, Professor Emeritus at UMass-Amherst, has written many novels and collections of short stories and was an early participant in Hands Across the Hills.

**"We're seeing the face
of the other, and
that's where change
happens."**



An audience of about 300 took part in the community forum at Leverett Elementary School to meet visitors from Kentucky. Photo by Kip Fonsh

“ There’s nothing like staying in each other's home and seeing each other in your pajamas. You know, it just changes your relationship. You become human in a different way than if you're just sitting across the table, listening and talking, hour after hour. I think that was a really vitally important component, although it did open up all those issues around class, and homes, and if it's safe to let other people stay in your home — I mean, just all those things came to the surface. I'm not sure that's a bad thing, if they're talked about and discussed.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ If anybody is going to use this as modeling for doing something like this in the future: Staying in their homes with them was a wonderful idea. You got to see their homes. You got to see how they live day to day. There wasn't 40 people listening to every conversation, right? It was just one-on-one, and the first lady I stayed with said, *If you have a question, ask me. I will answer it as honestly as I can.* I said, *Well, the same goes for me, I will answer you.* And — forget about the trying to one up each other like you normally do in a social setting and everything. The public parts were wonderful, but: the one-on-one time.

Letha Dollarhyde • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview March 7, 2024

“ We got to see each other beyond these labels and these categories that we get put in or put ourselves in, and that was some of the beginning work. I remember the first day, identifying the stereotypes we had of the other, and then we very quickly dispelled them. The real beauty of the project was to see each other as individuals, to see our humanity, and that we all on some level want the same things in our lives.

Stacey Lennard • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ One of the things that did help me in this process was the sharing and learning that there are all sorts of struggles and grief that people and families carry with them. I thought in the initial meeting, *Sure, I'll go out there and share my bit of what it's like to live here and they'll understand.* And by the time the sharing and get-to-know-people conversations were over, it was like, *Ah, that was pretty dense and naive and selfish of me, Valerie, to think that there are only problems in Eastern Kentucky.*

It doesn't matter what kind of home you live in, people have problems. But there is a reality too, you know — having things makes life easier. It doesn't solve the problems, but it helps you deal with them.

I know my mom's story very well: youngest of nine children, father killed in the mines, et cetera, et cetera. But half the people in the room had stories of leaving their country, lost grandparents, and resettling. So I realized, *Okay, we have some more things in common than not.*

Valerie Horn • Letcher County, KY
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024



*Paula Green introduces Kentuckians at the community forum in Leverett, October 2017.
Photo by Kip Fonsh*

Leverett Group to Visit Kentucky Counterparts

By Richie Davis, Greenfield Recorder, April 17, 2018

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LEVERETT — The last thing these grassroots organizers of a cross-cultural dialogue expected to make part of their efforts was a trip to a coal mine.

But that's among agenda items for 14 Leverett residents taking part in a visit to rural Kentucky next week as part of their "Hands Across the Hills" exchange, an initiative to bridge political and cultural differences.

The April 19 to 23 trip, which includes three days of discussions, presentations and tours of Letcher County, KY, comes following the Leverett visit last October by 11 Kentucky residents, several of whom are affiliated with a network that's been trying to rebuild the region's largely coal-dependent economy.

It was the decimation of the coal economy, Letcher County residents told the Leverett "Bridging Divides" group formed after the 2016 election, that convinced many to be among the 80 percent of voters there who cast ballots for Trump. (In Leverett, Trump won 14.4 percent of the vote, compared to 26.7 percent in Franklin County and 32.8 percent in Massachusetts overall.)

The visit by the Leverett contingent is scheduled to include a presentation about Leverett at a Shriners breakfast as well as smaller presentations, closed discussions between the two groups and "story circles" for participants to share personal experiences. They also plan to meet other residents of the southeastern Kentucky region and do some square dancing.

The tour will also include a visit to Appalshop, the 50-year-old cultural center designed to help Appalachia tell its own story and retain its traditions to help forge its own economic future.

The visit coincides with, and will be part of, Appalshop's Culture Hub Celebration, celebrating creative economic development around the region. And of course, there will be a trip to an exhibition coal mine by rail car in neighboring Harlan County.



An exhibition coal mine, Portal 31, toured by Hands Across the Hills in April 2018. Photo by Stacey Lennard

Leverett group members, who plan to fly to Kentucky — in contrast to the 16-hour drive here by their Letcher County counterparts last fall — say they're thrilled to be having further talks with the people they got to know here, as well as an opportunity to get firsthand experience of the culture.

Swapping political talk

"I'm excited to be reconnecting with these friends and getting to meet their families," said member Tom Wolff.

But at the same time, he's having some nervous feelings traveling to the heart of coal country, just as Kentuckians were wary about how they'd be treated visiting New England — especially since a core focus of the visits is talks about personal, political perceptions.

Since last fall, when discussions centered on Trump, immigration, guns, and coal, a new set of issues have emerged — national conversations over harassment of women and renewed calls for gun restrictions. There's also the Kentucky teachers' strike and a newly announced \$450 million federal prison in Letcher County, with its promise of hundreds of new jobs in an area that's lost 90 percent of its coal jobs since 2000.

"Just in this one county I live in, it's the most depressed I've seen it in my 74 years," says Letcher County resident Bill Meade, who was unable to travel to Massachusetts last fall but is looking forward to next week's visit.

The cultural exchange isn't meant to change minds, organizers stress, but to find common ground in a time that's become increasingly polarized, by focusing first on common interests, and by staying "authentic," as Leverett members say.

At public presentations planned in Letcher County, the group will insist that questions be written in advance, to lessen the potential for hostile interaction.

Paula Green, who will be co-facilitating closed sessions, says, "I know we're going to be walking down the streets of Whitesburg having a group tour. How are we going to be seen by people there? There's a long history of Northerners coming down in an exploitive manner."

As a result of the October visit, Green said, "I think my own humanity expanded. In some way, because like most of us, I've held a lifetime of stereotypes about people from



*Paula Green sharing insights with a western Massachusetts audience about the first exchange.
Photo by Sharon Dunn*

that region of the country — the toxicity of hillbillies, of rednecks and labels that have been put on them by people — that have never disappeared. So that was part of my image of what it's like. I think I've been humanized by people who are now my friends and colleagues in ways that were new for me.”

Another group member, Barbara Tiner, adds that after immersing herself in learning about eastern Kentucky, “I understand why people voted for Trump. I think it was misguided, and the media and the Russians had a lot to do with it, but I get it. It's the hope and promise.... So I don't have this anger. It's just a sadness.”

Meanwhile, in Kentucky, “There's a lot of excitement about the trip,” says Ben Fink, the Culture Hub community development project director at Appalshop, whose “Leverett Exchange” group has gathered steam since members felt well received in Massachusetts.

Meade, who hasn't met the Massachusetts visitors yet, says, “I would love to have people understand, we're not a radical group of people, in no way, shape or form. I think [there's] something that maybe those people can learn. ... I think once everybody sees we're all just Americans in different parts of the United States, maybe we're not different in attitudes and ways we do as much as a lot of people would like to think.”

His sister, Nell Fields — who unlike her brother, voted for Hillary Clinton — says the Letcher County group has met in recent months to discuss what they learned from the New England visit: “how to make ourselves stronger and more competent doing what we do already, which is to serve the community.”

The Leverett contingent is planning a May 15 presentation from 7 to 9 p.m. at Leverett Elementary School to report back to the community on their trip to Kentucky.

Green says she hopes the Kentucky exchange inspires efforts to heal the divisions that have cut off communication needed for democracy to function.

“We didn't start this exchange project to change people's votes; we did it to bridge divides and find a spirit of humanity in each other, and to acknowledge that, and to know that's in all of us. And that's the beginning of our common ground.... This is a model, an opportunity to experiment with how do we do this.”



Sharing Kentucky visit experiences with the Leverett community, May 15, 2018. Photo by Pam Szczesny

Connecting with Coal Country: What I learned visiting Kentucky with Hands Across the Hills

By Sharon Dunn • Leverett, MA; published in The Valley Advocate May 22, 2018

“It’s like you’re going to a foreign country... Do you need a passport?” Letha Dollarhyde of Letcher County, Kentucky, said this — partly in jest, partly not — about coming to Leverett, Massachusetts, when she visited here last fall. Our Hands Across the Hills project is about “Dialogue and Cultural Exchange.” “Cultural exchange” — isn’t that the phrase used by the State Department when American artists and scholars travel to other countries? So I asked myself: Are we this divided that a region of our country feels truly foreign? Would I be in a “foreign country” as I arrived in Whitesburg, Kentucky, for a return Hands Across the Hills visit April 19-23?



Welcome sign in Letcher County, April 2018. Photo by Barbara Tiner

As we crossed into Letcher County by car, a handmade sign with balloons bobbing in the breeze welcomed Hands Across the Hills. The looming beauty of the mountains turned us silent in wonder. The shades of green tender leaves emerging on thousands of trees, the redbud trees in bloom on the roadside — so many mountains, close together, slender emerald green valleys in between. Beautiful mountains, like the Berkshires, like the Green Mountains. Driving into Whitesburg, we found most of the main part of town is red brick, just like our New England towns. Not a foreign country.

Fourteen of us, members of Hands Across the Hills, were reuniting with the coal country folks who had visited us in October 2017 in Leverett. All of us had spent hours in safe, private dialogue sharing deep feelings, exploring our differences and similarities; the 11 of them had stayed in our Leverett homes; we had eaten with them, sang and danced with them.

Now we were gathered on the home ground of folks we’d come to consider friends. They welcomed us. They’d planned three days packed with dialogues and conversations

about community and family. We were educated about their economic distress, about the opioid crisis they face. There were real differences and a great deal we shared.

Yes, we began planning this “cultural exchange” almost a year ago, hoping to bridge a stark, painful political divide. After the November 2016 election, many Leverett residents wanted to understand how a rural area in another region could have possibly voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump.

One woman from Letcher County had been unable to speak to a beloved older brother — political views divided them painfully. Another had considered moving out of Appalachia.

The divisive 2016 vote and how these Kentuckians now feel after more than a year of a Trump administration — these issues slipped into the background as we gathered face to face. Not that these issues disappeared, oh no. But our common concerns — wanting a steady good living, a future for our children and grandchildren — were in the foreground.

On Friday, our first day in Whitesburg, the county seat, we walked the small downtown, met the mayor, the chief of police, and the library director. In the afternoon we settled in for our first dialogue session in Kentucky — in a building owned by Appalshop, the robust 50-year-old arts organization dedicated to community development that originally supported this project.

Closed dialogues have been at the heart of our endeavor, these times we sit in a circle and engage in talk facilitated by Paula Green of Leverett, whose experience in bridging divides and sustainable peace spans thirty years. Paula asked the group: “What changes have come about in our lives from our Hands Across the Hills experiences?”

One woman from Letcher County had been unable to speak to a beloved older brother — political views divided them painfully. After experiencing the dialogue process, she was able to engage and regain closeness with her brother. Another participant had considered moving out of Appalachia, but, bonding with Kentucky peers on the trip to and from Massachusetts, decided to stay in the Whitesburg community. Leverett members revealed they have created bonds of community and caring for each other that did not exist before. “I’ve met more folks in Leverett in the last six months than I have in the over 30 years I’ve lived there,” Tom Wolff of Leverett exclaimed.

We agreed that meeting face to face was an enormously positive and powerful experience. Face to face encounters let us see more clearly, to feel deeply what we share and

to feel safe in our differences. The corollary is that, on the whole, the shouting media and politicians divide us and want us divided.

Kip Fonsh of Leverett said: “I learned in our work together that when you are talking, you are not listening.” And listening closely, deeply, is central to the dialogue process. We would have a second dialogue session on our last full day, Sunday.



Jay Frost of Leverett presents a Rattlesnake Gutter Trust hat to Whitesburg Mayor James W. Craft. Photo by Stacey Lennard

Catering Business Started in an Abandoned School

Our Kentucky hosts wanted to give us a good look at Letcher County and the organizations they are developing to strengthen community and economic stability.

First, we visited the Hemphill Community Center, just north of the coal town Neon. Next to the parking lot is the Letcher County Coal Miners Monument, with hundreds of names carved into three black monuments and etched in the pavers underfoot: In Memory of Those Who Gave Their Lives for Black Gold. The number of names for a small county of 23,000 seemed very large to me, bringing to mind the stories we’d heard from our Kentucky friends of brothers, fathers, sons who had died through mining accidents and black lung disease.

The Hemphill Community Center operates in the basement of an abandoned school, in its kitchen and cafeteria. Here Hemphill native Gwen Johnson has created a catering company, a brick oven bakery she’s named Black Sheep, and a series of Friday Nite Pickin’ music and community dinners. Gwen spoke eloquently in our October Leverett public event about her desire to vote for a woman as president, but how she ultimately could not, because Hillary Clinton’s position, as Gwen understood it, was “to end coal.” “We have coal dust in our blood,” she said.

Gwen introduced her team, the Hemphill T-shirted crew who had done the baking and cooking for dinner. All are recovering addicts who have served time in jail, and now have been given a chance to be part of something brand new in this community. One of

the crew, a woman, said with a laugh, “You never know how much time you have on your hands till you get sober!” The crowded room roared with laughter.

Post dinner, the live music started up. Leverett’s Stacey Lennard won a cake in a cake walk! A tall cowboy-booted Kentuckian, a handsome elder, invited me to dance; his accented voice was hard for me to make out through the music, though I did catch him saying he’d won dance contests in all 50 states. Yes, he was a wonderful dancer!

We witnessed energy going into a new business enterprise — the catering company and bakery. We saw the effort to create and give pleasure to a community. The center gives employment to recovering addicts often turned away as unemployable, who were described to us as enthusiastic contributors to the Hemphill Community Center.

Shriners’ Hospitality

On Saturday the Mountain Shrine Club of Whitesburg invited us to a community breakfast, the last of their cold weather season. After hearty Kentucky fare that included biscuits, gravy, and several meats (plus yogurt and fruit put out just for us), Leverett

folks made a presentation about why we wanted to connect to Letcher County, about our dialogue work and about our town.

“What do people like you, with all your education and development, owe people like us? What is your responsibility toward us?”

Because the Shriners were likely the most conservative group we would meet on our trip, I was wondering what kinds of questions the audience might ask in our Q&A. Here was the most serious question: “What do people like you, with all your education and development, owe people like us? What is your responsibility toward us?”

This is a central, hard question. It was the core of several emails I received from close friends, passionate progressives, who, hearing of Hands Across the Hills going to Kentucky, wrote me in exasperation: “Blue states already pay so much more in taxes than red states, funds that go to red states to support them. We already give and give!”

I have arrived at my own answer to the man who asked this question: I feel my personal responsibility is to see you as who you are, to understand your complex situation as best I

can, to offer what best I can. In my case as a writer and a former business person, it is to write as truly as I can, and to share my business experience.

Paula Green, who answered publicly, spoke of her commitment to economic justice and a living wage for all, our group's willingness to work together on economic issues. "We are aware of the exploitation, extraction of resources and pollution that have plagued communities in your region. But we are not here to push solutions of any kind on you. We are here to get to know you."

As I chatted with two Shriners minding the meal ticket and lottery table, I learned that the members of this club drive children needing orthopedic or burn care to Shriners hospitals as far away as Cincinnati, Ohio. One member has driven over 100,000 miles and his wife, over 30,000 miles. "I make a friend on every trip," said this Shriner. Indeed, a few in our Leverett group have had their children cared for at the Springfield Shriners Hospital.

One of the lottery prizes laid out on that table was a shiny rifle. Years ago I shot a rifle — at Boy Scout camp in the Adirondacks with my son, and I actually enjoyed hitting the target. But I will never own a gun; I feel safer not having a gun in my house. Some of the Kentuckians we met feel the opposite: they feel safer with a gun — in the house, in a purse.

Talking with the two Shriners, I felt our differences (politics, guns) but I also felt I had something in common with these men, whose dedication to their community was similar to my own volunteer commitment over the years to non-profits in the areas of education and social services.



Stacey Lennard of Leverett introduces a slideshow at the Shriners breakfast in Whitesburg, KY. Photo by Kip Fonsh

I learned that the members of this club drive children to Shriners hospitals as far away as Cincinnati.

Celebrating Two Years Building a Culture and Economy

Our visit coincided with the two-year anniversary celebration of the Letcher County Culture Hub, an innovative approach to revitalizing distressed communities. At the center



Culture Hub Celebration at Cowan Community Center. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz

of the hub and its energizing force is Appalshop, the 50-year-old arts organization in Whitesburg. In only two years Culture Hub has created a network of 22 community-led organizations to work together to start businesses, revive cultural events, influence public policy and bring more and more citizens of Letcher County into the process of imagining and building a future together.

The motto they have adopted is: “We own what we make.” This is a strong verbal antidote to the more than a century of natural resource extraction — timber, then coal — and exploitation (low wages, captive economy via company stores and scrip, poor health care, paltry disability benefits). We own what we make. Letcher County has taken that to heart and welcomes all ideas to secure their economy.

At the celebration, held at the Cowan Community Center, we first browsed an outdoor farmers’ market displaying honey, woven goods, maple syrup, artwork and more. A play, *The Future of Letcher County*, was performed by Appalshop’s Roadside Theater in the Center’s beautiful building. This was a five- character reading — the actors created characters whose stories came from storytelling circles held county-wide. Storytelling, we

learned on this visit, is the prime way of communicating ideas here. Everyone tells stories all the time.

After the play, the audience gathered in its own large circle. “What moved you in this play?” the dramaturg asked. We answered: the stories of economic struggle, homophobia and transgender bullying, opioid addiction, overcoming the stigma of being considered “white trash,” the awful choice that young people face: should we stay here near our families where work is hard to find, or relocate far away where we can make a living.

For me, social and economic issues of Appalachia that were mostly abstract became more real as I listened to actual stories. For instance, the concept of the opioid crisis transformed to what is lived day in and day out. A story that struck at me: a Kentucky woman was forced to move in with her mother, because the youth in their own family constantly invaded her mother’s house, to rob her of a toaster, a microwave, to finance their opioid habit.

Traveling to a Coal Mine

On Sunday, April 22, we toured Portal 31, a coal mine active until 1963 in the town of Lynch. Here I was, in Harlan County, where the Academy award-winning film *Harlan County, USA* (1976) documented the fierce struggle for union contracts, fair wages and benefits, and the intransigence and brutality of the coal company owners and their henchmen. The film showed the comradery of miners and captured the love of coal mining, the miners’ belief they were doing important work in building American industry, helping win wars — all this is what Herb E. Smith of Letcher County had spoken of to us in October. The film also captured the strength of the women of this region, who organized picket lines and fought for rights for their husbands,



An exhibition mine, Portal 31, toured by Hands Across the Hills, April 2018. Photo by Sharon Dunn

The film also captured the strength of the women of this region, who organized picket lines and fought for rights.

brothers and sons. And indeed on our visit we witnessed the leadership of the Kentucky women we'd come to know — Nell, Carol, Val and Gwen — all weekend they were managing events and speaking in public, on behalf of their organizations.

On the way to Harlan County, as our van negotiated hairpin turns up and down the steep mountains, Herb E. Smith, a filmmaker at Appalshop, recounted the cycles of boom and bust in the coal industry that have led so many Appalachian folk to believe the current bust will surely be followed by another boom. Boom has always followed bust before, so why not now?

How much coal remains in the mountains? Herb E. tells us only a small percentage of coal has been extracted; huge reserves remain in Letcher County, only deeper down, difficult and expensive to mine. So, in coal country the feeling is, we have it, let's mine it and provide livings for ourselves.

Yet today's mining in eastern Kentucky is mainly done by machine, with humans serving as machine minders. As more and more power plants have turned to gas over coal, and as coal companies now favor the western U.S. reserves where coal is less expensive to mine, mining employment prospects in eastern Kentucky are dim. And suppose they weren't dim. The digging by machine leaves far more dust in the air and yields much more black lung disease than mining used to produce.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Our final deep dialogue was held at the Benham School House Inn in Harlan County, another closed school transformed into a business. But first we heard another theater group, Higher Ground, describe their plays, again created from stories, oral histories of folks in their county.



Higher Ground discusses their play. Photo by Sharon Dunn

Their production *Opioids, the Musical*, involved 80, yes, 80 community members. A commissioned play called Needle Work highlighted the importance of needle exchanges. We wondered later could we bring this troupe to Franklin County, Massachusetts, to perform, to teach us how to create powerful socially relevant theater pieces from stories we tell?



Dialogue session after activities in Harlan County, KY. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz

Paula Green asked us as we began our dialogue that day to reflect on what questions remained for each of us. What questions had gone unanswered? We broke into groups of three, and each group wrote three questions on paper. We taped all the questions on the walls, then moved them, grouping similar questions. The greatest number of questions clustered around

Trump, so we finally talked about Trump in our dialogue circle.

Two women, one each from Leverett and from Letcher County, who had not been with us for our hours of dialogue work in Leverett, went at it. “Can’t you see how all the achievements around environmental protection, consumer protection, regulation of financial institutions, all of it is being dismantled...” “Why can’t you overlook questions of Trump’s character and focus on the good things?”

One precept we learned from our past dialogue work was that blunt, blaming political cross-talk does not change minds. It raises the temperature in the room.

Others in our circle then took their turns to say that Trump was no longer the issue for them, that learning from and caring for each other have been fundamentally more crucial than discussing Trump on any terms.

In our very last formal gathering on Sunday we brainstormed: Where do we go from here? Ben Fink of Appalshop transcribed over 30 ideas for Leverett visitors and Letcher County Culture Hub partners to work on together.

Some of those ideas: Expand dialogue partners to a third community; partner on gun legislation for better background checks and against assault rifles; connect with business ideas and non-monetary capital... We each shared a word about what this weekend meant to us. My word was “Impressed.” I had never seen anything like the Culture Hub being created in Letcher County, a concept which Appalshop’s Ben Fink is looking to export to

Where do we go from here? Ben Fink of Appalshop transcribed over 30 ideas for Leverett visitors and Letcher County Culture Hub partners to work on together.

Together we sang the Appalachian traditional folk song “Bright Morning Stars” and made our emotional farewells.

other economically distressed regions of the U.S. Others’ words were: “Heart-filled,” “Uplifted,” “Hopeful,” “Excited.” Together we sang the Appalachian traditional folk song “Bright Morning Stars” and made our emotional farewells.

For each participant in Hands Across the Hills, the details of connection are different. We each had conversations with many different people, over meals, on car rides, at the farmers’ market. We all, Letcher and Leverett alike, are richer for knowing each other, for connecting in deep honest ways. We will be mining our experiences for a long time. A foreign country? No. We are fellow Americans.

Sharon Dunn, author of two books of poetry and a memoir, participates in Hands Across the Hills. She ran a family business with her brother for thirty years.



*Sunday afternoon dialogue in Kentucky's Harlan County, April 18, 2018.
Photo by Sharon Dunn*

Meeting together in Kentucky, 2018: No More “Slicing and Dicing”

By Rev. Sarah Pirtle • Leverett, MA

What is it really that we exchange with each other during dialogue?

I think we might say that it's truthful love. That's Gandhi's description of Satyagraha, the force he said is nine times stronger than violence because it is propelled by unity and not separation. Gandhi said that truth force is the strongest force in the Universe. He predicted, "Undreamt of and seemingly

impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence." One way to look at Hands Across the Hills is that we worked on making such discoveries.

I write as a member of the Leverett contingent. I came to Kentucky wanting to learn more about the strong community organizing there. Back in the fall when we prepared for the first dialogue and readied for that first visit, I felt we were making a strong promise not to be ones who came to Kentucky with stereotypes and misrepresentation bringing smug superiority as had happened to our Kentucky friends and their families so many times before.

The reading we did — like *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* by Harry Caudill, one of Letcher County's most famous writers — and movie watching in advance got us ready. One movie produced by Appalshop said that influences like Li'l Abner cartoons say that mountain people “sit around swapping lies. That we have no shoes, no teeth, and dirt floor homes. When you look at all these demeaning stereotypes, we mountain people are the last group where it is socially acceptable to make fun of us and still think of yourself as progressive.”

On the plane flight to Kentucky, I remember reflecting upon our first activity. We had drawn our heritage stories onto a paper quilt then heard the stories behind each square. I'll never forget learning from Gwen Johnson that she'd lost seven family members to the



Leverett guests to Kentucky observe evidence of strip mining during a bus tour. Photo by Sharon Dunn

mines. We carried the quilt with us as a gift. When Gwen drove me to Hemphill Community Center in her truck, she showed me paving stones outside the former school house with the names of all the men who died in the mines. As I stepped stone to stone, it was a powerful moment of feeling the presence of all these people, caring about each soul.

Over half of our Leverett contingent are Jewish, and we were moved beyond words when we arrived at Hemphill Community Center that first night and Shabbat candles were ready for lighting. There was challah alongside Hemphill bread, and enough grape juice or wine for the hundred or more who gathered. Ben Fink led people in chanting the traditional Shabbat words.

The next day in Whitesburg, the county seat of Letcher County, we visited the Whitesburg library and presented our paper quilt to the librarian. In turn she gave each of us a copy of another book by Harry Caudill called *Watches of the Night*. In this book written in 1976 Caudill used the phrase “gargantuan powers” to describe the interlocking system of corporations, stockholders, other owning class influences, and politicians at all levels of government from local to national.

His book notes that University of Kentucky students formed Appalachian Volunteers in 1964 and their key contribution was their research and writing to delineate the “Forty Thieves” — forty “land trusts, railroads, oil companies, and huge New York-based holding companies.” They revealed stakeholders with a shocking root system as powerful as the invasive kudzu plants which aggressively choke out other trees.

When we rented a bus for a tour of a coal mine in Harlan County, Herb E. Smith of Appalshop stood in the front of the bus and told us about geological history in the forming of the mountains. He also told about political history, and in particular about Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition, called KFTC. Herb E. was one of the founders. It grew into



Herb E. Smith presides over the bus tour with his command of local history. Photo by Sharon Dunn

a powerful organization that was instrumental in a statewide vote to outlaw the so-called “broad-form deed,” which stripminers had used for generations to seize Kentuckians’ homes by force.

Renowned Letcher County visual artists Jeff and Sharman Chapman-Crane can see the ravages of mountaintop removal coal mining from their yard. Sharman calls it “slicing and dicing” the way that people are divided. “Why do we in Eastern

Kentucky have the highest rate of depression?” she asked me at the Cowan Community Center. “We have to hold it in. We have to live with horrible secrets.” Jeff worked for sixteen years to create a sculpture project called “The Agony of Gaia,” which spans across a long table. It represents the spirit of the earth herself being hacked apart by bulldozers stripping the land bare to get at the coal beneath.

I met Jeff during the Shriners’ community breakfast and he invited me to come see their home and his finished sculpture. Everywhere we went in Letcher County we witnessed the vitality of the community, stronger than any imposed divisions.

I stayed with Gwen in an area of a former coal camp. She said, “We spend our lives fighting for our footing of equality. What has caused you so much pain becomes part of your work to alleviate pain from others.” She added, “When you start in the direction of people helping each other it feels like all of heaven and earth arises to help.”

The last morning Gwen and I sat talking in the early morning light. We marveled at the feeling of unity in the closing circle the night before. To put that unmistakable feeling of being in a golden circle into words, she quoted Psalm 133 in the Bible:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!

I knew the words in Hebrew and sang back:

Hine(y) ma tov u’ma-nayim. Shevet ach-im gam ya-chad.



*Presenting the paper quilt of family stories
to the Whitesburg KY library, April 2018.
Photo by Stacey Lennard*

“ The overnights that I spent at your [Gwen's] home were Earth-shattering for me. They gave me a feel for what day-to-day existence and issues and the environment is like, in a way nothing else possibly could. No matter how many books I read, or how many videos, being there was just enormously life changing for me, and it wasn't easy. Things didn't happen necessarily the way I expected they would. But that was a life lesson. I try really, really hard now to listen before I assume. And I really owe that to you.

Debbie Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online Feb. 10, 2021

“ I made a real great friend, somebody from Massachusetts. She stayed with me when she was down here. They looked for people where they could stay — you know, free — and so I said I'd take somebody, and so it was her that I got. We became friends, though — we talk on the phone all the time.

When I see people or something that needs help... I guess that's what inspired me to do it. I had a room somebody could use and so I just said, okay, I'll help. I didn't really know what it was all going to be about, at the start.

Velda Fraley • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview March 7, 2024



Stacey Lennard of Leverett and Herb E. Smith of Letcher County, at a song swap. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

“ I just remember Gwen's great, great hospitality. I ended up staying there — and I was not supposed to stay there that night. I got in from the airport quite late. There's one gigantic bed and a couch, and there are four of us. Gwen goes out to her truck and starts bringing in coats, because she is going to sleep on the floor — and think nothing of it. She did end up sleeping on the couch with the coats, and the three of us slept in the bed. That was a great introduction to Kentucky, and just to Gwen's hospitality; her sense of not thinking of her own comfort, thinking only of ours.

Pat Fiero • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ A member of the Cowan Community Center Board came to me and thanked me for us doing that event up at the Shriners building — how much of it meant to her to be able to listen to the stories that was shared there about the Holocaust, and the people from Leverett who were so closely connected to the Holocaust, and how that had impacted her. She had always felt the horror of what had happened, but having a face to people that she knew would always stick in her head from now on, and what that meant to her.

Nell Fields • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024



Hands Across the Hills participants Dom Spangler (left) and Gwen Johnson, both from Letcher County, KY. Photo by Kip Fonsh

Liberals and Conservatives from North and South Reunite in Western Mass.

By Karen Brown; first produced for New England Public Radio, which is now known as New England Public Media, Oct. 16, 2019

A culture-crossing project borne of the 2016 election met for the third time this past weekend in Leverett, Massachusetts.

Hands Across the Hills includes a small group from Letcher County, Kentucky — a Trump stronghold — and another group from mostly-liberal Leverett.

The project launched shortly after Donald Trump was elected as a way to understand the reasons behind the political divide.

Over two years, they've met in both states. Now back in Leverett, about 20 participants told a packed auditorium they understand better the cultural forces that shape why people vote the way they do.

But Mike Gover of Kentucky wondered: while this group has learned to feel less hostility towards each other, "Would it be possible to create a model or something that you could actually start using to do it on a bigger scale?" he said. "And I have no idea what the answer to that is."

The project aims to avoid the most obviously divisive issues, like how each person votes, but several people admitted the upcoming presidential election is likely to test that goal.

One of the lead organizers, Paula Green of Leverett, said their private group discussions have gotten easier over the past two years, as people get to know each other in person, over Skype, and through email.

"We had much less fear [at the recent gathering], much



Gwen Johnson of Letcher County and Paula Green of Leverett address the community forum in fall 2019. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills



Finding common ground, fall 2019. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

more a sense of the possibility of being able to find the humanity in each other without having to go through a lot of barriers," Green said.

Gwen Johnson, a career counselor in Kentucky who comes from a long line of coal miners, has been involved with Hands Across the Hills since the beginning.

"I now have a lot more friends on what I consider the far left. And so I get perspectives that I never had before," she said.

For instance, when controversial issues come across the news — most recently, about the closing of a large coal mine — she'll send the link to her new friends up in Leverett.

"We just bat it back and forth," she said. "And I never had that before."

Johnson said she voted for Trump in 2016, but she's not sure if she'll vote for him again.

"I just keep hoping that somebody is selected to run against Trump who won't insult us," she said.

Retired social studies teacher Kip Fonsh of Leverett said he's conscious of not appearing elitist, which is one stereotype of northern liberals.

"We can't appear to be condescending [to the Kentucky group], those of us up here," he said. "You know, 'What can we do for you? What do you want us to do?' We have to find a way to work with each other, to help each other in a way that doesn't create a hierarchical partition between the two places."

Fonsh said his goal is not to change people's minds, but to understand them.

"This isn't about beating someone overhead and saying, you know, 'You better vote for candidate X and not Trump next time,'" he said. "We can't do that. People are going to push back on us even if we tried."

Fonsh added he's still furious about the election of Donald Trump, but even if Trump wins again, he plans to stay involved with Hands Across the Hills.

"I'm very proud to be a part of this, even if I still hold the views [from 2016] that have only been intensified," he said.



A "fishbowl" activity during dialogue, fall 2019. Members of the outer circle, which is in the role of listening, can tap someone from the inner circle and replace them in the dialogue. Photo by Sharon Dunn

“ When we went to Leverett, it was like, *You don't understand*: You have these nice fancy houses, and you have these good paying jobs that don't rely on natural resources, and you just don't understand — which is not necessarily true. After we made real connections, we found out that a lot of them grew up poor. Their families had struggled and suffered. One of my best friends that I made up there, she told me about her mom's experience and her grandma's experience with the Holocaust, and trying to recover from those generational wounds. So, I mean, wow, I don't know that the divides are as big as we think they are.

At one point, I was feeling really self-righteous, like, we've just lived through this generational shit, and they don't understand, and they just are rich, and they don't know what it's like to struggle, and blah, blah, blah. And then I'm having these conversations with Danielle, who I'm starting to build a deeper relationship with, and she tells me about her mom and her grandma's experiences, and just losing family and being in the Holocaust and being directly impacted by that.

For me, that was really profound and hard, but also important, because it showed me our suffering doesn't look the same — but that doesn't mean that it isn't valid. And just because they are wealthy, or have a nice house — not even that they're wealthy, but just, even if they just have this nice house — it doesn't necessarily mean that they were just handed that, and I shouldn't judge people for that. I should be more mindful about people's backgrounds and stories... just take a minute to stop and think. That one was pretty interesting.

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview Feb. 20, 2024



A view in Letcher County. Photo by Malcolm J. Wilson

“By the Light in Your Eyes:” Songs that Connected Us

By Rev. Sarah Pirtle • Leverett, MA

My last name, Pirtle, is a Kentucky name. My grandfather is from Louisville, and his family in the area can be traced back to the 1700's. There's a redbud tree in my yard I planted years ago, not knowing someday I'd travel to eastern Kentucky and see mountainsides of redbuds ablaze in pink flowers in April. Leaning against the wall in my house is a dulcimer that I bought from Homer Ledford in his home in Winchester, KY back in 1973. I



*Singing together in Leverett, fall 2019. In the front row, left to right: Sarah Pirtle, Ben Fink, Gwen Johnson, and Pat Fiero.
Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills*

carried it to our first Hands Across the Hills meeting as a symbol of how I've felt connected to Kentucky for decades. It turned out that Homer had performed music at the funeral for a relative of one of the Letcher County group.

A key component to Hands Across the Hills is how singing builds community. In Kentucky culture, singing is a timeless glue. Paula asked me to write a theme song for Hands Across the Hills as a present to have ready when our new friends from Kentucky first arrived back in 2017. I didn't know how to start, so I asked if I could sit in during a Leverett Alliance planning meeting. I barely knew anyone there. I don't remember exactly what happened, but Sharon Dunn tells me all of a sudden during the meeting I grabbed a pen, and lyrics for the verses began to flow.

When I drove in the dark down the driveway on my way home, the tune came tumbling out:

HANDS ACROSS THE HILLS

1. Before we met you, we pictured your faces,
we studied your names and planned where you'd stay.
And now we can see all the strengths that you carry,
as you work and you build and you pray;
as you work and you build and you pray.

Refrain:

Hands across the hills, hands across the hills,
joining hearts and joining wills, hands across the hills.

2. When you piled in the vans and took to the highway,
we hope you could feel our hearts pulling you here.
Nervous, excited, all hands are open
and these hands reach over the hills;
and these hands reach over the hills.
We're taking a chance, we're taking a chance
to join and sit down together,
and I can see better by the light in your eyes,
and that light will lead us back home.

Refrain

3. When you're in Letcher County, and you look at your mountains,
we're in the same circle, we're on the same team.
We look at the same moon, we look at the same sky.
We look in our hearts and find the same dreams;
We look in our hearts and find the same dreams.
We're taking a chance, we're taking a chance
to join and sit down together,
and I can see better by the light in your eyes,
and that light will lead us back home.

Refrain



*Gwen Johnson (left) and Sarah Pirtle.
Photo by Roswell Angier*

The story of music in Hands Across the Hills really begins moments after the van from Kentucky pulled into the parking lot at the Leverett Congregational Church for the first time in October 2017. Nell Fields, from Kentucky, told me when she looked around, expecting they'd arrive in a city, she found Leverett looked a lot like Letcher County, hills ringing the parking lot, a small post office and town hall across from the church. Gwen Johnson got out of the van and, once we had assembled in Town Hall across the street, said we

needed a song. She formed a circle and along with Ben she started singing the traditional tune, "Bright Morning Stars Are Rising."

That song cemented us together. In a way it's our true theme song. Whenever we sing it, we are taken back to those first hopes, those first risks, that first intuition that somehow our hearts could belong together.

Bright morning stars are rising.
Bright morning stars are rising.
Bright morning stars are rising.
Day is a-breaking in my soul.

The Kentuckians brought worn copies of shape note songbooks, predicting there'd be a moment we'd all want to sing together. That first night, people learned "Bright Morning Stars" by ear. It wasn't until the second night, during an interlude in the community contra dance at the grange in Montague, MA, that the books came out. Ben stood like a lightning bolt, ignited by the music, and led gospel hymns with his hand waving up and down in the traditional way.



*Ben Fink leading shape-note singing in
Leverett, 2017. Photo by Roswell Angier*



*Shape-note singing in Leverett, fall 2017.
Photo by Roswell Angier*

Shape-note music was another theme for the group. On our first visit to Whitesburg we met at a bar owned by Tyler, one of our Letcher County participants, and rows of local singers gathered in a side room where any of us could join in their regular time of singing. “*What wondrous love is this, oh my soul....*”

Music was a ribbon connecting us from the start. We met in Leverett homes to swap music during each of the Kentuckians’ visits to us, widening the circle to other local musicians. A renowned Letcher County banjo player, Lee Sexton, performed at the Cowan Community Center when they sponsored a whole day of events during our visit there.

The death of Paula Green was a shock that sent so many of us reeling. Of course it was “Bright Morning Stars” that Gwen and I sang together at her memorial service in July 2022. We added new verses crafted for her.

There are those who’ve gone before us.
There are those who’ve gone before us.
They send us light to carry.
Day is a-breaking in my soul.

Later that month, July 2022, Letcher County and surrounding counties in East Kentucky were ravaged by a flood that killed more than 40 people, left more than a thousand homeless, and wrecked entire downtowns. In response, Leverett participants in Hands Across the Hills came together with their neighbors to organize a benefit concert they called “Bands Across the Hills.” In the end more than \$10,000 was raised for two Letcher County community organizations that were involved with Hands Across the Hills, and which were playing a key role in frontline flood relief. I wrote a song for the occasion, “Bridge to Kentucky,” that tried to emphasize both the devastation and the resilience: “Mothers held on to each child as the flood roared through the hollow. Endless flood. Endless mud, can’t wash away tomorrow, can’t wash away tomorrow.”

I worked with my grief at Paula's death by organizing an online event called *Building Bridges: A Concert of Songs & Conversation Across Divides*. It featured Eric Law from Los Angeles, a dialogue leader for decades who recently began working with the national cross-partisan organization Braver Angels, who joined Gwen, Ben, and me. Sharon announced, "The musicians share songs about building connections across communities and cultures we too often assume are hopelessly divided. These gifted vocalists are also committed practitioners of dialoguing, of humanizing us all. They interlace their music, traditional and original, with conversation opportunities for online listeners to share their own stories and songs."

The lens of music was a crucial way to digest and synthesize the meaning of Hands Across the Hills for me. In complete contrast to the quick arrival of that initial theme song, it took four years for me to create a song that expressed the enduring connection we'd take with us. I wanted to articulate how my literal blood family line connected to the heart family I had found over the past six years. I sang it at our closing. Here's a section:

WALKING TOGETHER: Closing song for Hands Across the Hills, October 2023

My great great great grandfather in the dark Kentucky night
Walked home through the forest, making his way without moonlight.
He placed his hands on the bark of each tree,
The north and the south bark felt differently.

He said to find your way you've got to stretch your hand,
And we found each other despite divisions in this land.
Hands across the hills will reach beyond goodbye.
Morning stars rising, we shout to the sky.

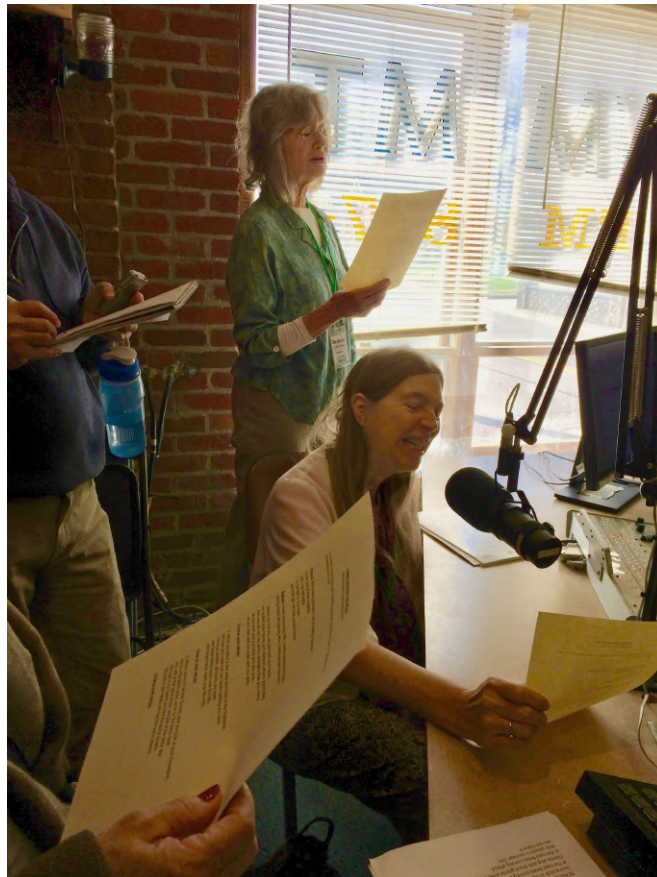
Walk together 'til the dawn, feel the stars shining down.
I will reach to your heart for your wisdom that comes.

CHORUS: Guiding us home, guiding us home.
We do not make our way through the dark night alone.
Guiding us home, guiding us home.

When I walk out in this tattered country,
My friends, you are a beacon. You still walk with me.

We gathered the last time officially in October 2023 — five from Kentucky arriving in Leverett by plane, not van. Jay came in from New Hampshire and Ben from Philadelphia. We met at the home of Debbie Roth-Howe to express to each other how much Hands Across the Hills meant to us. We chose to sing “Bright Morning Stars” to bind us together one more time.

Bright morning stars are rising.
Bright morning stars are rising.
Bright morning stars are rising.
Day is a-breaking in my soul.



*Sarah Pirtle, at the mic, leads the group in singing "Hands Across the Hills" over Appalshop radio, spring 2018.
Photo by Sharon Dunn*

4.

Guns, Coal, and Trump

“Changing Minds is Not the Goal”

THE TWO COMMUNITIES CAME TOGETHER to talk about the tough stuff. The challenge was not to change minds, but to develop an understanding of the stories and motivations behind individual opinions and positions. For example, what roles do local history, geography, family ties, and life experiences play regarding guns, coal, race, immigration, abortion, addiction — and Donald Trump? Emotions sometimes ran high during these sessions, tears for some, anger for others. Skilled facilitation and practiced listening skills helped maintain mutual respect. In the end, many participants felt the group exceeded expectations — though in the view of some, a lot of stones were left unturned.



*In a dialogue circle: Stacey Lennard, Valerie Horn, Pam Szczesny, Sharon Dunn, and Nell Fields.
Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz*

“ You might be wondering if we're changing anyone's minds. No, that's not the goal.

We listen to one another, speak about family, struggles and our hopes. We speak face to face as human beings and discover what we have in common. We don't change minds but we do change hearts. Our group has grown to respect one another, and from our shared humanity explore politics and hot-button issues like class, race, guns and drugs. The point is not to change a few votes, but to really know one another.

John Clayton • Leverett, MA

Essay published in The Fulcrum March 26, 2020

“ We really have to get to know each other, and quit hating each other because we disagree. If we really do start trying to understand, and learn from each other, just know who we are, we will find out that we have way more humanity in common than we have dysfunction or disagreement. That's really, really important in the world we live in. I believe it's getting more and more important all the time.

It's not that it's new to me, it's just reinforced every time. We probably still disagree on some of the basic fundamentals of why things are how they are, or what we should do about it, or how they got that way to start with, or who we really need to be looking at. But, you know, we're agreeing on a lot of basic details. I find that interesting — and encouraging. And it makes me happy.

Mike Gover • Letcher County, KY

Public dialogue held online May 25, 2021



Debbie Roth-Howe of Leverett and Mike Gover of Letcher County talk in Leverett, fall 2019

During Hands Across the Hills Visit, Both Sides Agree to Disagree on Trump

By Richie Davis, Greenfield Recorder, May 5, 2018

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WHITESBURG, Ky. — Many of the questions are left unanswered, on both sides of the Leverett-Letcher County, Ky., divide that members of each community brought to their recent conversations.

“When will you feel safe letting go of coal?”

“Is there a way of overcoming the stigma of feeling like white trash?”

“Why can’t we overlook Trump’s questions of character and focus on the good things?”

“Why did you trust us as your guests in your homes in Leverett?”

Their discussions, begun following the November 2016 election, were never meant to change anyone’s behavior, say members of the Leverett Bridging Committee who invited the Kentucky delegation to town last fall as an exercise in cultural understanding.

“The way people vote is a small measure of their humanity,” said Paula Green of Leverett, who facilitated close to 10 hours of structured dialogue between the two groups, using an approach she developed over decades of working in conflict zones around the world. “What’s surprised me most is how quickly and deeply we’ve shifted from pro- and anti-Trump voters to a community of people struggling together to understand each other. It wasn’t a matter of obliterating and ignoring the differences, but in some way transcending them for their common humanity.”

Green, who’s spent more than 25 years bridging differences in conflict zones around the world, said, “This is about finding common ground and trying to



Dialogue participants review unanswered questions during a session in Kentucky. Photo by Richie Davis

dispel the stereotypes and demonization of each other, because that threatens our country and our democracy. There was a tremendous amount of transformation and

“Actually physically sharing space, sharing food, sharing stories is really important in this work.”

understanding on either side, of the other, and a great deal of respect for the struggle each of us goes through and what that does to our behavior, and our voting behavior. And there was the sense our Kentucky friends, as we are, are really open to learning.”

Still, tensions arose at the first Kentucky dialogue on the first full day, after an initial “story circle” in which one Leverett woman described the “powerlessness” of Clinton voters after the election, and the “cardboard” stereotypes that Kentuckians said they’d felt from outsiders.

One Kentucky woman told two Massachusetts counterparts that she feared Muslims are trying to take over this country and impose Sharia law, leaving one Leverett man shaken about how to respond — just as some in the Massachusetts group were surprised to learn some of the Kentuckians had concealed weapons with them.

“You guys in Hands Across the Hills are onto something most people are not doing,” said Amy Brooks, a University of Massachusetts theater graduate who works with Whitesburg-based Appalshop’s Roadside Theater. “Online dialogue might not be enough, trying to see something from someone else’s point of view isn’t necessarily enough. Actually physically sharing space, sharing food, sharing stories is really important in this work. We can communicate and connect face-to-face and have some kind of sustained conversation in ways we never can in a more disconnected way.”

Brooks, who believes naturally occurring differences between people and communities are “absolutely being exploited by people in power (because) it benefits them to have working-class communities pitted against each other,” added, “We’ve lost our nuance, our ability to make fine distinctions. We share the same needs, but have very different ideas about how to get those.”

The two groups found common ground hearing concerns raised about the opioid epidemic in rural Kentucky and its mental health effects on broken families and teens, many of whom feel the need to leave Appalachia for jobs and for greater acceptance at home.

Issues Remaining

But when talk turned to Trump, it struck a nerve. “I think he has appealed to the working-class people who have not had a voice,” said Gwen Johnson of Letcher County “and somehow, in all his rich-man, ivory tower lifestyle, is able to articulate in a way they can understand and agree.”

That drew questions from the Leverett group for specifics, and moderator Green acknowledged, “We sit in very different places. We have different lives. What we have to hold is that there are real differences.”

Tom Wolff, responding to an explanation that Trump’s election was an attempt to return decision-making to the states and local officials, said, “You think people are over-regulated, I’m right with you. But when they start to wipe out regulation and let it go, I’m worried about the money, because it’s in fewer and fewer hands. And that’s how both of our communities are suffering ... I think we have to find some middle ground.”

As the discussion continued, some Leverett residents in the group felt the question over Trump still hadn’t been fully resolved.

“Our country is having a national conversation that’s one of the most difficult conversations to have,” said Green. “It’s happening in living rooms and school rooms and meeting rooms and community centers all over this country. It’s a question about Trump and a question larger than Trump. It’s about our history, about our direction, about our values, about our electoral process. We’re part of a large conversation on where we are and how we bridge the divide. We’re trying to do it in a learning way.”

Barbara Tiner of Leverett was among those who pressed the question, right down to the final structured conversation the last night of the Kentucky visit: “Are you still supporting him? That’s still a question for me.”



Pat Fiero of Leverett (left) and Velda Fraley of Letcher County. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz.

“The question is, how do we define democracy and how do we define a country that we want?”

Kentuckian Velda Fraley responded, “I’m for him all the way.” Pressed for her reasons, she answered, “Because I think he’s for the better good of the country. I think we should just forget about the stuff in the past. That’s irrelevant now.”

Asked whether she would accept the findings of Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation, Fraley said, “I just don’t think they’re going to find anything ... I don’t know what they could find, but I would want it to be really, really bad before I change my opinion of him.”

“I think it’s about our democracy,” responded Susan Lynton of Leverett. “I think it’s about what we want for our country. The question is, how do we define democracy and how do we define a country that we want?”

Still others meeting in this small city, with restaurant TVs tuned in to Fox News or CNN, raised concerns over where having different facts might lead.

Another issue left off the table was guns, at least in formal discussions.

“As a benchmark of how far I think we’ve come on this journey,” said Kip Fonsh of Leverett at the closing session, “Gwen (Johnson) and I had a knock-down, drag-out argument at lunch earlier, and we disagreed about guns, big time. But at the conclusion of the conversation, Gwen approached me, and we both stuck out our hands. Then we said, ‘Nah!’ And we hugged. I think that some measure of understanding, and seeing depth in people is being able to have an argument like we did, still stand up, still talk to one another and have an engagement of physical contact, which for me is pretty important.”

Takeaways

After the visit, Fonsh reflected, “The initial reason for making this connection was to better understand the motivations behind people’s decision to vote for Trump. ... It kind of affirmed some things I felt I already knew about why some people voted for Trump, and I realized it was much more of a complex matter than we sometimes talk about.

“People voted for Trump for a variety of reasons, and some of those reasons I do feel sympathetic to, and I’m feeling a bit closer to people from Whitesburg. But... I’m still very, very angry with those Trump voters who, from my perspective, voted for reasons that were purely unadulterated selfishness, to protect what (they) have, to keep what they have, to increase what they have.

“It’s very, very, very hard, if not impossible, for me to see how people would continue to support an individual who in my opinion is a racist, misogynist, sexist, a serial sex abuser, who’s ignorant of how our government works... his character is just horrendous. It’s hard for me to understand how people would vote for him under those circumstances, and there’s part of me that’s still angry. ...I know the people we met were wonderful people — gentle, friendly... but I just can’t escape the deluge of horrendous decisions and actions this man takes that are putting American democracy at risk. Aside from coal, we just didn’t dig deep enough.”

The dying coal economy — the core of much of initial group discussions, especially as a reason for Letcher County’s overriding choice for president — came into clearer focus during the recent tour: There’s been a boom-bust cycle, with automation the chief reason thousands of jobs have been lost, along with the fact that coal still in the ground remains a treasured resource when alternative economic forces seem few.



*Walking tour of Whitesburg, KY.
Photo by Stacey Lennard*

Leverett member Jay Frost said, “There are many issues that are far more profound than who we voted for,” as the layers of understanding emerged through the discussions.

Hands Across the Hills was clearly successful from Green’s standpoint: “We exceeded our goals, we surpassed our expectations. The ability of people to see beyond their differences and to listen and learn from one another was phenomenal.”

And Nell Fields, who grew up in a family of 18 children in Letcher County reflected, “Politics used to be something you could debate, and talk about. [It] was such a big part of my life, and I almost mourn for it. It wasn’t just about winning an election, it was really about understanding what was happening in an election ... [but] people got to the point where they didn’t want to talk with each other, because they had to choose between one of two evils. Twenty or 30 years ago, as a young adult, it was motivating and invigorating to connect with somebody who might have a little different political view, and you’d talk about it and it didn’t separate you as people.”

When she first read the Leverett group's invitation to meet, Fields said, "a lightbulb went off in my head: 'This is something you need.'"

And she's felt a softening in what's felt like a stubbornness among some kith and kin, along with a relaxing of politically-rooted tensions she's felt.

As a community developer who's used to going into discussions with diverse viewpoints, Leverett's Tom Wolff said he approached the project without high expectations. But he was amazed, he added, by subtle changes that have taken place and the passion that several members have brought to volunteering to work together on spin-off projects.

"My top priority is letting the world know that there's hope, that we're by no means divided, that we softened some people," he said. "It certainly softened me. I'm quite stunned this is going on. This felt like a really spiritual end."



Dialogue in Kentucky. Photo by Sharon Dunn

Perspectives from Hands Across the Hills Participants

ON COAL

“ My family has been coal mining my whole life. That’s what my dad did when I was little; my grandpa is dying of black lung right now, actually. And so that’s the culture we grew up with. When there was a boom, we all lived well; everybody had double-wides, and nice vehicles, and had enough money to do what they wanted, within means, I guess. And then after coal went out, we just started to see our community kind of fall, and a lot of the people fell with it. The drugs came in and took over, and poverty just skyrocketed.

When the election happened, I think a lot of people were just angry and hurt and felt like we didn’t matter — you know, we’re just this little coal town that the rich folks from up north came in and exploited and took from and then packed up and left, and we were just left with nothing other than black lung and blown out creeks with polluted water. I think a lot of it stems from anger, a want for something better, to be heard and seen, and the election felt like a chance for that to happen.

Trump being the businessman, he recognized that, made us feel like he saw us and cared about us. When you have two candidates, and one of them says, ‘we’re gonna put a lot of coal miners out of out of business or out of a job,’ and you have one that shows up, wears his little photo op hard hat and says, ‘I care about coal miners, I care about these people. I’m gonna make sure that you have a job and your families are fed,’ you know, it’s a no-brainer.

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview Feb. 20, 2024



Rachel Sexton of Letcher County and Danielle Barshak of Leverett, October 2019. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

“ For me as facilitator, I tried to hold my own passions in check so that I could best be present for the group. However, once in Leverett and once in Letcher County, my feelings ran ahead of that commitment. In the first instance, during our first deep dive into the phenomenon of coal and their desperation for the only jobs they’ve ever known, one Kentucky person said with hope that ‘perhaps the U.S. will have another war and then our jobs will return.’ Because I have spent the past 30 years facing the consequences of war directly by facilitating dialogues with shattered populations in war zones around the world, that remark pained me deeply.

‘I feel heartbroken and upset hearing this,’ I responded, perhaps more sharply than I might have otherwise, but with a passion that made one of our Leverett participants understand that we were serious here, that we were not just ‘making nice.’ I think that gave permission for more honest responses from others on both ‘sides,’ and probably deepened the trust that we could be real with each other.

Paula Green • Leverett, MA
Op-ed published May 30, 2018



Miners memorial: “Those who gave their lives to black gold.” Photo by Paula Green

“ There was a really tense time for me in one of the dialogues when we were discussing coal, and it was early on, and it got pretty intense. There were some judgmental comments about coal and the environment. You know: we don't have an aversion to science. We know what the science is, we know about climate change and carbon emissions and all that. We know about all that. We're not disregarding it. But at the end of the day, if you can't feed and clothe the children, who cares about all that, you know?

And if *you're* sitting in a place where *that* is the thing that you're more worried about than any other thing — the carbon emissions and climate change — well, then you're vastly better off than a lot of people around here are. So I think that was a chasm, if you will, between the two cultures. And it's not that we don't know about it and don't care about it. It's just that it takes a back burner when everybody's out of work.

Coal has not been kind to us, but it was the only industry in a mono-economy. My mom had three brothers that were killed in mining accidents, and my only brother, my younger brother, was killed in a coal mining accident. We've had our share of heartbreak and blood, sweat and tears, but it was still the way that families lived here. And it's been a pretty dark night of the soul for us since the coal industry took a big downturn. All of our infrastructure and all of our public services were based on coal severance taxes, and suddenly, there was no coal being mined. So all that money went away, and there was nothing to replace it.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Podcast interview Sept. 1, 2022



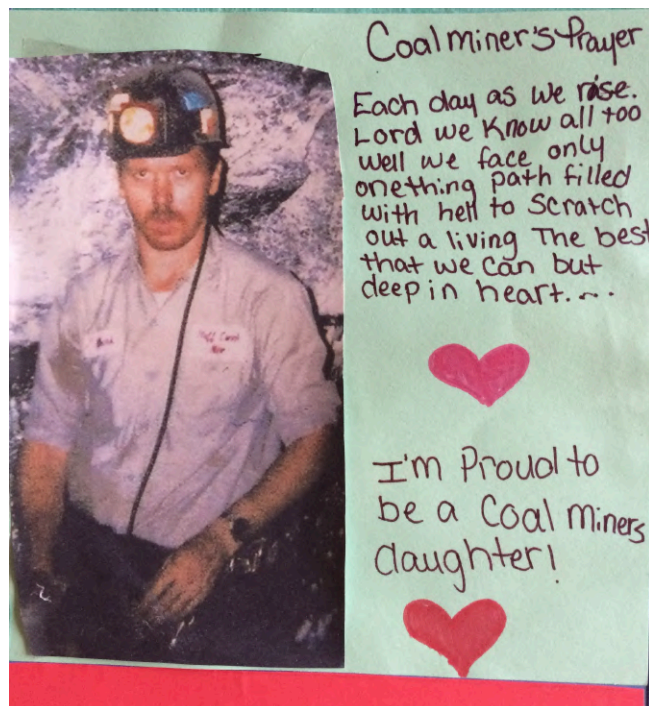
*A diorama within the Portal 31 exhibition mine toured by Hands across the Hills participants in April 2018.
Photo by Stacey Lennard.*

“ I don't know if I ever told you this, Gwen: I came home after that weekend in Kentucky, and I was livid. I was livid that 15 hours down the road, from my house to your house, opportunities are so different. One day's drive. And I just felt horrified and really angry that our country has ignored your part of the world and exploited your part of the world to the degree it had.

I had to see it. I had to see it to know it. I had to take that trip through the coal mine you brought us to.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Public dialogue held online Feb. 10, 2021



*A square from the paper quilt of family stories created by
Hands Across the Hills participants, October 2017*

ON GUNS

“ The question that I asked is: 'What helps you feel safe?' And the people in Massachusetts said, 'When nobody has guns,' and the people in Kentucky said, 'When everybody has guns.' But the common thing is: how do we get our safety?

Paula Green • Leverett, MA

Radio interview Nov. 28, 2018

“ We went to Harlan County's Portal 31, which is kind of a sanitized coal mining experience. Afterward, we went to lunch at the Benham Schoolhouse Inn over there. It was on a Sunday afternoon and it was, you know, we're in the Bible Belt, so it was after church, and there were a lot of little demure ladies in cardigan sweaters in there eating their lunch. And Kip [Fonsh, from Leverett] says something about guns, and I just looked around the room, and I said 'Well Kip, there's probably 20 guns in here,' and he said 'What? There's not 20 guns in here!' and I said, 'I'd venture to say there are.' And he said, 'Where are they?' And I said, 'They're in the purses of these little ladies eating their lunch after church!'

I mean, we went at it. It got pretty heated. Because he — he can argue really well. And I can tell you, we got really heated. Jim Perkins [from Leverett] was sitting at the table with us, and I heard Jim say, under his breath: 'they're a warrior people.' He was talking about us! I thought it was hilarious.

So then we go back in, and we're sitting down to have another dialogue circle, and Kip said, 'Gwen Johnson and I just had a knock-down, drag-out at the lunch table, and Herby Smith was sitting beside him, and Herby just looked at him and said, 'She pull a gun on you?' So that's kind of how things have evolved. We can laugh about things. You know, I do take their viewpoint into account when I'm thinking about things, whereas I used to didn't — and it's just because we're friends, and I know what matters to them. Things are not as cut and dried for any of us anymore, or black and white, if you will. There's some gray areas now that I didn't have before.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Podcast interview Sept. 1, 2022

“ I think I might have mentioned something about guns. And I don't recall the exact words I used, just kind of off the top of my head — flippant, probably. And you [Gwen] made the comment that you thought that all the little old ladies in the room in the dining room were probably packing. And needless to say, my response to that was — you've got to be kidding. It just struck me in such a way. We had promised one another that we wouldn't beat people up about voting for Trump. This was about trying to understand people and where they were coming from. And I have to confess: I lost it. I didn't honor that pledge. And I guess you could say I went ballistic. *You gotta be kidding me. What the hell are they packing for?* Especially these little old ladies.

And what followed was very intense, very contentious, and unusual for the trip. I could understand better why Gwen or others might have voted for Trump, more than I could understand why sweet little old ladies were packing. I feel the heat going up now, the intensity. I didn't feel safe. I don't pack. I've never shot a gun in my life. I've grown up in the country all my life. My father, my uncles, my grandfather — none of them had a gun for self-defense. They had a gun for hunting, exclusively. Not even target practice. They just hunted to put food on the table.

I did not feel safe in that room. I think that's what really kind of generated my heat. You know, what if I said something wrong? What if I did something wrong? What if I — could I trust that others would honor the damage that guns can do? And I think that's what set me off. Plus, I also disagreed with the constitutional arguments.

Kip Fonsh • Leverett, MA

Public dialogue held online April 6, 2021

“ It's very interesting what happened in our small, closed, safe dialogue group in Harlan County that day: All of us really didn't want to get into a heated discussion about politics. We really felt there were things that were far more important for us to be able to collaborate on in the future, working together, for common goals.

We could really agree on no assault weapons. That's something that if you had the Northeast liberals and the Kentuckians working together on that— talking to government officials and saying 'we're together on this, we're not separate' — that's a step forward. And we've been trying to find other issues like that, where we can work together, and along the way increase our own bond.

Sharon Dunn • Leverett, MA

Radio interview May 7, 2018

“ The second family in Leverett I stayed with, he said, ‘Letha, you don't believe in guns, do you?’ I said ‘Yes, I do. Actually, I own one.’ ‘You own a gun?!’ I said ‘Yes, I do.’ He said, ‘Do you know how to use it?’ I said, ‘Yes, I do.’ ‘Why? Why do you own a gun?’

I said, ‘You live a *little* out in the country; of course, Leverett's not a big city like New York. But if you call the police, and someone's breaking in your house, how long does it take them to get to you?’ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘just a few minutes.’

I said, ‘I'll give you an example. I called the police because of a gunshot I heard, and a boy came up the road to my sister's house where I was at, with blood all over him. And he told me that this girl had got shot. So I called the police back and told him they may want to bring an ambulance. Thirty minutes after that phone call, the police called back wanting to know if I still needed them.’ The guy kind of looked at me and said, ‘so it could be an hour before they showed up?’ I said, ‘Yes, and if there's somebody outside my door trying to break in: What am I supposed to do? Tell him to sit down on the porch and wait till the police get there, and then finish the job?’ We have to protect ourselves, because you're not going to let someone hurt one of your kids. I said, ‘My dad taught all of us kids to shoot a gun, and to respect the gun, because my brothers hunted for meat for the table — squirrels and rabbits and what have you.’

He said, ‘I never thought of a use for a gun, but I can see in your case where a gun would be necessary.’ So it did change their thinking on a lot of stuff like that, which goes back to standing on your own two feet. In these mountains, we just don't have the police protection and things like that, that we need.

Letha Dollarhyde • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview March 7, 2024



Gwen Johnson (left) and Kip Fonsh act out a piece of story theater, fall 2019. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills



A view of the hollers in Letcher County, April 2018. Photo by Stacey Lennard

“ I remember the first time we went to Leverett, we did this exercise where you position yourself along a spectrum: one wall of the room was ‘I feel safer when everyone has a gun,’ and the other wall was ‘I feel safer when no one has a gun.’ Well as you can imagine, most of the Leverett people flocked to the ‘no one’ side, and most of the Letcher County people flocked to the ‘everyone’ side.

And there right in the middle of the room stood Letha Dollarhyde, the hillbilly mamaw everyone wishes they had. Everyone looked at her curiously, and she just said: ‘Well you see, this one time, there was a bear...’ And everyone burst out laughing.

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY
Written reflection July 8, 2024



Kentucky's Nell Fields, Letha Dollarhyde, and Debbie Fields in an October 2017 dialogue. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz

Reflections from a Dialogue on Guns

By Rev. Sarah Pirtle • Leverett, MA

One of my favorite things Gwen Johnson often said was, “How did the beast bite you?” I knew I had been “bit” by gun violence. But in our conversations about guns in Hands Across the Hills, which could veer toward belief, policy, and statistics, it was hard to know when and if I could mention something so personal, traumatic, and vulnerable.

Finally, during an online dialogue May 2022, I spoke a little. Ben Fink opened the dialogue by asking: “There’s been a lot of shootings in public places lately. What is the impact on you and your community? How do we view the causes and consequences?” He added: “Paula always brought us to the personal. What is in your heart about all this?”

At first, the discussion veered toward concerns about gun violence in general: the need for better treatment for youth experiencing mental health crisis, and the argument for banning assault weapons. But then, Ben followed up to ask: “What’s the personal and direct impact for people here?”

“What’s the personal and direct impact for people here?”

At that point, I spoke up: “I have a close personal connection to guns. Yesterday was the anniversary of my sister’s murder. She was killed by a gun by a coworker after they both were laid off work. I haven’t brought that up before but I want to mention it now. I find I don’t get over it. I want to remember, and I guess represent the families impacted.”

Others in the group expressed their sympathy for my loss, and the conversation went a step deeper. When it came to second amendment rights and the idea of standing up to tyrannical governments, Rachel Sexton of Kentucky added, “The government shot into the houses of strikers. That happened to my Papaw. I felt safe because my Dad had guns. Growing up, I felt safer knowing there was a gun on top of my refrigerator.”

Toward the end of that online dialogue, the conversation moved toward what could be done. Leverett and Letcher County residents alike spoke about the need to educate children to share their feelings, rather than focusing on punishment; to value youth and care for their mental health; to reach beyond hardened political positions to seek solutions.

We still carried different views on guns and safety — whether to “take the tools away that allow people to harm others” and how to address the “reasons and feelings behind violence.” But we were coming full circle into what motivated us to meet and stay together all these years: preventing violence, preserving life, strengthening community.

ON VACCINES



Massachusetts: Protection for myself and others

By Jay Frost • Leverett, MA; published in the Greenfield Recorder (MA) Jan. 8, 2021 and The Mountain Eagle (KY) Jan. 13, 2021

I will confidently schedule my COVID-19 vaccination as soon as it becomes available in my community. I am over 70 and in good health, and I want this to happen sooner rather than later. I know that administration of the vaccine may be accompanied by mostly mild side effects, but that in trials these occurred only in a small percentage of subjects. I am willing to accept the risk.

For me, like most others in the Pioneer Valley and elsewhere in the Northeast, my choice to vaccinate is influenced by two factors: the desire for my own protection against the disease, and for the protection of those with whom I come in close contact. I believe that if the majority of our population chooses immunization we protect the community-at-large and can put an end to the pandemic.

Like many others of our generation, my wife and I have long believed in the benefits of vaccines commonly administered in the U.S. — for polio, MMR, DTaP, flu, and so on — for ourselves, our children, and the general population. Awareness of medical science plus a lifetime of personal experience have convinced us that common vaccines are safe and effective, protect us from serious (sometimes deadly) diseases, and prevent epidemics.

Unfortunately, vaccination has become yet another hot-button issue fueling the political and cultural divide that threatens our country. The fault lines are familiar — Republican vs. Democrat, red state vs. blue state, rural heartland vs. coastal elite.

From a Kaiser Family Foundation survey published in mid-December: Among Republicans, 42 percent of respondents said that they would probably not or definitely not get the vaccine even if it was free and determined to be safe. Only 12 percent of Democrats said they would decline the vaccine. In the same survey, among rural residents nationwide, 35 percent expressed hesitancy about the vaccine, 8 percent more than suburban residents and 10 percent more than urban dwellers.

Here in Massachusetts, according to a Boston Globe survey published in early December, 85 percent of interviewees said that they planned to get the vaccine as soon as they could.

Reflecting the above numbers, during a December Hands Across the Hills dialogue (via Zoom), our Kentucky colleagues indicated that a significant percentage of residents in their rural area opposed getting COVID-19 vaccinations.

For me, my COVID-19 vaccination cannot come soon enough. It will represent the first small step in the return to “normal” life, a time when — eventually — our group from Leverett will meet again with our Kentucky friends, to embrace them, and to share once more the stories, songs, potlucks, and home visits that have helped our project actively address the barriers that divide our country.

Jay Frost is a retired freelance writer and former Leverett resident who recently moved to New Hampshire. He is a founding member of Hands Across the Hills and remains active in the project.



Kentucky: Another ‘miracle’ drug?

By Gwen Johnson; published in the Greenfield Recorder (MA) Jan. 8, 2021 and The Mountain Eagle (KY) Jan. 13, 2021

The coronavirus vaccine is now being distributed and administered all over the United States, but many folks here in eastern Kentucky are not interested.

Over the weeks since these articles were conceived in a Hands Across the Hills brainstorming session with participants from Leverett, Mass. and Letcher County, Ky., I conducted an impromptu survey among the highways and the hedges of my local area. I asked a simple question: How do you feel about the prospect of being injected with the new COVID-19 vaccine?

Responses fell into three general categories:

Among some respondents, the question was met with skepticism and thoughtful consideration. They said that they would wait and see what happened but would not take the vaccine just yet.

Others answered with a resounding “No!” but then tempered their responses by suggesting that they might later take the vaccine after waiting to see if there were any health concerns or side effects among early adopters.

Still others, like myself, expressed the desire to promptly take the vaccine in order to get on with our lives and quit worrying about it. (Among this group were several health care professionals who are mandated to receive the vaccine.)

The numbers of respondents in each of the three groups were about equal. This led me to wonder: Do the results of this survey reflect public opinion in other parts of the country, or are we unique here in our region?

When the first vaccine shipment arrived in our county, the local newspapers ran front-page stories announcing its availability. I applauded the news, but not all my neighbors felt the same way.

Many residents continued to be apprehensive and hesitant even after the vaccine became available. Perhaps, they thought, this is just another “marketing” experiment using hillbillies as subjects, such as in the early 2000s when Purdue Pharma dumped tons of Oxycontin into Appalachian communities via local health care systems and pharmacies. For years, Oxycontin — dubbed “hillbilly heroin” — flooded our mountain communities, with dire consequences.

If some people here in eastern Kentucky are slow to get on board with a new medication, please understand that this is not our first rodeo. We have been exploited by Big Pharma and healthcare systems, triggering an epidemic of drug use and incarceration that has created a near-complete failure of family and cultural systems.

If some folks are slow to embrace this “miracle” vaccine that could end the dreaded coronavirus, this could possibly be why. So before you judge us too harshly, try to put yourself in our shoes (although they may not be as nice as the ones you typically wear).

Human medical experiments without a patient’s consent may be outlawed in this country — unless, of course, you were a hillbilly in moderate pain during Oxycontin trials. Some folks around here are suspicious lest they fall prey to yet another “miracle” medication.

Gwen Johnson, a self-described hillbilly woman from Hemphill, KY, is proprietor of Black Sheep Bakery and Catering, an entity that generates revenue for the non-profit Hemphill Community Center. She has been a member of Hands Across the Hills since 2017.

ON THE EVENTS AT THE CAPITOL ON JANUARY 6, 2021

“ I had been very anxious about some of the policies I saw unfolding under Trump, but the insurrection terrified me when I watched what was going on in live time with the Capitol. Many of you know that I'm the daughter of Holocaust refugees. And watching that was such a flashback for me about Nazi Germany, and the Nazis storming the Reichstag.

It was the first time that I felt really frightened because of my Jewishness in this country. And that was a real swing of the pendulum for me, because this is the country that saved my family. This is the country that I have come to trust, that allows me to exist. But that insurrection absolutely terrified me. I saw that our country could become something very different. And it frightened me on behalf of my grandchildren and the world they're growing up in. I felt the extremes of that polarization so much more viscerally.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Public dialogue held online Feb. 10, 2021

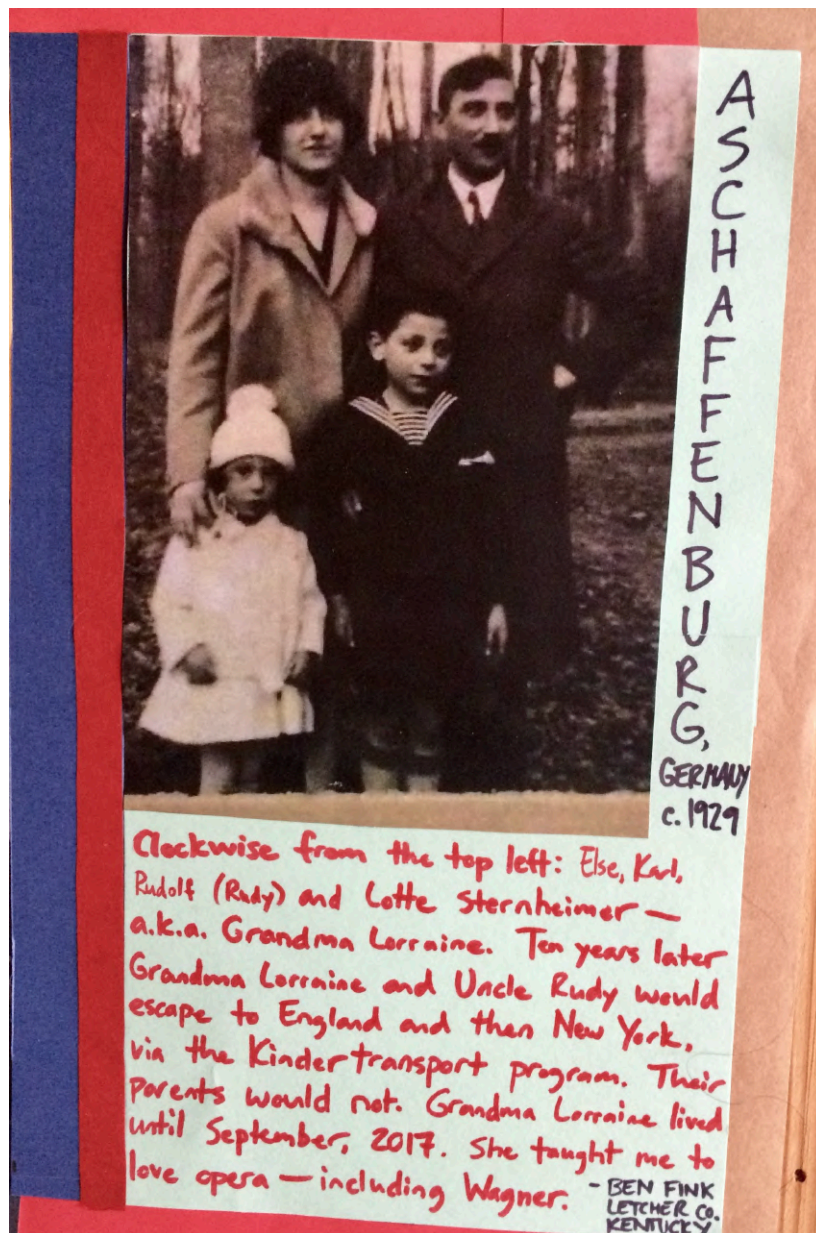
“ There are still, I believe, a lot of people in our community who potentially support what happened. I saw Facebook posts with hundreds of likes, in support of and feeling a commitment to what had happened there. In this community, I try not to engage too much at that level of confrontation... There are still plenty of people here who feel — I think — that they are pushed down and not heard, and have strong fears about the direction the country has been and continues to go, and they want to shake things up and get the attention.

For me personally, I feel like it's a horrible thing. I don't proclaim to understand all the legalities, but nothing in my lifetime compares, and I'm sending out thoughts to folks who felt that fear. I'm sorry that you experienced that.

Deborah and Stacey in particular, when you talk about your parents' stories: I went to bed on stories of my mom being the ninth child at the head of a holler at Scuttlehole Gap. When I think of you, 15 hours away, going to bed on stories from your family — knowing how those stories impacted me, I assume that you had the same connection. They're different, but there's that same allegiance and loyalty and sadness for what our families went through.

Valerie Horn • Letcher County, KY

Public dialogue held online Feb. 10, 2021



*A square from the paper quilt of family stories created by
Hands Across the Hills, October 2017*

ON THE FIRST MONTHS OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION



A Kentuckian looks at the new administration

By Mike Gover • Letcher County, KY; published in the Greenfield Recorder (MA) May 21, 2021

I don't know the exact level of division in the country or here in Eastern Kentucky, but I know that it is deep. The dividing lines are not clear, so I will call them "left" and "right." I don't like categorizing us this way, but if I am going to try to explain my area's reaction to the election of Joe Biden, I can't think of another way. "Left" means generally agreeing with the Democrat party ideology, and "right" means generally agreeing with the Republican party ideology.

If our country is in fact divided, then I would say that Eastern Kentucky may be slightly more "right" leaning than the rest of the country but not much. I have visited many other places in America and some places in other parts of the world, and I don't see humans as different as one might think even though our cultures and appearances are quite different.

I think most humans generally want the same things on a basic level. We all want a safe, nurturing world for ourselves and future generations. We seem to have wildly varying perspectives on what that should look like, on what our current condition is, on what our condition should be like, and on how to get from where we are to where we would like to be.

Since I cannot really speak for my region, I can only say what my reaction to the new Biden administration is. I assume that where I live around half the people would agree with me and half would disagree. This assumption is based on the common conversations that I am involved in and ones that I hear around me. I am fairly certain that I am every bit as unhappy about the election of Joe Biden as the people who don't like Trump were by his election in 2016. To be specific, I probably disagree with close to 100 percent of the things that the Biden administration wants to do in this country.

I am not in favor of larger and more restrictive federal government, and that is what I believe this administration is in favor of. I believe Biden and his family are corrupt in

dealings with Russia and Ukraine and especially China. I believe that Biden wants aggressive gun control, unreasonably open borders, government-funded abortions, and a much more restrictive government overall. I oppose all of these things. I believe that our country's spending is out of control, and that is a path to ruin for the future generations of this country and in fact the world.

For now Biden is the president. This division regarding his legitimacy, in my opinion, is a worse problem than who the president is.

I inherently distrust anyone who has been in politics for as many years as Joe Biden has, and if he had the answers to our problems then why haven't 50 years of his sort of solutions fixed anything? In spite of all that I disagree with him on, I am willing to give him a chance and give him my prayers. I don't like much of what I believe Biden stands for, but I don't hate him as a human. I cannot honestly say that I respect him as a man, but I do acknowledge that he holds the office of the presidency. I cannot say that I believe the election to have been fair and honest given all the coronavirus election rule changes, big tech

manipulation, and gross media dishonesty. I can say that Joe Biden is currently the president of the United States.

The last few elections and the vitriol that has come with them shows the level of division in our country. I don't believe that we can survive as a nation with this much division. I really don't see Joe Biden or any of his recent predecessors as the real problem but all of them as symptoms of a much deeper spiritual and moral problem in this country. These are the problems that will need to be identified and addressed in order for the nation to survive.

I believe that we need to start having honest conversations with accurate information, without labeling and judging each other every time we disagree. All of us need to realize that we are not right about every opinion that we hold and to stop condemning anyone who disagrees with us.

I don't see Joe Biden or his party doing anything to unite us, and I believe that we will go further in the wrong direction under his leadership. I expect that just because of my opinions I will be labeled by many as a racist, a white supremacist or a number of other

derogatory names. I know that I am not any of these things. Anyone who knows me also knows that I am not these things.

For now Biden is the president. This division regarding his legitimacy, in my opinion, is a worse problem than who the president is. We are all humans, and that is more important than the dividing factors that are currently being pushed on us from many sides. Will a Biden administration unite us? Time will tell. Whether I believe in him or not I really hope that he turns out to be good for the country.

Kentucky-born Mike Gover, like his father, made his living from the coal industry. He has served 17 years in administrative levels in local government. He raised four sons in Whitesburg, and has volunteered and mentored at Oneida Baptist Institute, a boarding school, for the last six years.



A Massachusetts liberal looks at the new administration

By Jim Perkins • Leverett, MA; published in the Greenfield Recorder (MA) May 21, 2021

I wasn't a supporter of Joe Biden during the Democratic primary season.

I liked Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. I thought of Biden as a "middle-of-the-roader," too old and set in his ways to tackle the big issues, even if he had the desire to do so. Our country is in deep crisis, and we Americans are on course to lose whatever democracy we have managed to build over the passage of our history. It is not democracy when power rests in the hands of a few fabulously wealthy people and a growing majority are losing ground, insecure, powerless, scared, and agitated.

Our lives are playing out against the onrushing menace of climate change. Global warming creates conditions causing farmers to fail, forcing them to pull up stakes and become refugees. Sea rise already threatens some low-lying cities and island nations. Fires, hurricanes, drought, and floods become more frequent and severe. That humans are the cause is increasingly difficult to deny.

The great tasks of our time are to make peace and to create a fairly shared, modestly prosperous economy operating in harmony with the needs of the natural world in which everybody has a comfortable, secure, fair share. There is good reason to fear that these tasks

are impossibly large. It is tragic when politicians divert us from the work that needs to be done now, acting out our anger, frustration and despair, shining searchlights on people and groups of people to blame and hate while enabling the powerful to double down on their profit-producing, world-destroying ways.

We need to kindle our hope and confidence, to inspire ourselves and others and find the spirit to rise to the challenges of our time.

Joe Biden is naming the real problems and betting that we have the courage, knowledge, and will to deal with them. He sees his job as uniting us behind a hopeful vision of a just and prosperous future. He cares deeply for the wellbeing of people and expresses that care through bold programs for good public health, employment, and education. He accepts the reality of climate change and promotes designs for our near and middle term future that combine plans for full employment with the greening of the environment.

I can see now that he is of the right age. He has an elder's wisdom and compassion. He has no ambitions to interfere with the direct pursuit of the job at hand. His personal interest is at one with the public interest. His ego is quiet. His experience is unequaled. He knows how to get things done. He has proven his skill as a judge of competence and character by his choice of those to serve in his administration. He has demonstrated his understanding of the enormity of the challenges facing our country and the world by the breathtaking scope and scale of his policies, his administrative actions, and his legislative proposals. His personal modesty and decency give reason to trust him.

Our democratic experiment is endangered by fierce inequality and the influence of money on our politics. We, the people, have been manipulated, lied to, and deeply disappointed. Now we are challenged to overcome our racial prejudice, our feeling of alienation from others, and our fear that government will always be used against us. We need to kindle our hope and confidence, to inspire ourselves and others and find the spirit to rise to the challenges of our time. My hope is that a large majority of us may soon come to see that we have in Joe Biden a leader with whom we can work together for a hopeful future.

Jim Perkins has been a teacher, preacher, farmer, anti-war activist and nuclear resister. He is a founding member of Hands Across the Hills and for eight years served on the Select Board (governance) for the town of Leverett. Jim raised his children on a 300-acre farm in Upstate New York and now enjoys cultivating flowers and vegetables in his Leverett gardens.

5.

Making Things Together

Paper Cranes, Hillbilly Honeybuns, & Bands Across the Hills

FROM THE START, and by design, Hands Across the Hills was about more than the formal dialogue sessions. Shared meals, community-wide gatherings, jam sessions, storytelling, and group singing were all key elements of the experience. The relationships that developed led to a host of unexpected follow-up activity: a Kentucky participant's sojourn to France with a Massachusetts host, which helped launch a local business in Letcher County; a "pop-up" pub in Leverett inspired by their experience of Kentucky community life; joint community observances of Martin Luther King Day; smaller-scale visits from one community to the other to mark special occasions; and a large-scale Leverett-led concert and relief effort following the devastating Kentucky flood of 2022. Participants from both communities worked together to support a beloved young participant, who faced discrimination based on gender identity in Letcher County, to stay with a Leverett host family and attend a Western Massachusetts school.

Hands Across the Hills as a formal project may have ended, but some of those projects — and many of those relationships — continue.



Jamming in Leverett, fall 2019. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

“ What surprised me the most was the quality of relationships we developed with them. I didn't expect so much transcendence. We have all been so broken since the election. And so angry, so disturbed, so concerned about our country. And the fact is that we were able to be with this group of people in a way that transcended that anger.

Paula Green • Leverett, MA

Public event in Leverett, MA May 15, 2018

“ There've just been a lot of benefits that we didn't count on happening, that have happened. We had a solar project: we got solar on top of our community center, and solar in three other locations in the county, and the folks in Leverett donated toward those projects — you know, because of course, they didn't want us to use coal, they were all about us using solar.

I got an invitation to go to France and work in a French bakery for two weeks from Susan [from Leverett]. We've got these little free libraries outside that people can come and leave books or take books, and Judy [from Leverett] has donated hundreds of books to those libraries.

Just to sit around the table together, and to get to know each other's culture a little bit, and to get to know the families and what's going on with them — I've got friends in Leverett that I check up with every week. You know, we're checking on them, they're checking on us. It's invaluable, it's family.

Whatever's going on here is of interest to those folks in Leverett now, and whatever's going on up there is of interest to us. So many of them are Jewish, and when some antisemitic, violent act happens, my first thought is: Oh my goodness, how are they? Are they okay? You know, we send condolences back and forth. I lost my mom and was showered with so much kindness from Leverett. Nell had COVID and they sent money and Black Sheep Bakery catered meals to Nell's house. And I mean, there's just been so many wonderful things that have come about because of these friendships.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Podcast interview Sept. 1, 2022

“ Nell [Fields] was on the board of Appalshop, and I've had a lot of experience consulting to nonprofits. So we just met, every week or every other week, and I, you know, coached her through. Anything that has to do with running Appalshop requires enormous patience, skill, and understanding. I didn't think that I had the answers, but I could work with her. That wasn't a Hands Across the Hills project. It was something that happened because the two of us liked each other and we got into this topic, and I said, well I'll be glad to talk with you. And I wonder how many other things were like that. What other spin-offs from Hands Across the Hills happened like this?

Tom Wolff • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024



Gwen Johnson and the Black Sheep bakers speaking at Hemphill Community Center. Photo by Stacey Lennard

“ That Friday night during the 2018 Leverett visit to Letcher County, when we held very possibly the first large-scale Shabbos observance in the history of Hemphill, Kentucky — that stuck with a lot of us. Nell had stayed with Tom and his wife Peggy when we were in Leverett, and they said the blessings and had the wine and challah, and Nell wanted Tom and the other Jewish folks from Leverett to feel welcome. Anyway, while we were planning it, I remember asking Gwen and Nell and the other local organizers about how to handle the drinks, because normally you drink wine on Friday nights, but Letcher County is dry, and I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble. So I asked them, “Do we want to serve grape juice, or —” they cut me off — wine!” We ended up having both. And I remember one local middle-aged woman came in, and I asked her which she wanted, and she said: ‘I’ll have what Jesus drank.’

But the part that had the biggest impact, locally, was the bread. You couldn’t get good challah anywhere near Letcher County. It just so happened I still had one in my freezer from the last time I was in Cincinnati, so I defrosted it and brought it along, and everyone had some. Well, Gwen and the folks she was working with at Hemphill Community Center, they were really taken with it. They were just starting Black Sheep Bakery, and they wanted to learn to make it themselves. So I put them in touch with a friend of mine in Philadelphia who makes excellent challah, and she was happy to give them the recipe.

That’s how the Black Sheep Bakery, in the coal camp of Hemphill, Kentucky, with maybe three Jews living in the whole county, started baking the best challah in a hundred-mile radius. It flew off the shelves. The locals loved it. Only trouble was, they weren’t sure how to pronounce the word ‘challah.’ So they started calling it ‘hillbilly honeybuns.’

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY

Written reflection July 12, 2024



Shabbat in Letcher County. Photo by Richie Davis

Black Sheep Deli of Amherst Gets a Kentucky Counterpart

By Richie Davis, Greenfield Recorder, April 24, 2018

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HEMPHILL, Ky. — No one expects the “Hands Across the Hills” exchange to lead Leverett, Mass. voters or their Letcher County, Ky. counterparts to suddenly change their divergent political behavior.

But the effort to bridge the divide between Western Mass. and Eastern Kentucky has already resulted in one surprising development: the startup of Black Sheep Bakery, Appalachian style.

Mind you, Hemphill Community Center, a gathering place in a hamlet 13 miles from the city of Whitesburg, was already gearing up to build a brick oven in the former schoolhouse following last year’s successful “Back to Our Appalachian Roots” project. The project, focused on honing traditional skills like blacksmithing and quilting, included open-fire cooking mountain foods like Cumberland pie, chicken and dumplings, blackberry cobbler, beans and dutch-oven cornbread.

But when Gwen Johnson and nearly a dozen Letcher County neighbors traveled northward to Franklin County, Mass. last fall for a four-day cultural exchange with Leverett hosts — with plenty of potluck meals at every turn — they got a taste of New England hospitality, complete with whole-grain breads and baked goods from Amherst’s Black Sheep Deli.

A load of those cookies and other sweet treats, donated by Black Sheep owner Nick Seamon of Leverett, were sent back as leftovers for the Kentuckians’ 13-hour drive back home. Enough remained, in fact, that Johnson brought the baked goods to a community center meeting the night they arrived back home.



Bradley Johnson, a volunteer for Hemphill Catering Co. with new brick oven at Hemphill Community Center. Photo by Richie Davis

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There, volunteers like Johnson and other participants in a community-owned Hemphill Catering Co., received a \$15,000 Culture Hub grant to build a brick oven in which they planned to bake bread using locally sourced and other healthful ingredients.

“There is nothing like hearth-baked bread,” said Johnson, the community center’s secretary and treasurer. “It feeds the body and seems familiar even if you have never before tasted it.”



The Black Sheep Brick Oven Bakery and Catering, Jackhorn, KY. Photo by Malcolm J. Wilson

The catering business, said Johnson, makes pastries and some cakes, as well as cornbread and biscuits, “But making sourdough and yeast-rise loaf bread are new to us. This is a brand new effort,” and the community-owned bakery is a spin-off from the catering business, which cooks the meals

for parties at Hemphill, a former coal-mining camp.

Getting what Johnson calls artisan bread or sourdough bread probably means a 50 miles and back trek. The plan is to begin experimenting with the brick oven, about 4 feet wide and 6 feet deep, using grain sourced around the region — possibly from a mill three hours south, in Asheville, N.C., but gradually trying to interest growers locally.

But what to name the new brick-oven bakery, which Johnson said will not only be staffed by volunteers, but also will be a community service outlet for defendants sentenced by the Letcher County Drug Court?

Hemphill is now “a community struggling with unemployment, addiction and poor health outcomes,” according to Johnson. “Many of its citizens, in the throes of addiction, have been incarcerated. When they emerge from their cells they find it almost impossible to find a job.” The new bakery “will be 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.”

As some of the bakery project organizers contemplated the work ahead, Johnson recalled, “Someone said, ‘I’ve always been the black sheep in my family.’” That reminded

her of the whole-grain bread and baked goods she'd been introduced to from The Black Sheep deli up in Massachusetts.

"We kind of stole the name," Johnson said. "We didn't figure there would be any fallout, since there's so much distance, and we had a whole plethora of sweet treats leftover from the potlucks that they gave us to enjoy on our way back to Kentucky."

Back in Amherst, Seamon, who set up his bakery and deli in 1986, said he's just as tickled to have the Kentucky contingent take the name back home with him as they did with the baked goods he provided. He even sent some Black Sheep T-shirts and coffee mugs down to Kentucky with the delegation of Leverett residents taking part in the trip last week.

"There are Black Sheeps everywhere," Seamon said with a laugh, adding that his only regret was that he didn't get to meet the Kentucky visitors last fall. And Johnson said she's hoping to get in touch with Seamon for some Black Sheep recipes.

Meanwhile, back in Kentucky, a seven-member Black Sheep Bakery crew — which Johnson hopes will grow to include other members of the community if the bakery becomes successful — began training last week with a brick oven and sourdough expert at Smoke Signals Bakery in Marshall, N.C.

As Johnson told radio station WMMT back in February, when the community center celebrated the start of work on the oven, "Our dream is to bake pizza and locally sourced bread using healthier grains than we get around here, from flour and grains with no GMOs. We just think we have a deficit in the breadbasket here... We want to make it an abundant, healthy breadbasket."

"Many of Hemphill's citizens, in the throes of addiction, have been incarcerated. When they emerge from their cells they find it almost impossible to find a job. Hemphill Community Center believes these folks are a latent asset of the community."



Bread baked at the Black Sheep Brick Oven Bakery and Catering, Jackhorn, KY. Photo courtesy of Hemphill Community Center

Inspired by Kentucky, Leverett 'Pops' a Pub

By Richie Davis, Greenfield Recorder, April 26, 2018

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LEVERETT — Don't expect bourbon, or even moonshine.

But Leverett residents, including those recently returned from a cultural exchange to Kentucky, have long had a hankerin' for a watering hole where they can come together.

The idea for the town's first pop-up pub, planned for May 5 at Leverett Crafts and Arts, didn't spring directly from the "bridging group" that returned this week from Letcher County in Eastern Kentucky's coal-mining region,

but it began soon after the 2016 presidential election. The idea came about at the first meeting of the Leverett Alliance, the group that reached out to Trump voters in this town where Hillary Clinton received 85 percent of the vote.

"In Leverett, we've always sort of been jealous of Shutesbury having the Shutesbury Athletic Club — a local bar where a diverse group of people can go and just have a beer and listen to some music," said Kurt Adams, who advocated for such a place for a while. "Why can't we have something like that? Wouldn't it be nice if we could all come together, people of different political perspectives, with no agenda; we're not going to talk politics. We're all just regular people in town and let's have some fun."

At the Leverett Alliance meeting, designed to bring together people from across the political spectrum, about 60 people showed up at the library, according to Tom Wolff. He has been part of a committee to see about a pub pop-up.



Leverett and Letcher County residents gather at Kentucky Mist Moonshine in Whitesburg, KY. Photo by Richie Davis.

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Several said there should be a place to meet that's not the transfer station or the Village Co-op, said Adams, but no one has jumped to take the risk of starting a business.

The pub, from 6 to 10 p.m., will be something of a trial balloon, with wine, beer and soda on sale, thanks to a one-day liquor license, organizers said. If it's deemed a success, it could reappear quarterly or maybe monthly.

But Adams warned against too much success, since the fire code for the space allows for no more than 100 people.

There was brief talk of trying to find someone to buy the post office building when it became available, but that would have required an investment no one was willing to make, Wolff said.

"People want a place where they can come together," added Wolff, who described the Eastern Kentucky residents' community centers, in former school buildings or similar spaces, offering a great example of ways to connect people.

Aside from helping its 18 members get to know their Kentucky counterparts as part of the Hands Across the Hills project, Wolff said, "We fell in love with each other in Leverett. We live in these hilltowns, and we have connections with some people, but there's no place to gather. I've been at meetings at 14 different houses in the last year and a half, and I've come to appreciate my neighbors. I really feel like this town is more of a community."

Pat Fiero, another member of the planning committee, which has been meeting at The Harp in North Amherst, said, "We're trying to reach across the divides and talk to people we don't usually talk to and get to know as human beings."

To liven it up, said Fiero, who was part of the Kentucky trip, there will be four bands and a name-that-pub contest.

The prize? "Some hooch we brought back," she said. So there may be some bourbon and moonshine, after all.



*The Kentuckians accept a gift from their guests — a print by a Leverett artist — during the spring 2018 exchange visit.
Photo by Sharon Dunn*

Massachusetts Residents Make Origami Cranes for Our Bakery

By Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY; published in The Mountain Eagle April 21, 2021

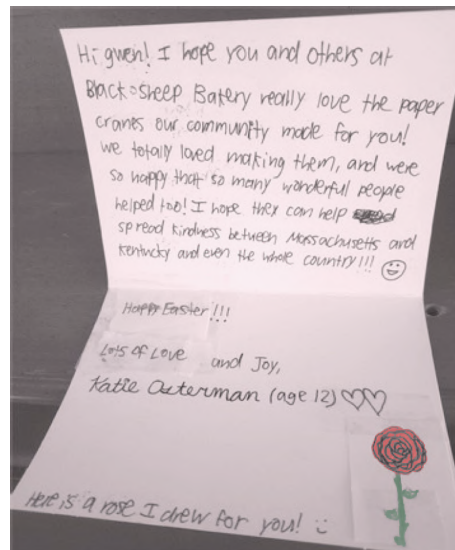
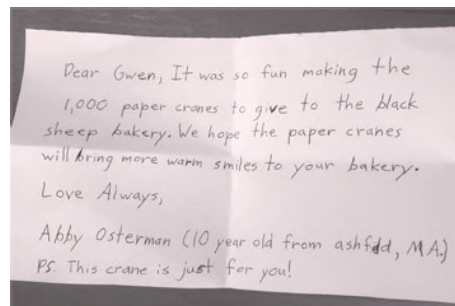


A few weeks back I went out the door here at the community center, and lo and behold there were two cranes in our parking lot. I could not believe my eyes. What were they doing here? Why ever would they touch down here? When I walked closer they took wing and flew over into the creek. Moments later they flew away.

A couple of weeks later I was asked to be a speaker at an online church service with folks in Massachusetts [run by Rev. Sarah Pirtle of Hands Across the Hills]. During the service someone mentioned they had been making origami cranes and that cranes symbolize peace. I shared about the cranes I witnessed on our campus. Two young sisters, ages 10 and 12, in Sarah's Sunday School class wanted to fold a thousand paper cranes, and Sarah suggested they send the origami cranes they make to Black Sheep Bakery. I shared that we would be honored to receive the cranes.

The children put colorful papers on the porch of the hardware store in the village. Folks of all ages came and got the papers and constructed cranes for the project.

A month later a large mysterious box arrived by delivery truck. We thought it was supplies we had ordered. Upon opening, we discovered it contained a big plastic tote filled to the brim with paper origami cranes. There were one thousand of them, so colorful and of all different sizes just like the people who made them. What a joy to our staff to know that people cared enough to



spend hours on a craft to bring smiles in a place and people a thousand miles away.

We have made garlands of cranes and hung them in the bakery. You really should visit us to see them. They make it look like we are always having a party.

On Sunday we met Katie and Abby Osterman on a Zoom meeting. They introduced us to their baby chicks they are raising. They are the amazing young ladies who had a vision of outreach to Appalachia that caused their whole village to get on board. That vision has truly decorated our lives here at Black Sheep Bakery.

Thank you, Abby and Katie! We hope you and your chickens thrive. We will always remember your bright labor of love in these dark times.

What a joy to our staff to know that people cared enough to spend hours on a craft to bring smiles in a place and people a thousand miles away.



Honoring Dr. King Together

By Rev. Sarah Pirtle • Leverett, MA

“Love is the willingness to go to any length to restore community.”

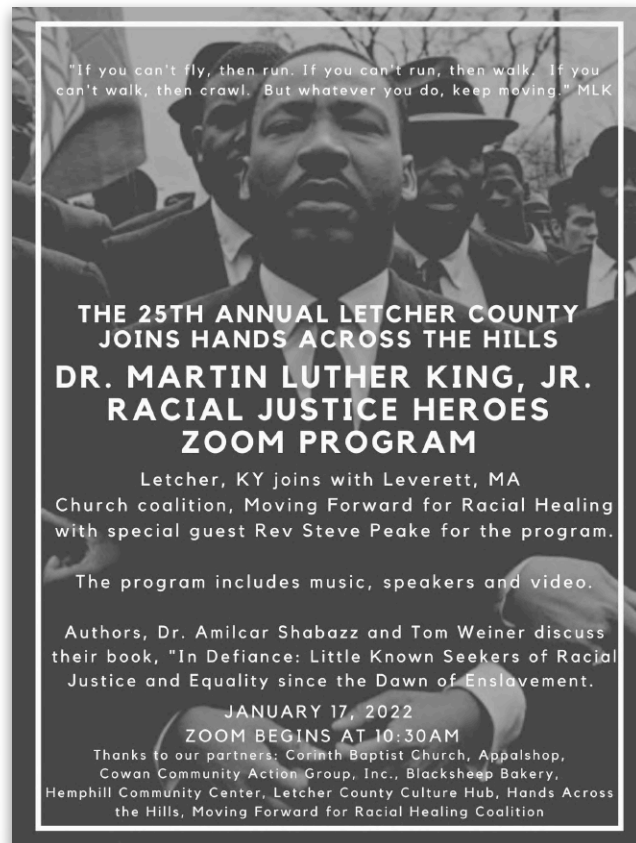
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

For many years, events have been organized in Letcher County, Kentucky during the weekend honoring Dr. King. Starting in 2021, during the COVID lockdown, Hands Across the Hills and its sister project Bridge4Unity joined together over Zoom to connect the annual events in Whitesburg with events in Franklin County, Massachusetts.

The joint celebration included white and African American ministers from Kentucky and Massachusetts leading music and prayers. Here are a few of the words I offered:

We build together a home for the heart. Moving forward towards racial justice, there is a walk that needs to be walked deep inside. The construction of racism is an attempt to steal the soul of humankind. We are doing soul-level work.

When we face traumatic horrific history and present day inhumane actions, we are agreeing to look and join the necessary outcry and by taking responsibility for facing this, we shout this matters. By being willing to touch these realities, a power of human caring grows that becomes a light to guide us.



Responding to the 2022 East Kentucky Flood

By Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY



Gwen Johnson doing her part for flood relief, August 2022, with a volunteer. Photo courtesy of Hemphill Community Center

In the summer of 2022 a deadly flood hit 14 counties in East Kentucky, including Letcher County. More than 40 people were killed, thousands lost their homes to water and mud, and entire downtown areas were destroyed. National media covered the disaster for a day or two, then moved on. Social services and government aid came nowhere close to meeting the need. Several Letcher County organizations involved in Hands Across the Hills played a key role in flood relief at the community level: cleaning and emptying people's houses; distributing food, water, and other vital goods; and coordinating volunteers and donations that poured in from ordinary people from several surrounding states and across the country.

"This is the hardest work I've ever done in my life," said Gwen Johnson, director of Hemphill Community Center, which quickly became a major hub of flood relief activity. She observed that some of those who had lost the most were serving as volunteers to help others. "There are angels among us," she said.

In Leverett, Hands Across the Hills participants and many of their neighbors sprung into action. They organized a musical benefit they called Bands Across the Hills, raising money at the door and through refreshments, and soliciting donations through a GoFundMe page they set up for Letcher County flood relief. Over \$10,000 was raised, and donated in equal shares to Hemphill and Cowan Community Centers — two deeply-rooted community organizations connected to Hands Across the Hills since the start.



Leverett's Eye-Witness to Flood damage in Eastern Kentucky

By Jim Perkins • Leverett, MA

Jim Perkins traveled to East Kentucky to volunteer at Hemphill in the weeks following the flood. He posted this reflection on the Hands Across the Hills website.



July 2022 flooding in Whitesburg, KY. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

Everything is needed... Everyone is making do, depending on each other. Survival depends on community cohesion, and it exists here more than in our affluent realm where we don't depend on others.

Last night I was cold, sleeping in the big iron bed at the top of Gwen's house. There's no electricity so I navigated the stairs and intricacies of the house by candlelight. The roof leaks but last night it didn't rain. It doesn't leak on the bed, Gwen assures me.

This morning I see that the bed coverings are thin but exquisitely worked quilts of great beauty. I note that a lot of beauty was washed away by the flood. If you send, say, a blanket, send a beautiful one. A couple of hundred airline blankets just arrived with a Delta flight attendant crew person. I didn't ask if she stole them. There are mountains of paper towels, toilet paper, bottled water, some boots, soap and detergent, everything needed to restore the domestic routine.

Hemphill coal camp is on a road beside a piddling creek that has carved out a hollow just big enough for that road and a row of very modest houses and businesses. The rain comes down harder than usual, as we have noted in Leverett, and the creek became rusting, debris-laden water standing to the height of the ceiling of one man I was talking to. They have shoveled the mud away, and what's left has turned to dust. Piles of mattresses, sheet rock, insulation and such remain to be somehow disposed of. The businesses are closed and wrecked. Some of the houses are again holding people, but many are beyond redemption.

I repeat: If you are inclined to give something, give something beautiful.

A Song for the Flood

By Rev. Sarah Pirtle • Leverett, MA

When the flooding happened, I had such heartache that I felt the disaster in my bones. I wished I could fly like a bird on wings from Western Massachusetts to Letcher County to help. I decided to pour that longing into a song to perform at Bands Across the Hills.

Setting out to write a song forces you to condense the essence of what is important. It was a turning point to find this lyric — *Endless mud can't wash away tomorrow*. Writing a song is like mining. It's like pressing coal to become a diamond. You have to keep going deeper. I found this line — *When we work with the power of love, what's broken is being mended* — and that encapsulated not only our urge to help the community, but also it spoke to the meaning of Hands Across the Hills.

I heard details of the flood while visiting Debbie Roth-Howe in Leverett. On the drive home, I concentrated on creating a song that could in some way join our friends. It needed both to acknowledge the scope of the disaster as well as all that they were doing to address it. Along the dirt road from her house, I sang up a storm. I'd drive a mile and then pull over to the side of the road and write down the next lyric. Here's the result.

BRIDGE TO KENTUCKY

Dedicated to Hands Across the Hills, words and music by Sarah Pirtle, 2022

This song was written in response to the flood and sung at Bands Across the Hills.

(1) Mothers held on to each child as the flood roared through the hollow.
Endless flood. Endless mud, can't wash away tomorrow, can't wash away tomorrow.

CHORUS:

Can you hear the wind across the mountains?
Can you see that bird a-flying, high wings above the hollow?
Can you feel those wings wrap around you? We've gotta build a new tomorrow.

(2) So many neighbors lost their lives from the waters raging by
So many neighbors lost their homes
It's like stars changed in the sky. Stars changed in the sky.

CHORUS:

Can you hear the wind across the mountains?

Can you see that bird a-flying, high wings above the hollow?

Can you feel those wings wrap around you? We're gonna build a new tomorrow.

Bridge: When we work with the power of love, what's broken is being mended.

When we work with the power of love, we seek what can be found.

When we work with the power of love, someone's in your corner.

When we work with the power of love, we walk on sacred ground.

(3) You gave a thousand meals a day and brought food before the nightfall.

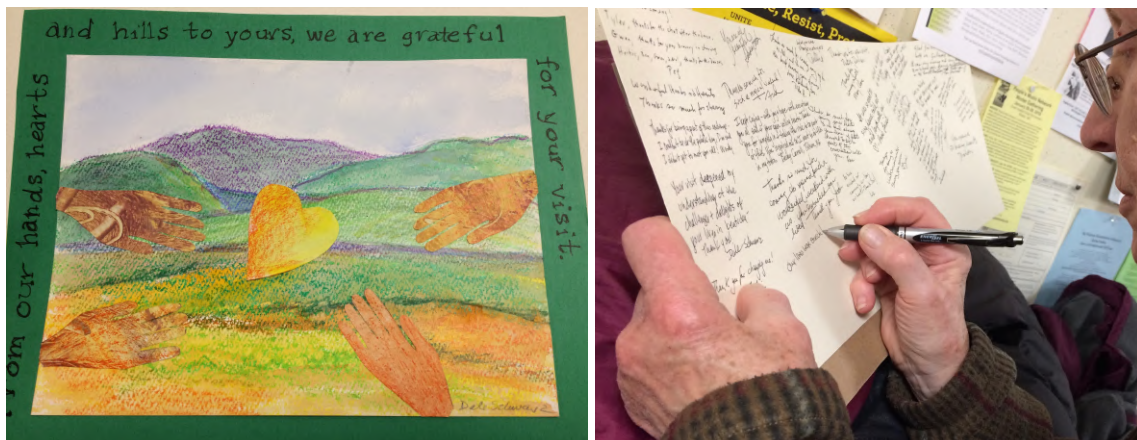
Four wheelers drive to those closed in. You're trying to feed them all, trying to feed.
them all.

CHORUS:

Can you hear the wind across the mountains?

Can you see that bird a-flying, high wings above the hollow?

Can you feel those wings wrap around you? We're gonna build a new tomorrow.



Leverett hosts in Hands Across the Hills sent this thank-you card, created by Dale Schwarz, to their Kentuckian guests after the first exchange visit. Photos by Sharon Dunn

6.

Limitations & Shortcomings

Divides Uncrossed, Work Unfinished

MUCH OF THE PUBLIC-FACING events, media, and presentations about Hands Across the Hills have focused on the project's success: the extent to which residents of Letcher County, KY and Leverett, MA were able to build relationships, come to understand each other, and work together toward common goals, despite a political and media environment that encourages us to see each other as enemies. At the same time, throughout the project's six years, participants from both communities maintained a healthy critical discussion about the project's limits: topics that were not fully explored, divides that were not fully bridged, opportunities that were missed. Most of these discussions took place informally until the end of the project, when in preparation for this book, participants engaged in two formal dialogues on the subject. Excerpts from these dialogue sessions are included in the pages to follow, along with some other reflections on the project's shortcomings, with the hope that readers can learn not only from the successes of Hands Across the Hills, but also from the places where the project did not go as far as it could have.



Dialogue session in Kentucky reviewing questions that remained unanswered, April 2018. Photo by Sharon Dunn

THE CLASS DIVIDE

“ One of the things that we never discussed was the whole issue of class: that we in Western Mass had more money than people in Kentucky had, and that it was an issue. I can remember [a woman from Letcher County] who stayed with me — we went to Turners Falls, and it's in the mountains, it's picturesque, and so I say to her on the way home, *Does this remind you of home?* And she says, *NOPE*.

When we went to the breakfast that was given by the Shriners in Whitesburg KY, a fellow in the audience got up and said, *You all have so much money — why don't you just give us some?* It's like, okay, that's right to the point here. I think that just didn't get addressed. It got swept under the rug. And I think it kept us from having a more honest relationship.

Pat Fiero • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ I still carry images around in my head of the young man who stayed with us remarking about our home, and how large it was. And when we went to Kentucky, what stayed in my mind were the number of people who lived in very small homes, quite often trailers, or sometimes trailers that had been really tastefully and creatively and imaginatively transformed into homes that didn't look like trailers. But you could tell, visually, that there was not only an economic difference, but there was a cultural difference that was in part connected to the economics, but also to the social dynamics of the area. And there's nothing quite so disturbing as visual evidence of poverty, and the counterbalance: the visual impression of wealth.

Kip Fonsh • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024



(Left to right) Paula Green, Danielle Barshak, and Nell Fields enjoy a meal together in Letcher County, Kentucky.
Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

“ I just want to note that class is about more than money. Class is also about education and opportunity, and all those things were floating in the air. I wonder whether or not we would have gotten there — had we gone down to Kentucky a second time, had we been able to continue our in-person dialogue groups, had Paula not died, had this work gone deeper.

I think the groundwork was there for that conversation, because there are these very obvious inherent discrepancies that we all knew about when we first tried to dialogue. Whether or not we would have gotten farther — this is a question for everybody, I don't know — had we paired with a community of Trump voters who are more socioeconomically similar to us.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ Well, how many big universities are there near Leverett? Within an hour, you have access to good universities. And with this comes a lot of professional jobs, education — I feel like the education rates are higher. My mom was a first-generation college student. My dad didn't graduate high school. My grandpa is illiterate. I grew up in a single wide trailer, you know — I have never starved or went without or anything, but I've never been wealthy by any means. I come from, I guess, generational poverty. And it hasn't really resolved yet. I was a little intimidated; all of the houses were super nice and everybody was either a lawyer or a writer or had some kind of professional job.

There definitely was a wealth gap. And it made it hard because a lot of folks were not willing to talk about it. I think that was one of the issues. When money came up, it was just like, everybody just kind of was like, *Nope, we're not talking about it.* It was like, *Well, we don't want to, we don't want to talk about how much we have.*”

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview February 20, 2024



A “fishbowl” activity during dialogue, fall 2019. Photo by Sharon Dunn

“ I think the group was careful to perhaps even hold back sometimes when they maybe could have helped, or might have felt the desire to — to make sure it's an equal playing field, that everybody picks up their own tab, and there's no 'big person, little person.'

Valerie Horn • Letcher County, KY
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ I think the challenges of doing this work across class lines is a story that has not fully been told. I think we wanted to go there. We started talking about it during the pandemic on Zoom, and we wanted to talk about it in a fourth dialogue weekend to be held in Letcher County that never happened.

I think class is one of the hardest divides — harder than who you voted for, or what you think about guns or coal or abortion. And it is more insidious, because it manifests in all these ways that are not obvious. And I think we've witnessed one of them tonight in this Zoom dialogue, and that's access to technology: we keep having people in Letcher County losing internet, phones dropping off, or needing to leave suddenly because somebody came to the door and they need to take care of them. I've worked in a lot of poor and working-class communities, and this is very common. There's lots of people in Letcher County who wanted to get involved in Hands Across the Hills, or wanted to attend more dialogues or meetings or gatherings, but they couldn't get off work, or they were taking care of family, or a crisis came up at the last minute.

I don't think it's something we fully processed and talked about explicitly. One thing that did happen several times, which was really difficult for me, was hearing people in Leverett say, *Oh, the people in Kentucky don't care because not as many of them show up for the dialogue, or because they're not on the Zoom.* I don't think anybody meant anything bad by it. But that difference is something that I don't think we've talked about a lot internally and certainly has not made it into the external media narrative.

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

WHAT WAS THE GOAL?

“ I thought a lot about this question of what are we doing this for — to what extent would it be worth my time, the other people in the Letcher County Culture Hub’s time, the resources and the money it would take. A big motivator for me, as the then-organizer of the Culture Hub was, this is a leadership development opportunity. This is an opportunity for people in Letcher County to build their relationships, their connections, their ability to show up and share their stories in rooms full of people they don’t know, and who don’t know them.

We talk about Hands Across the Hills as the kind of dialogue facilitation or peacebuilding work that Paula did, combined with some of the organizing work that I do. The project, in terms of the way it was set up and facilitated, was much more from Paula's perspective than from mine. In dialogue, the goal is to foster mutual understanding across divides, versus in organizing, the goal is to create something together that is in mutual interest. So, I realize — and correct me if I'm wrong — I don't recall us ever having an intentional conversation in HATH [Hands Across the Hills] about what we all want out of the project.

We did a dialogue project, and a bunch of concrete projects spun off of it — whereas in an organizing approach, at least the way I look at it, you make things together and dialogue happens naturally on the way as you get there.

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ Oh, I think we talked about the goal. And then we went back to facilitator-led discussions, and we never set actions.

Tom Wolff • Leverett, MA
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ I remember talking about very specifically keeping our eyes on the idea of dialogue: that because of the other differences that we had, that was more of an even playing field for us to come together. Maybe somebody from Leverett can help me remember if this was only when we were Leverett folks talking — trying not to exaggerate or focus on our differences in terms of class and culture, and come and work on the things that we had in common.

The Leverett folks doing something more for the Letcher County community, which clearly had other needs that were larger than what we came together to tackle from the start, I think felt maybe untenable, or hard to figure out, how to do that on an equal footing.

Stacey Lennard • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ I don't necessarily think that I expected you all to come do anything for Letcher County, or provide resources or whatever. I think my goal was that I would be able to gain something from the experience to take back to my community, not necessarily that I would be able to come get something physical as in a resource, and take it back to my community and say, 'look what I found up north in the rich land!'

If I was going to go on this trip, and I was going to go somewhere and spend the weekend, it wasn't just going to be for me to have the space to have deep conversations and have deeper thoughts and feelings myself. I can go to therapy down the road for that.

I was disappointed that even though I was given the tools, and the opportunity to have the conversations with y'all, I didn't necessarily go back into my community and have those same conversations with people that I had not had those conversations with before. I wanted to be able to take my experience back and say, *Hey, we're having these conversations, and we're doing this and this is happening. And I want you to be a part of that.*

I am not saying that there were not things that came out of HATH. Obviously, there were several projects that came out of it. I just don't know that there was room for other projects. Maybe it felt like once the trainings got footing, that's where that's where the energy went. And I wasn't interested in that, because I didn't feel like I'd been trained effectively. Therefore, how could I be a trainer?

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

BRINGING IN THE WHOLE COMMUNITY



Letcher County residents attending a final reflection meeting of Hands Across the Hills, at the Hemphill Community Center, with Leverett participants attending by Zoom. Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills

“ Find the people in your own community that you don't agree with. I feel like that was one of the issues that a lot of us had with Leverett. It was like, *why are you not having these conversations with people that live 30 minutes away from you?* One thing was — somebody else had said it, and it got said a lot — *Where are the poor people?* I know there are poor people near Leverett, Massachusetts. Find them and bring them into these conversations! Even for us, in Letcher County, we should have done better about networking and reaching out to other people in the community and getting them involved.

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview Feb. 20, 2024

“ It's just hard: Even living in a small community, I could walk to somebody's house and be just as surprised that we see things that differently. We don't all think the same way here, just like I know y'all don't all think the same way there.

Valerie Horn • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ We really were never able to connect with, reliably, folks who weren't liberals. The core of the group was really liberals. And I think delving as deeply as we did maybe made it harder to have conservatives join the group. I think the price of going as deeply as we did, is it makes it harder for people with divergent views to stick with the program.

Pat Fiero • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ It was a hard sell to people around here. They thought we had lost our ever-loving minds to be part of it. As far as organizing around this stuff in the community, naw, it didn't work here. People thought it was crazy to try to do such a thing. Part of it was Fox News hard-selling people around here about liberals.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY

Meeting June 19, 2024

“ Other expectations I had along the way of things that I would like to see happen, was to do more things locally: to try to get other people to thinking and talking and engaging across the political divide that we all seem to experience — and probably have for many years, and didn't even realize until the 2016 election.

Nell Fields • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ I also wanted to bring it home. I wanted to be able to do this kind of work locally. I never felt like we as a group were able to make that manifest. Nor do I feel like I have the tools now to do that, or where to go. It just feels so big, and it feels worse than it was before — so I feel a little bit lost. I mean worse in our country, and the polarization of our country.

Stacey Lennard • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ It's really hard for folks who work and have kids to pack up and leave for even an extended weekend. I'm a young mom, and it was always a challenge for me to find somebody to take care of my kids. And even if your expenses are paid, you're still missing your work or whatever. You can hear my pigs in the background — I'd have to find somebody to feed my pigs and take care of my dogs and my kids.

If that means helping people, like giving them stipends to participate — and I don't want it to sound like you want to pay people to participate, because that's not necessarily what it is. If they're struggling to make it financially, make it easy for them to participate. That was one of the bigger issues that we found when we asked people in Letcher County: *Well, I can't just up and leave for the weekend. I gotta take care of my grandkids, or my grandma, or I don't have the money.* If money wasn't a factor, I feel like it would reach the folks who needed to be reached, rather than just the people who were available at the time.

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview Feb. 20, 2024

“ We were older here in Leverett; a lot of people were retired. Not at all from Kentucky; they're working really hard. We began with a lopsided number of Leverett folks compared to the number of people from Kentucky. So that's a pretty significant imbalance. Also, we didn't have any young people in Leverett and three came from Kentucky. If we were going to structure this again, in a more ideal way, you'd want those numbers to be much better balanced, I would think.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ My colleagues at Roadside Theater in Kentucky, who did this kind of exchange across politics, culture, race, class for decades, they used to say that when you're building a bridge, the span can only be as strong as the postings on either end are deep — anchored in their own communities, in the life of those communities. And when that local work gets shallow, the bridge collapses. For different reasons in both communities, I think, the postings came up. The local work, the depth of the roots, just stopped being as strong.

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ I think it is just as important that we had our own honest dialogue and communication among Leverett partners and also among Letcher County partners. If you can't love and understand yourself, it's not likely you're going to be able to love and understand others either. If we're not living it in our daily lives with each other, on a smaller scale, after we take it to a national level and promote and hold it up...

Maybe we should have had a few more parameters — expectations in the beginning, and talked about that a little more. Maybe a little bit more understanding that dialogue is ongoing, not just the moments when we're sitting in a circle in a chair, but the full breadth of our relationships and our work together.

Valerie Horn • Letcher County, KY
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024



Leverett participants (left to right) Sharon Dunn, Susan Lynton, and Tom Wolff during a break in dialogues in Leverett, fall 2017. Photo by Garrison Greenleaf

ROADS NOT TAKEN, HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

“ I had really hoped there would be more spin-off groups from HATH, from participants who were engaged in HATH or from the trainings, that would then build other dialogue groups. And we talked about it a number of times; a bunch of us were willing to travel and help facilitate. But first COVID hit, and then we lost Paula. That took a lot of the wind out of the sails.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ We were beginning to consider creating a speaker's bureau — a lot of us in HATH have spoken to newspapers, on radio shows, in churches and university classes. We looked into applying for a grant from the Massachusetts Council on Arts and Humanities to fund folks in Kentucky to come up and pair with us in Leverett and go into high schools, to talk about the work of Hands Across the Hills. But the COVID pandemic got in the way of that completely.

Sharon Dunn • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ When we were asked if we wanted to keep going or just end it all together, I strongly pushed for HATH to keep going. I wanted to see more young people take over. HATH opened doors for me; I literally put that on my resume that I participated in HATH. I was telling Ben this could be great for young people. They can develop public speaking skills. With dialogue, they can build skills with relationship-building. Kids are not getting these types of skills anywhere else.

Alyssa Helton • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ What we need is a national conversation. We need millions, literally millions of small groups reintegrating us into each other's communities and networks of care and concern.

Jim Perkins • Leverett, MA

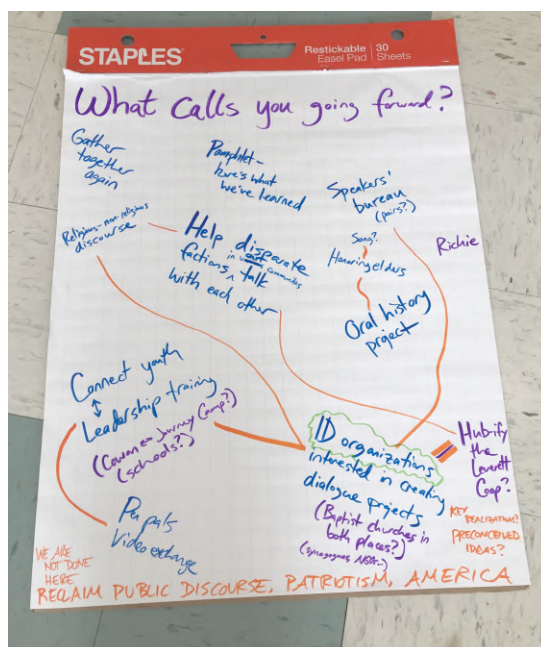
Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ We as a people, or as a community, or as Kentuckians, tend to take our time about making up our minds about things. I don't think we have seen all that this Hands Across the Hills has to show us — as our children grow up and realize we had an honest conversation.

So many of their grandparents and great-grandparents have told us that they had nothing but negative conversations with people from other places. So when they're now learning from some of us that these were very positive communications, I think then they're gonna say, *Well, maybe if my grandma could talk to them — maybe my great-grandma couldn't, but my grandma could* — that they'll be more open to starting dialogue of their own or participating in it. So I see it still having effects 20, 30 years down the road. Because I know how long it took for some of the changes to come about.

Letha Dollarhyde • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024



Ideas about where Hands Across the Hills can go from here, Leverett, 2019. Photo by Sharon Dunn

7.

The Impact

Stretching Minds, Communities, Opportunities

THE IMPACT OF HANDS ACROSS THE HILLS continues to reverberate. There may or may not have been a change in people's votes, but there was widespread change in people's attitudes — among participants and onlookers alike, in Kentucky and Massachusetts and far beyond. Years after the final dialogue exchange, participants from both communities continue to correspond with one another via telephone, letters, email, and occasional online group discussions. The program's success has prompted inquiries from people and organizations across the country eager to launch their own cross-cultural and cross-partisan bridging projects. In its final years, Hands Across the Hills responded by hosting two weekend-long immersive training programs in dialogue and organizing (see Appendix 1) that attracted participants from across the country in academia, grassroots organizations, nonprofits, and education. Though the project has ended, the ripple effects continue.



Deborah Roth-Howe (center), of Leverett, answers questions about Hands Across the Hills during a community forum in Western Massachusetts. Photo by Pam Szczesny

Hands Across the Hills Story Spreads Far Beyond Franklin County

By Richie Davis, Greenfield Recorder, February 12, 2019

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Leverett, Massachusetts, and Letcher County participants gather for conversation in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Photo by Richie Davis

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LEVERETT, Massachusetts— After a year of drawing attention solely from *The Greenfield Recorder*, this town's Hands Across the Hills effort and its organizer, Paula Green, are in the spotlight nationally and internationally as an effort to help bridge the political — and now racial — divides in this country.

The project, organized by a "bridging committee" in the aftermath of the 2016 election, brought to Leverett a 11-member delegation from Letcher County,

Kentucky — where Donald Trump won 80 percent of the presidential vote, versus 14.5 percent here — for a three-day October 2017 exploration of cultural and political differences.

A *New York Times* article last week about Green and her career helping to resolve conflicts in Myanmar, Bosnia, Rwanda, Israel-Palestine, and other flashpoints around the globe, winning her the 2009 designation as an "unsung hero of compassion" from the Dalai Lama himself, grew out of a "U.S. Peacebuilding Award of Excellence" [awarded to Green and Hands Across the Hills] last October from the Washington, D.C.-based Alliance for Peacebuilding.

The *Times* article, which followed stories last November on National Public Radio's "Here and Now" and in *The Boston Globe*, also led to a *New Yorker* article this week and came with the release of an hour-long documentary by ARTE TV, a German-French arts and cultural network, *The Divided Soul of America*, that was viewed by 7 million people in Europe and North Africa in which the Leverett-Kentucky project was described in

the broader context about polarization in American politics.

Another article, "The Same Hills, Two Americas," about the Leverett-Kentucky effort, ran in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* just before last November's election.

"People are making up stories about 'the other' — Muslims, Trump voters, whoever 'the other' is," Green told the *Times*. "'They don't have the values that we have. They don't behave like we do. They are not nice. They are evil.'" But, she added, "That's dehumanization. And when it spreads, it can be very hard to correct."

Even as the Leverett contingent hopes to make arrangements for a second visit from Kentuckians for continued conversations this fall, a "Bridge4Unity" effort Green is coordinating is planning a presentation in Amherst February 24 at 4 p.m. — "Dialogues Across Race: South Carolina, Massachusetts, Kentucky" at the Unitarian Universalist Society, where they plan to share experiences from a recent interracial dialogue in South Carolina.

"It is heartening," said Green in response to the flurry of publicity the cross-cultural dialogue is finally getting, resulting in calls from California, Colorado, and other parts of the country from people hungry to start cross-cultural bridging projects.

"People want to do this," says Green, a founder of Amherst-based Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures program at Vermont's School for International Training. "They say, 'we're so divided. There's so much pain, we need to do this work.'"

Beyond the interpersonal vision for Hands Across the Hills, helping people from both communities discover what they could begin to understand about one another, there's also



Paula Green and the work of Hands Across the Hills, in the New York Times. Photo by Laura Anderson

"People want to do this. They say, 'we're so divided. There's so much pain, we need to do this work.'"

been an educational mission, to show the rest of the nation "this is worthwhile, this is important and doable," says Green.

The *Times* article, which like the Arte documentary explained the dialogues in a larger context about American polarization, was met with comments from skeptical readers who

"Dialogue makes other work possible and makes people doing the work much more passionate, because they know people from this other place, this other culture, other race, other place, who are suffering."

Green says "want to hang onto their anger and hatred, who don't want to let it go and try something else, because they're comfortable and safe. We're trying to say to people that dialogue is not the end, dialogue is the beginning. It makes other work possible and makes people doing the work much more passionate, because they know people from this other place, this other culture, other race, other place, who are suffering."

Green, who worked as a co-facilitator at January's cross-racial, cross-cultural gathering of 30 people from Western Massachusetts, Kentucky, and South Carolina, says, "It's very important that people understand why we're doing this in the biggest context." She added that the conference in Beaufort, South Carolina "was a powerful experience that exceeded my expectations in terms of honesty and intimacy. Talking about race and racism is harder and more delicate than politics because there's a 400-year-old tragedy that's never healed, and that continues to create unending pain within this country."

These careful conversations need to be facilitated and they need to develop over time for trust in a safe, intimate setting to build understanding, Green said.

But she added, "There's a longing in our country for civil discourse. And more is going to come, because now it's on the national stage. It's a national conversation."

“ We may not have changed votes; we're certainly not changing the world. Things look worse to me now than they did when we started Hands Across the Hills. But each of us that participated in this learned something and had a good experience. I don't know if anybody who participated in Hands Across the Hills left without feeling a degree of respect for someone from the other community.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ To me, from the Kentucky side, we walked away feeling seen and heard. And that's something that we'd never felt until we'd done HATH. I'd actually worked with Appalshop for three years where I would help make documentaries, and a common theme in the workshops was how the media portrays Kentucky and coal country negatively. I feel like HATH has done the opposite: portrayed us as resilient people, strong people, people who are willing to open our hearts, our minds, and our homes to people who are completely different than us, and learn from those experiences.

Alyssa Helton • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ I was often defending Kentucky voters or people who voted for Trump. I never thought I'd be doing that in my lifetime, but — we're so quick to condemn people who made that choice. I learned so much about the circumstances, about why that made sense for people who were living that particular life. I found myself defending them, and that was a really surprising experience for me. Not that I feel good about the vote, but I understand where it came from.

Deborah Roth-Howe • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024

“ I was talking on stage [in Leverett], and somehow, I got prompted to discuss that, you know, I had voted for Trump, and the reasons why I had. I felt like there were people in the audience who I expected to be angry or judgmental — and some people might have, but there were I think three people who came up to me after that were like, ‘you helped me realize that there are people who have good hearts, and want the same things for their family that I do, that voted for Trump — and they didn’t vote for him because they wanted people like me to be targeted, or whatever master plans that he had.’

I can’t speak for everybody, but I feel like a lot of people in my community had the same reasons for their political standing as I did. And just that one little story I was able to share with people in that one minute of vulnerability, thinking, *Oh, my God, if somebody puts this in the newspaper, and my dad sees that I’m talking about him politically, or my grandpa, I’m in for it...* — just that five minutes was impactful for somebody, and made a difference in how we see each other and the experiences we have when we talk to each other. That was kind of profound, too. Sometimes just talking really matters.

Rachel Sexton • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview Feb. 20, 2024

“ Another thing was the respect that the people in Kentucky had for all the Jews in Western Mass and how connected they were to the Holocaust. The Kentuckians didn’t know the history, and then they met all these people. Their respect for what they learned was just so profound. It came up over and over again, how much they respected and understood where people had come from.

Judi Fonsh • Leverett, MA

Dialogue held online May 20, 2024



Tyler Ward of Letcher County presents to the crowd at the community forum in Leverett, October 2017. Photo by Roswell Angier

“ In our very first dialogue circle about family, two Leverett women told Holocaust stories, because the parents of both of them had left Europe in the 1930s. These women cried, because it was really a difficult thing their families had gone through, uprooting their lives and immigrating to the U.S. As Gwen said: She was from eight generations of people who had been rooted in Kentucky. That's not true of many in Leverett at all. Many in the dialogue circle had parents and grandparents who arrived in the U.S. from 1900 and on, not only from Germany and Russia, but also Ireland.

Somebody in the Kentucky group said, 'I'm meeting you; you're immigrants. And I was kind of taught not to like immigrants, that they were dangerous, and they were going to take things from us. But here, your families are immigrants. And so, my view about that has changed.'

The folks in Leverett learned a lot about coal mining, and how back in the time of World War I, coal extracted from the Kentucky earth helped win the war — and that's something that coal miners were extremely proud of. That's something that we hadn't realized, we hadn't realized the amount of pride that went into being a coal mining family.

Sharon Dunn • Leverett, MA

Podcast interview Sept. 1, 2022

“ I've talked to my nieces and my nephew, in their preteens and early teens, about some of this and got them to open up to me in a way they hadn't before. We followed some of the same '*What you say here stays here. You can be open and honest,*' guidelines, and it has opened up some real dialogue with people in my own family, to speak openly and honestly. Who knows how far that will go in the future?

Letha Dollarhyde • Letcher County, KY

Dialogue held online May 28, 2024

“ I don't know if HATH had a long-term, big legacy for a lot of people, or just the group that was involved. I hope it probably did — especially, the more that people document it. Then at least it's a place to look to for a model, maybe? Well, at least an example; it's not a template.

Mike Gover • Letcher County, KY

Phone interview Feb. 13, 2024

“ I could say one thing that's been on my heart from the very beginning, and that is how much Hands Across the Hills has changed me. Just getting the invitation letter from Jay seemed to be a total paradigm shift for me, because I was already struggling with family — my children and siblings and people that I love and cherish in my life — already feeling the strain between us politically. It was very difficult. But that letter helped me just stop and think. It just said: this is about not judging, but understanding. You've got to listen to understand. And that really has changed my whole life about all of this stuff.

That being said, I just want to say one more thing around the politics of this. I feel nationally, throughout this country, the politicians are the people who are benefiting from this great gap that's between all of us. The ones of us that are here, we were able to overcome that gap and to sit down and get to know each other. I feel like the people of color and the poor are having to struggle and deal with these horrific issues — and those numbers are growing every day. The poverty is creeping up every single day and taking great leaps and bounds during this pandemic. More and more people are finding themselves in situations where this could get a lot worse, if we can't get some attention to Washington, DC and people there, that there has to be a change in how they approach our political problems — and that they stop feeding into the frenzy of separation, of separating the people, as I feel like they have.

Nell Fields • Letcher County, KY

Public dialogue held online Feb. 10, 2021

“ There was a signature way that Paula often used at the end of a public gathering. During the second visit with our friends from Letcher County, we assembled in the gym of the Leverett Elementary School, again with a packed crowd. To close our time, she began by quoting Mother Teresa: 'The trouble with human beings is we draw our circles too small.' Paula asked us to hold a circle with our arms and then expand the circle, widen, to embody our intention. She said: 'We are part of a very large chain of hearts that extends beyond Kentucky, beyond Massachusetts, around the world, where people of goodwill everywhere are seeking peace. So you're part of something very large.

Sarah Pirtle • Leverett, MA

Written reflection July 26, 2024



The audience at the Leverett community forum, imagining and holding an expanding circle of care and inclusion. Photo by Karen Brown/NEPR

“ During the time that we were going back and forth between here and Leverett, my daughter got sick and passed away. The second trip we made up there, we made in October, and she died in September. So I wasn't gonna go, because I didn't want to put a damper — I didn't want it all about me and my loss.

Everybody just kept urging me to go. And Bunny, my daughter, was so pleased that I was involved in this, that I thought about what she would want. And even though she had only passed like three weeks before, I went. Paula, being the type of lady she was, talked to me beforehand. She said, ‘Letha, how do you want to handle this?’ Her favorite thing was, *let's acknowledge the elephant in the room*. And so that's what she did. First meeting, she says, ‘We're going to let Letha have the floor and let her tell you; you can ask questions, she's already agreed to it.’ And we did, and that was the nicest thing.

They not only cried with me, but when the crying was over, the elephant left the room and we got down to what we needed to do. Everybody knew,

because I'd gotten cards from them and stuff, but nobody really knew all the details and how this was going to affect me, and the future and everything, so it was a point where I felt like: If we can get through this, we can get through anything.

Sarah had had a dream about me, and wrote me a beautiful song about Bunny. The thing was, Sarah did not know me that well, but there was dragonflies in it. Bunny loved dragonflies, and Sarah had dragonflies in the song she wrote for me.

I don't know if you were raised in the city or the country, but you don't usually find more than three or four dragonflies together. When I came home from the hospital — when they were going to work on her all night, they sent me home to make the decision whether to pull the plug on her the next morning. The doctor wanted me to rest. And as I'm coming home, Bunny's boyfriend called me. He said, 'Mom, where are you? When you pull in the yard, please don't be scared. Just don't freak out.' When I pulled into our yard, there were thousands of dragonflies. You couldn't reach your hand out without touching a dragonfly.

When I talked to one of the monks up there in Leverett, I was told that in their religion, that's what's sent to take a soul home. So you can see, this thing has affected me in ways that no one could have predicted. And I know the idea is not to just affect one or two people. But if you tell your story afterwards, and tell how the people there reacted to all of this, and that type of thing, it makes them more *human*. It makes them more approachable or something. Until we understand that we are all the same — maybe different, but still basically the same — we will not straighten out the world's problems.

Letha Dollarhyde • Letcher County, KY
Phone interview March 7, 2024

“ Once you stretch a human mind beyond where it's been, it can't go back to its regular shape.

Gwen Johnson • Letcher County, KY
Meeting July 11, 2024

8.

Methods Behind the Magic

Dialogue and Organizing

AS PAULA GREEN AND BEN FINK COLLABORATED to plan, facilitate, and organize the ongoing project, they each drew upon unique approaches and skills. Green brought a perspective shaped by decades of leadership experience as a peacebuilder, educator, and dialogue facilitator in conflict-impacted areas worldwide, including as the founder of a western Massachusetts-based peacebuilding organization. Fink drew from his experience as a community organizer, teacher, and theater director and producer, including his current work with Appalshop's Roadside Theater in east Kentucky, where he helped to found the Letcher County Culture Hub.

The complementary approaches that Green and Fink brought to the task of building community across divides formed the basis of the project's three exchange weekends. However, the combined work of dialogue and cultural organizing extended deeper — shaping the perceptions, attitudes, leadership, and community lives of Hands Across the Hills participants.



Hands Across the Hills contra dance, fall 2017 in Leverett, MA. Photo by Holly Lynton

“ You don’t start with the hardest. You start with building community and building common bonds and building trust. If you start with the hardest issue, which in this case, would be Donald Trump, we never get to anything, because we would wind up having a lot of tension between us and a lot of discord and a lot of mistrust.

Paula Green • Leverett, MA
Radio interview March 1, 2018

“ A thing that I like to say is: *no two human beings on God's green earth have ever built a relationship based on what they don't have in common.* We're both from rural places, we're both from hill country, we're both kind of pissed off about the way things are going in the country. And we're curious enough to ask each other.

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY
Public talk held online March 10, 2021



*“Fishbowl” exercise during the October 2021 training at Leverett Town Hall.
Photo by Sharon Dunn*

Hands Across the Hills: Reaching In and Reaching Out for Dialogue and Cultural Exchange

By Paula Green • Leverett, MA. Excerpts from her address accepting the Alliance for Peacebuilding's Melanie Greenberg U.S. Peacebuilding Award of Excellence, October 2018

Representing Hands Across the Hills and receiving this award from the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) holds special historical meaning for me, as I am part of the founding generation of AfP. This award, named after our illustrious director Melanie Greenberg and designated for U.S. peacebuilding, is a gift late in my career that I will deeply cherish.

During the past 25 years of my life and AfP history, I founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and taught generations of graduate students at the School for International Training. My work, and most of AfP's, has focused on the world beyond U.S. borders. Along with other peacebuilders, I have had the privilege of designing and implementing multi-year projects in such complex conflicts as the Balkans, the Caucasus, South Asia, Eastern Africa and the Mideast. I find myself surprised to now be advocating for, and honored for, U.S. peacebuilding.

I stepped down from these international responsibilities in very recent years, just in time to face the U.S. election of 2016. We now confront a new world, one that threatens to dismantle the scaffolding that sustains and nurtures all of our work as peacebuilders. With the threats to peace, justice, and global survival, the turn to U.S. peacebuilding seems timely and appropriate for me. I believe all of us are called upon now to use every measure of our wisdom and talent, both at home and abroad.

Like many of you, my community gathered after the election to first mourn our losses and then discern next steps. Some of us formed a committee to bridge divides, hoping to gain insight about Trump voters: their fears, their dreams deferred, and the motivation for



*Paula Green delivering her address in Washington DC.
Photo by Alliance for Peacebuilding*

their votes. It is such a project that I will explore with you, highlighting key points and lessons learned or reinforced for peacebuilders, integrating what we know professionally about intergroup relations, and sharing some stories about this particular match of dialogue partners.

Distorted, dehumanized perceptions of each other and the development of good versus evil narratives contribute to extremist ideology and violent behaviors.

Research reveals that when we dehumanize particular groups of people, we ignore or reject policies that support their lives.

As a peacebuilder, why did I choose this way to intervene? On one level, this project chose me. It fell into my lap as a newly articulated vision, calling to be manifested and shaped. On another level, distorted, dehumanized perceptions of each other and the development of good versus evil narratives contribute to extremist ideology and violent behaviors. Increasing connectors and reducing dividers across as many sectors as possible seems essential at this juncture.

Furthermore, research reveals that when we dehumanize particular groups of people, we ignore or reject policies that support their lives. We in the progressive and peacebuilding communities may have ignored the basic human needs and removed our moral concern for some identity groups in our society. Social psychology

studies report that it is harder to humanize than to dehumanize. By disliking those who appear to dislike us, we become caught in a trap of mutual enmity. Our group thought there would be a great deal to learn by reaching out beyond our bubble.

Seeking partners for dialogue and cultural exchange felt awkward, as our motivations were suspect and our connections were weak. Through an online newsfeed we finally found Ben Fink, a visionary and talented community organizer who is not from Kentucky but living and working there. Resistance ran high among the Kentuckians, who feared a repeat of one hundred years of exploitive “let’s go look at the hillbillies” exercises. Nell later remarked: “We mountain people are the last group where it is socially acceptable to make fun of us and still think of yourselves as progressive.”

Through their trust of Ben and his diligent and reassuring recruiting, however, we formed a stable partnership that has enabled this vision of dialogue across the political

divides to grow. *Key point:* It is difficult and essential to find a partner credible enough to attract participants willing to dialogue with those who appear threatening to their values and way of life.

It is in the name of the 30 group members from Kentucky and Massachusetts that I accept this award. We call ourselves Hands Across the Hills to fit the geography of Western Massachusetts and Eastern Kentucky. Our Massachusetts region is as politically blue as coal-country Kentucky is red, and each region abounds in stereotypes about the other. We profile as different communities on many social and economic indexes of class, politics, privilege, education, family, ethnic identity, religious practice, media consumption, occupation, history, and geography. Given these gaps and our mutual agitation about the election, I had no idea at the outset how we might reduce hostility and establish common ground. Data shows that those who choose to engage in dialogue are generally at least curious about the other, but I could not even count on that in the heightened antagonistic relations of the post-election period.

The literature on best practices in contact theory demonstrates that specific structures help maximize the development of empathy, such as sufficient time together, meaningful rather than casual interactions, common goals, some form of cooperation, self-disclosure, and equal treatment in the dialogue setting. Fortunately I had enough experience with intergroup dialogue and peacebuilding programs in far more violently divided communities to have some faith that a well-designed program based on these principles

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*Plaque awarded to Hands Across the Hills.
Photo by Paula Green*

could enable participants to identify common needs, even if they disagree on the methods to satisfy those needs. One striking example of that phenomenon arose around the issue of guns. My question: "What makes you feel safe," elicited responses from the Massachusetts group that having no guns created safety while the Kentucky group felt that safety arose when everyone had guns.

All of us here at AfP understand what we are up against with this resurgent tribalism. We know that dialogue is a tool and not a panacea, and that it is not a substitute for action. But we also recognize that deep divides become chasms and then cataclysms if not addressed. Side by side with structural change, dialogue works its way into individuals and communities, contributing to greasing the wheels for those unjust political and social structures to move. For any of this to happen between such disparate, polarized, and



Hands Across the Hills contra dance. Photo by Holly Lynton

Jay, one of the Leverett hosts and a staunch environmentalist, wished to host a 74 year-old strip-mining supervisor and defender because “I want to find out where we can work together.”

outwardly asymmetric groups as those between a Massachusetts college town and a Kentucky coal camp region, I created an immersive and intensive dialogue and cultural exchange program. Perhaps another *key point* is to utilize the positive power of a residential multi-day retreat format, in our case in both Massachusetts and Kentucky.

One year ago this week, a group of Kentucky participants drove 15 hours by van from Whitesburg, Kentucky to Leverett, Massachusetts, a small town just north of Amherst. For many, it was their first time in New England and there was a great deal of predictable anxiety about how these Yankees would behave. Extensive communication and separate dialogue training in both Massachusetts and Kentucky, however, helped ease the tension and fears of the arriving Kentucky contingent, who were brave enough to risk entering the territory and homes of a liberal enclave.

After welcomes and introductions, hosts and guests, deliberately acquainted in advance by phone and email, departed in pairs. The intimacy and vulnerability of home-stays created an inviting and trustworthy space that shaped the experiences to follow. Jay, one of the Leverett hosts and a staunch environmentalist, wished to host a 74 year-old

strip-mining supervisor and defender because “I want to find out where we can work together.”

Key point: Include thorough and collaborative preparation by all parties, and offer introductory dialogue training plus exposure to videos and books about each other’s cultures and concerns. All of these details strengthen ripeness to meet the identified other. Personal investment impacts outcomes. Each of our three days consisted of several hours of dialogue interspersed with other activities designed to modify the unconscious cognitive and emotional biases of participants. We used art, music, theater, dance, local sightseeing, endless potlucks, and the aforementioned home-stays to help group members see beyond their comfort zones and in-group bubbles, and to make a place at the table for those with whom they profoundly disagreed. *Key point:* There are many doors through which to challenge the straight jacket of tribal judgments, both within and outside of structured dialogue circles.



Letha Dollarhyde (KY, on left) and Susan Lynton (MA) contributing to a paper quilt of family stories, before beginning dialogue. Photo by Garrison Greenleaf

To foster trust and commonality, I guided the group to enter the dialogue process through the well-known ground of family stories. What was revealed, however, were vast differences even at that level. Many Massachusetts families are relatively recent arrivals in the U.S., so several participants were first, second, or third generation Americans. Many of the Kentucky colleagues had never met an immigrant or refugee and certainly never heard an impassioned, tear-filled first-person Holocaust story. One person remarked: “*I was taught to hate refugees and immigrants. I never met one. I will never think that way again.*”

Those from Massachusetts had never encountered coal miners’ families nor understood the pride and accomplishment that accompanied the suffering of those whose families lived and worked in the same towns and died from the same black lung disease and crushing boulders as their great-grandparents. The group from Massachusetts, alien to a coal mining life, also had attitudes and stereotypes to shed, and new ways to think about the conditions that shape a life and a voting record. Each group had to find fresh language

to acknowledge each other's suffering and each other's survival skills and resilience. We learned anew that joy and suffering touch all of us, regardless of circumstances.

This carefully constructed format was the necessary foundation to hard talk about the hot-button issues of the election and the polarization of our country.

We had a spectacular local event during our weekend in Leverett attended by 300 people. The Kentucky participants spoke with honesty and passion about their lives and struggles. The western Massachusetts audience responded with standing ovations, creating a positive feedback loop that further encouraged the Kentucky group, who felt seen and respected by people they had previously stereotyped. Research teaches that we dehumanize those who we perceive demonize us, and like those who appear to care about us. A web of



*A group dialogue in fall 2019, in Leverett.
Photo courtesy of Hands Across the Hills*

enmity shifted to a web of mutual recognition of each side's humanity.

Key point: We who are peacebuilders have learned that we need to engage “more people and key people” for any success in our work. To that end, these requests offered ample opportunities to engage and train hundreds of “more people,” as did events in Kentucky and our visits to as many local and state officials in each location as possible. As a result of the publicity around our events, I have been

invited to facilitate large gatherings on controversial public issues in various communities. Each of these engagements depolarizes conflicts and shores up the foundations of democracy.

In addition, we have enjoyed national and local media, including some rural online networks, been filmed by EU television which will be seen on a special program on presidential politics in the U.S., supposedly by millions, and were interviewed recently for upcoming features in a leading Amsterdam newspaper and the *Boston Globe*, possibly appearing on their front pages before the midterm elections. This is all a *key point*: reaching more and key people. National media, perhaps with encouragement from AfP, could aid us tremendously by showcasing bridging experiences rather than accentuating the polarization. Someone responded to our publicity by writing that “*each time a positive action is published, hope is generated.*”

Six months after the Kentucky visit to Massachusetts, we reversed the whole process by traveling to Whitesburg, Kentucky, a town deep in coal country where most residents are descendants of miners and describe themselves as *“having coal dust in their veins.”* We were warmly welcomed and hosted by our dialogue partners. I had anticipated that these three days might be the end of our partnership, but it became clear by Sunday night that the groups were clearly unwilling to separate. We spent our last day on the phase of dialogue where it shifts to brainstorming joint projects and actions.

The Kentuckians, a bit to my surprise, have requested a return to Massachusetts next spring [2019] to continue the dialogues and friendships. We are investigating the feasibility of organizing this with the addition of key people and influencers from both communities, which would allow us to amplify and support changes in both groups, as well as reach more media who are now paying attention to us.

For me as a peacebuilder, I am interested in establishing and disseminating workable models. I know it is easier to export and replicate a three-hour or six-hour model, but that is not feasible across long distances, nor as likely to result in substantive individual and community change. I included extensive preparation on both sides to support immersion, intimacy and transformation. All of that mattered in how our process unfolded, our trust grew, and our impact expanded.

As our country disintegrates into enemy camps and the urgency increases to respond to dramatic ruptures, we will need each other more and more. To that end, I have already embarked on a second experiment with this model, this time focused on race, which I daresay will be more difficult than political polarization. We have a strong group of 18 African American and white American participants from western Massachusetts, a similar group is being assembled in Beaufort County, South Carolina, where one of our colleagues had links to form this new partnership, and we will include some of our Kentucky group members to provide a third geographic, racial, and cultural component. In preparation,

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Participants in Bridge4Unity from South Carolina, Kentucky & Massachusetts at the Penn Center, Beaufort County, SC, January 2019. Photo by Patricia Crutchfield

each side will have its own monthly cross-racial dialogues. The Massachusetts and Kentucky groups will travel first to South Carolina in late January, with the return exchange in Massachusetts planned for June. I will co-lead this dialogue project, named Bridge4Unity, with an African American professor from Beaufort County.

The fruits of these preparatory dialogues are already manifesting. The group in Massachusetts is looking ahead beyond South Carolina toward a multi-year program of both dialogue and collective action in our own community. One of the members of the Massachusetts dialogue group is a leading professor of African American Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and head of the National Black Studies Association. His motivation for joining the dialogue is to learn the skills to bring to campus and around the country.

I thank you for this honor that the Alliance for Peacebuilding has bestowed on Hands Across the Hills. I take this award on behalf of all of us in Kentucky and Massachusetts who have put our hearts into this vision. We will carry the work forward in the hopes that rather than forfeiting our democracy, that we keep reaching out across hills and divides to make room for each other and create some semblance of wholeness that perhaps this country has really never known. We need to act soon and decisively, before the chasms between us become too wide to cross.

How to Talk When You Don't Agree

*By Gayle Jo Carter with Paula Green.
Excerpted.*

How can we build bridges of understanding and connection in our communities by strengthening our communication tools?

In this historical moment of polarization in our country, we are called to reach out across the lines of division and alienation. We struggle in our families, workplaces, and community organizations to understand those who perceive, vote, and value differently. We have become not just strangers to one another, but often hostile strangers. To mend the fabric of brokenness and prevent even more dangerous ruptures, here is a top ten list to increase your communication skills and strategies.



Paula Green opens a dialogue training, October 2021. Photo by Sharon Dunn

1. Active Listening — Hearing and understanding the truth of the experience of others:

- Give the speaker your full and undivided attention.
- Listen to learn, not to verify existing assumptions or expectations.
- Listen with empathy, to see the problem from the other person's point of view, to walk in their shoes.
- Ask questions to clarify or expand your understanding, not to challenge or engage in debate.

2. Authentic Speaking — Telling the truth of your own experience:

- Speak for yourself, [and] not for a group or position.
- Speak to communicate your own experience, [and] not to persuade others.
- Distinguish your opinion or belief from fact or 'truth'.
- Acknowledge the experiences and assumptions that have shaped your views and opinion.
- Speak from your heart.

Dialogue offers new insights and understanding of others through the creative tension of managing difference.

3. Develop Dialogues:

Find facilitators in your community who can guide structured and sequenced conversations.

Dialogue offers:

- A deepening of trust and mutual care that arises from active listening and authentic speaking.
 - New insights and understanding of others through the creative tension of managing difference.
- A reduction in the stereotypes, prejudices, and generalizations that keep us from recognizing our common humanity.
 - New and unexpected responses to complex problems.

4. Understand the difference between dialogue and debate:

- The goal of debate is to win at all costs.
- Debate includes criticism of the other. It promotes competition and aggression.
- Dialogue's goal is to discover common ground and build bridges of understanding and concern.
- Dialogue considers all points of view and assumes that different ideas contribute to fuller solutions.

5. Learn to ask good questions. A good dialogue question will:

- Focus on genuine curiosity.
- Avoid blame or judgment.
- Take participants deeper than the level of opinion or position.
- Encourage thinking of old issues in new ways.
- Focus on direct personal experiences, rather than arguing about facts.
- Call forth new, unrehearsed responses

6. Tolerate emotions:

Acknowledge that we all carry fear of hurting others by saying the wrong thing, feel defensive about our beliefs and our identities, and are more vulnerable than we generally admit. Where possible, share these fears in your personal communications and dialogues.

Stay in control of spilling out accusations and judgments that will cause harm and set back your goal of repairing the divides.

7. Words matter: Focus on the spirit of your communications:

- Examine your intentions and make sure they are clear and clean.
- Offer respect and dignity.
- Lead with kindness.
- Be receptive to the histories and perceptions of others.
- Remember that all human beings have similar needs for security, recognition, respect, equality, and basic human rights.

8. Welcome differences:

- Imagine what a flat world it would be if we all were exactly the same.
- Acknowledge the complexities of difference.
- Celebrate the many ways we live, worship, create, and believe.
- Remember that every life has joy and suffering, but that not all suffering is equal.
- Know that our lives are uniquely shaped by our very different circumstances.

**To create
something new,
we must become
new in our own
attitudes and
behaviors.**

9. Create something new:

- Conscious conversations and structured dialogues allow something new to be created.
- To create something new, we must become new in our own attitudes and behaviors.
- Focus on yourself and your own changes rather than trying to change others, which we know is not effective and is actually counter-productive.
- Envision together the social cohesion you long for in your family, workplace, community, and country. Work together to bring it into being.

10. Practice, practice, practice:

- Communication skills can be developed and refined throughout our lives.

- Be patient as you build your communication skills and disciplines.
- Remember that the purpose is learning.
- Stay through the hard places. Don't run away from the difficulties.
- Sustain and reinforce the dialogues or conversations over time. We need repeated exposure to each other to shift our attitudes and behaviors.
- Make a conscious commitment to humanize others. When you do so, they become part of your circle of concern, and so do others like them who you have not met. This is the way we multiply the impact of dialogue and conscious communication.



A Sunday dialogue in Kentucky. Photo by Sharon Dunn

“ When I teach dialogue, I say to people: It's about 95% theory and structure and planning, and about 5% pixie dust that just goes around the room and creates a kind of transformative magic. In the structures that we're using for dialogue, the magic happens because a container is held.

The most important role that you will have, if you facilitate, is to hold the container. You have to hold all those 10 or 20 or 30 people who are in your circle in that container, so that they're safe, they're all respected, they're all recognized. And when they have that, they can do their work.

Paula Green • Leverett, MA

Leverett community event December 12, 2017

“ One particular methodology of cultural organizing that I brought into Hands Across the Hills is the story circle. It comes out of civil rights organizing; it was created by the theater wing of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And it is a very, very intentionally structured way of sharing stories.

In our second time [going up to Leverett], it was kind of unclear where to continue, so I said, “Let's do a story circle.” The conversation had gotten a little bit abstract — about a whole bunch of different political issues. And we were trying to figure out where they all came together.

So the prompt was: “Tell a personal story about how you came to participate in society the way you did.” One person started, everybody listened, we went around the circle. By the end of this circle, people in both communities were talking about these really deep stories, irrespective of what communities they were from. Later that day, I remember somebody saying: “I forgot who was from Letcher County and who was from Leverett.”

Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY

Public talk held online March 10, 2021

On Cultural Organizing and Performing Our Future

By Ben Fink • Letcher County, KY & Denise Griffin Johnson • West Baltimore, MD. Excerpted; published April 21, 2020 in AmericansForTheArts.org.

“We own what we make.” That’s the watchword of a national grassroots-to-grassroots coalition called Performing Our Future, which we both help lead. It unites communities across the country who have spent generations resisting economic exploitation — who historically have not owned what they make — and who have long been set against each other along racial, political, regional, and rural-urban lines. How have

Like conventional organizing, cultural organizing is about building power, understood as **organized people plus organized money plus organized ideas.**

The difference is cultural organizers organize not around problems but around projects.

these communities historically resisted exploitation, and how have they now come together? Through the work of cultural organizing.

Cultural organizing is not the same as conventional community organizing or activism. Conventional community organizing and activism typically work from deficits: identify what’s missing in our communities, find and mobilize the people who agree with you, call out the inequity and injustice, and fight the bad guys. In the coalfields of East Kentucky and the inner city of West Baltimore, where we work, this usually means “organizing around” problems like unemployment, drugs, or disenfranchisement. Sometimes a meeting might start with a poem, or a protest might include beautiful puppets. But that’s still not cultural organizing. Cultural organizing is more than activism-plus-art.

Like conventional organizing, cultural organizing is about building power, understood as **organized people plus organized money plus organized ideas.** The difference is cultural organizers organize not around problems but around projects: music concerts that reflect the contributions our communities have made to world culture, plays that retell our communities’ stories in residents’ own words, community-run businesses that employ neighbors in recovery. These projects draw on and enhance a community’s shared material,

its intellectual, emotional, and spiritual richness — its commonwealth. Artists, used to being treated as outside experts and gig-entrepreneurs, join this work as neighbors, with key skills to contribute. Government officials, used to steering the conversation, join this work as equals, no greater or lesser than anyone else. Youth, elders, poor folks, and others who are used to being ignored join this work as full participants, and are fully heard.

Projects get generated by people coming together, sharing personal stories, expressing what moves and matters to them, and listening to others do the same. The goal is not for everyone to take the same side on this or that issue, but to weave everyone's diverse experiences and perspectives into a bigger story, in which all of us can see our own stories reflected. Cultural organizers facilitate this process.

Cultural organizing makes it possible for neighbors from across the street and across the country to come together in remembrance, healing, and celebration. It creates the conditions for us to work alongside people we never thought could be allies, to open up possibilities we never could achieve or even imagine otherwise. It shows us how whole communities can unite around shared stories, traditions, and values — across seemingly-insurmountable differences — to build, grow, and protect the places we call home.



Hands Across the Hills participants from Leverett join Kentuckians in a square dance at the Cowan Community Center. Photo by Chana Rose Rabinovitz

Secular Communion in the Coalfields: The Populist Aesthetic and Practice of Roadside Theater

By Ben Fink; published in TDR (The Drama Review) Winter 2020. Excerpted.

Everyone Is Welcome, Everyone Is Challenged

COME AND TAKE IT — Those words greeted Nell Fields and me on a raw afternoon as we rounded a bend in Big Cowan Creek in Letcher County. They were printed at the bottom of the Confederate flag hanging on a house by the side of the road, just below the image of an assault rifle.



Square dance at Carcassonne Community Center, Letcher County, KY. Photo courtesy of Lafayette College/Clay Węgrzynowicz.

I was pretty sure Nell didn't like this display any more than I did, but neither of us said anything. Nell, born and raised in Letcher County, knew better than to take the bait. As for me, if I opened my mouth and let out my outrage I would be reduced to another know-it-all from far away who had come to take the remaining dignity and pride from a long-exploited and humiliated community.

This was the role I felt the flag begging me to take — my stock part in the ongoing culture war that had long kept people here divided and conquerable. Slowly, I was learning to resist.

Appalshop's director Alex Gibson, one of relatively few Black people around, gets a lot of questions about issues like these. He was once recounting Appalshop's history to a group of visiting academics: it started in 1969 as the Appalachian Film Workshop and expanded into theater (Roadside), radio (WMMT Mountain Community Radio), music (June Appal Recordings), archiving (the Appalshop Archive), news (the Community Media Initiative), youth leadership development (the Appalachian Media Institute), and other divisions as community needs and opportunities arose. In as many ways as possible, he concluded, Appalshop seeks to amplify the voices of ordinary people in our

communities. We do not give people a voice; people are already speaking; we just work to make everyone heard.

“But,” interrupted a graduate student, “what if those people are racist?”

Alex paused a moment, then responded: “Most people don’t organize their lives around being racist.”

The student’s question reflected a common assumption: that there are good people and bad people, and that working toward justice means taking the side (and telling the stories) of the good people and not the bad.

Appalshop takes a different approach. Its stories focus on what we all organize our lives around: the places we live, the people we love, the work we do, the values we cherish. These remain constant across cultures and ideologies, even as their expressions vary widely.

Like broad-based organizing campaigns, Roadside productions are ensemble works, not star vehicles. They focus not on the genius of individual artists, entrepreneurs, or institutions, but on the latent creativity of an entire community. And like organizers, they catalyze this creativity by building close relationships with a community’s leaders: usually not the people with official titles, but ordinary residents who have a following among their neighbors and who are working to develop those neighbors into leaders themselves.

Nell is one such leader. Our first encounter followed the principles of a *one-to-one relational meeting*. “One-to-ones” are a basic community organizing practice. They are face-to-face meetings where the only agenda is to understand what makes a leader tick and what drives that person to want to make change — what’s known in the organizing trade as *self-interest*. I asked Nell some probing questions along these lines, and I shared my own stories where I saw overlap in our interests and values. Eventually, after a strained silence, she told me something she’d never before told anyone at Roadside: “If you really want to reach everyone in this county, you’ve got to go talk with my brother.”

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Robert William “Bill” Meade, one of Nell’s 17 siblings, was chief of the volunteer fire department in remote Kings Creek — where she and I were headed in the car that afternoon. His Facebook profile listed his occupation as “Boss” at “Strip mine.” Unlike Nell, who rarely took credit for her decades of effort creating opportunities for local youth, Bill dominated every room he was in, sometimes shooting his mouth off until he got



From left to right: Nell Fields (KY), Jim Perkins (MA), Alyssa Helton (KY), and Dom Spangler (KY) in Leverett, fall 2017. Photo by Kip Fonsh

Nell got her politics from Robert Kennedy. Bill, on the other hand, grinned and agreed when I suggested he was the embodiment of every urban liberal’s dread.

thrown out of county government meetings. Nell got her politics from Robert Kennedy, who had visited Letcher County when she was a teenager. Bill, on the other hand, grinned and agreed when I suggested he was the embodiment of every urban liberal’s dread: a staunch Old Regular Baptist, a fixture in the local Republican Party, and an outspoken supporter of Donald Trump.

Nell later claimed she had ulcers all the way over Cowan Mountain and down Kings Creek, as we neared her brother’s firehouse. We opened the door to a cavernous gym joined onto the fire engine garage, and I heard a booming welcome from a 250-pound, five-foot-four septuagenarian dressed in Dickies khaki work clothes. For the next two hours Bill held the floor with tale after tale of home, work, and family, rants about the corruption of county government, and stories of local volunteer fire departments struggling to survive the collapse of coal.

He talked less about fighting fires than about responding to opioid overdoses — often several in a weekend — and hosting dinners and other events where neighbors could gather and enjoy themselves.

I mostly listened. But early on, while responding to something Bill said, I found an opportune moment to perform my usual self-introduction. Leaning into the interfering-outsider stereotype, I smiled, raised my eyebrow slightly, and identified myself as a

“communist Jew from the Northeast.” After a slight pause, Bill laughed. Then we laughed together. Then he responded with a slightly offensive Jewish joke — and we laughed again. (At some point I noticed Nell wasn’t laughing. As soon as we got back in the car she apologized for her brother’s behavior. I thanked her and assured her I was not offended. This was all part of forming a relationship based in sharing stories and values, strong enough to withstand the pressures I knew would come.)

Bill and I soon found we both liked long-distance road travel (he used to be a trucker) and old church hymns (I was working on starting a regular shape-note sing in Letcher County). We both cared about defending our communities from exploitation, whether by big government (his main concern) or big business (mine). And I was pleasantly surprised to learn his immediate self-interest was uncontroversial: he wanted the fire department to host bluegrass concerts again. They had stopped in the 1980s, when a long-gone county sheriff got too greedy with his bribe requests, and for the next 30 years the community assumed it would be impossible to revive them. I recognized this as what our economist colleague Fluney Hutchinson calls “bounded imagination” or “resigned preferences,” a big part of how exploited communities stay exploited. “How much does it cost to put on a bluegrass concert?” I asked him. Three hundred dollars, he said.

Three weeks later, on a Saturday night in the dead of winter, over a hundred residents showed up at the firehouse. The show included two bands, a square dance, a hot dog dinner, and a neighborhood art exhibit that spanned a full wall of the gym. It was the first time some of these local artists ever presented their work to their neighbors. The 2016 Big Kings Creek Meat & Greet would be the first of many similar events, and the start of a lasting relationship.

But not everyone was pleased with our new partnership. Some of my colleagues, having spent decades fighting Bill’s strip-mining and logging and right-wing politicking, still saw him as the enemy. But that started to change as they got to know him and realized he

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didn't expect them to agree with him, only to acknowledge where he was coming from. This has always been Roadside's approach: to collaborate with "problematic" people instead of dismissing them, to include all perspectives instead of taking the "right" side, and to frame issues in locals' own stories instead of imposing a nationalized media script. Just as eminent community organizer Saul Alinsky had often counseled "no permanent enemies," so does Roadside vet potential partners with just one question: *Where do you stand on organized exploitation?*

A basic tenet of populism is that every community's culture contains the potential for democracy and justice, and the goal is to draw it out. Roadside's primary tool for this purpose is the story circle, developed alongside Junebug Productions. Like a lot of Appalshop's best work, the story circle is something new and inventive that furthers something old and common-sensical: just a group of people sitting in a circle listening to each other's stories about an agreed-upon topic — seemingly casual yet meticulously



Leverett participants join the audience for a reading of the play The Future of Letcher County at the Cowan Community Center. Nell Fields is second from left; Bill Meade is on the far right. Photo by Sharon Dunn

curated. The strictness of the protocol put me off at first: one teller at a time, in one direction around the circle, just a beginning/middle/end with no analysis or explanation, no thinking about your story in advance, no interrupting, no cross-talk, nothing on your lap. But I soon recognized the reason for all the rules: here was

nothing less than an attempt to create a space without inequality, where everyone speaks, everyone listens, and everyone's story receives equal attention.

I wasn't sure Bill could stay quiet long enough to participate in a story circle, but again he surprised me. Knowing he would get to talk, and everyone would hear him out, he proved more than willing to listen in return. He participated in several story circles and follow-up meetings, as Roadside collected material for the *Future of Letcher County* play.

And one year and three months after we first met, in June 2017, Bill took the stage at Appalshop to create the role of Harlan. It was the first time he had ever been in a play, or inside the Appalshop theater.

Harlan, a composite of lots of Letcher County people and their stories, is an old right-winger whose offensive (to many) positions on sexuality, religion, environmentalism, and mass incarceration get a full airing in the play. They also get just as extensively challenged, by other characters who speak in the equally real words of county residents: the feminist academic Elizabeth; the flamboyantly gay teenager Andrew; the young Christian idealist Jason; and Harlan's liberal sister Jane, played (we couldn't resist) by Bill's liberal sister Nell.

The play's first act is a 45-minute argument among the five characters about the county's economic, cultural, and political future, peppered with stories, songs, jokes, and impromptu audience interventions. It concludes with each cast member in turn asking the audience "What do you think?"— and then inviting them to become players in Act 2, contributing their own stories in story circles that further the discussion of their community's future.

In performance after performance, in venues across the county and as far away as West Baltimore, *The Future of Letcher County* demonstrates how harshly neighbors can disagree and still act together as neighbors. Many of the play's most touching moments occur when characters discover unexpected common ground, as in the moment late in Act 1 when Harlan reveals his pain at the county's schools being taken out of the hands of their communities:

HARLAN: The point I'm tryin' to make is that them old schools belonged to us. At least we thought they did until they took 'em away from us.

ELIZABETH: Economists and developers have a term for that kind of thing. They call it creative destruction —

HARLAN: — Say what?

In performance after performance, in venues across the county and as far away as West Baltimore, *The Future of Letcher County* demonstrates how harshly neighbors can disagree and still act together as neighbors.

ELIZABETH: — Creative destruction. It's an economic concept based on the theory that capitalism destroys and reconfigures previous economic orders, ceaselessly devaluing existing wealth in order to clear the ground for the creation of new wealth.

HARLAN: Well I don't know nothin' about all that, but like I said before, I do know we lost a lot when we lost our schools.

And everyone, onstage and in the audience, nods in silent agreement.

Community Centers of Power

About halfway through that first Kings Creek bluegrass concert in February 2016, just after Bill badgered me to come onstage and sing "Poor Wayfaring Stranger," I was approached by a short and powerfully built woman in her late 50s. I had heard of Gwen Johnson, and it turned out she'd heard about me, too. As she later told a group of visiting national funders: a firefighter friend had told her "there was this guy [...] and he had some money."

We scheduled a one-to-one for a few days later. I learned Gwen had lived in the coal camp of Hemphill most of her life, currently worked a desk job in early childhood education, first learned to read as an adult, and went to college when her daughter did. Gwen's politics hearkened back to an earlier time: she supported her coal miner relatives and opposed their "exploiters" with equal vehemence. A musician, volunteer Appalshop radio DJ (the Hemp Hillbilly), and self-described "tree-hugger," Gwen still proudly sang "Which Side Are You On?"; next to her desk hung photos of her family alongside John L. Lewis and Mother Jones.

When Gwen wasn't asleep or at work, she was volunteering at the Hemphill Community Center, founded by her family and neighbors in the basement of their shut-down neighborhood school. Hemphill Community Center hosts weekly music

performances and community meals, provides space for locally run classes and events, and houses a memorial to fallen coal miners. Its walls are covered with murals by local artists, photos of generations



Gwen Johnson (center) at a meeting for the Letcher County Culture Hub. Photo by Malcolm J. Wilson

of union leaders, tributes to veterans, announcements of community happenings, and several prominently placed rainbow-colored signs that insist on inclusiveness in the community's own uncompromising language:

And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

There is none other commandment greater than these. — Mark 12:31

NO EXCEPTIONS!

Hemphill Community Center, like Cowan Community Center and Kings Creek Volunteer Fire Department, is a place where the community is in charge, where everyone is welcome, and where anyone ready to put in the work can become a leader. Roadside, paraphrasing Southern Freedom Movement organizer Bayard Rustin, calls these kinds of places “community centers of power.” Their presence often marks the difference between communities that claim their voice and those that let opportunists speak for them, between those that act together across differences and those that succumb to culture wars, between genuine populism and its authoritarian shadow.

As organizations that pose an inherent obstacle to established power, community centers of power often find themselves under threat. When I arrived in Letcher County, the county government had already pulled support for these centers' utility bills, insurance, and other essential expenses, and was about to cut off support for their senior citizens programming. They claimed they had no choice, citing the drop-off in revenue from coal severance taxes. But many community leaders noticed they'd somehow found the funds to build a multimillion-dollar recreation center, where nothing is allowed on the walls other than lists of rules, ads from corporate sponsors, and signs warning users to pay the proper admission fee — a decidedly un-free space. After Gwen pointed out this disparity at a county government meeting, the trash collection at Hemphill stopped.

With Hemphill's cafes, bars, and union halls mostly gone, and its churches mostly sectarian (“like bee swarms,” Gwen says), the community center was the only place left where everyone was welcome. And these new funding cuts put the center on the brink of

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shutting down. When Gwen and I met, she told me Hemphill's community leaders were in the midst of a "dark night of the soul."

What kept them awake most often were the center's electric bills. Letcher County was serviced by a single energy company, American Electric Power (AEP), a government-

Through telling their own stories, building their own power, and creating their own wealth, the people of Letcher County have started to loosen the stranglehold of divisive culture wars.

sanctioned monopoly that was about to raise its rates. Hemphill's volunteers were already reaching into their own pockets during the winter months to keep the center's doors open.

As usual, Gwen's first impulse was to fight. (One time, in a room full of funders, activists, and nonprofit professionals, Gwen was asked for her preferred gender pronouns and responded: "You can call me anything you want, so long as you call me when it's time to give the oppressors hell!") But after some research, she and the

Letcher County Culture Hub's other leaders concluded they did not have the power to mount a successful campaign against AEP, or against the county and state governments that had failed to protect them. Instead, inspired by their relationship with a new local solar energy company, Culture Hub partners committed to getting as many of their buildings as possible on solar power.

I anticipated big pushback, given the War on Coal rhetoric all around us, but I had again underestimated the community's inherent genius. As Gwen expressed in Letcher County's weekly newspaper *The Mountain Eagle*:

Solar is coming to Hemphill! We are getting geared up to get solar panels atop our building. It's hard to believe the grounds housing the Letcher County Coal Miner's Monument, amidst a coal camp community, could achieve such a thing. We did a little homework months back to ask coal miners what they thought of the idea.

Without fail they all echoed the same thing. They all thought we needed to move ahead with it. They thought with the closing of the Big Sandy Power Plant and the rate increases and riders on the AEP bills, that we had to search out new ways of doing things. Without fail they all told us they thought solar was a great idea. So all these months later it looks like it is about to happen. We want the miners to know how

much we appreciate their contributions to our efforts all these years. The benevolence of the miners has helped us every step of the way. We love coal and hope and pray for a resurgence of technology that will put every miner back to work. We will always support our working people. That is who we are!

People sometimes ask me if Roadside has changed people's minds about coal or Trump. As far as I know the answer is no. Nor was that ever the intent. Instead, we have created the conditions where supporters of coal and Trump can enter into communion with neighbors who think differently, without anyone fearing a threat to the things they organize their lives around. Through telling their own stories, building their own power, and creating their own wealth, the people of Letcher County have started to loosen the stranglehold of divisive culture wars. And if politics is downstream from culture — as Roadside has long held — when we change what's possible culturally, political change will follow.



A bluegrass jam at Hemphill Community Center, spring 2018. Photo by Kip Fonsh

Appendix I

Training Others to Do What We Did



*Participants and trainers of the second Hands Across the Hills
“Dialogue Across Divides” training, Leverett, MA, April 27-29, 2023*

From the start of the project, many people who heard or read about the work of Hands Across the Hills wanted to learn to do it themselves, in their own communities. Over the years Hands Across the Hills hosted a variety of formal and informal presentations, meetings, and coaching sessions to help other projects get off the ground and share the strategies that had made Hands Across the Hills possible.

This work to support other efforts culminated in hosting two three-day immersive Dialogue Across Divides trainings in facilitating dialogue and cultural organizing, both held in Leverett. The first, in October 2021, was led by Hands Across the Hills co-facilitators Paula Green and Ben Fink; the second, held in April 2023 after Paula Green’s death, was led by Ben Fink and Johanna Solomon of Kent State University. Trainees also

had the opportunity to learn from participants in Hands Across the Hills from Massachusetts and Kentucky, in formal training sessions as well as homestays, shared meals, and community gatherings.

Each Dialogue Across Divides training weekend included roughly 25 participants from as far as Minnesota, Georgia, and Pakistan. Trainees came from academia, grassroots organizing, electoral organizing, nonprofit administration, popular education, and conflict resolution. Their projects ran the gamut from restoration of Native American lands to empowering disenfranchised voters in Florida to facilitating dialogue in South Asia and the Middle East.

The training's interactive sessions aimed to develop these skills:

- Facilitating dialogues where everyone's perspective counts, everyone's worth is recognized, and everyone is challenged to learn and grow
- Organizing groups of participants for long-term collaboration across political and cultural barriers
- Creating skillful questions and prompts
- Building strong one-to-one and group relationships
- Negotiating and defusing intercultural and interpersonal tensions
- Collaborating, learning, and cultivating common ground across political, regional, racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, and class divides
- Integrating art, music, theater, and storytelling into dialogue and organizing work
- Developing meaningful day-long or weekend-long agendas that include dialogue sessions and collaborative work, plus informal and social time

Both trainings charged tuition, and scholarships were available. Tuition covered program costs such as facility rental, catering three meals a day, and materials. It was the fact that this grassroots project was earning revenue, and expected to continue with future trainings, that led to the decision to incorporate as a nonprofit charitable organization.

The pages to follow include key excerpts from the Hands Across the Hills Dialogue Across Divides training manuals.

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THE BASICS OF DIALOGUE ACROSS DIVIDES



THE DIALOGUE PROCESS

Participating in Inter-Group Dialogues:

Dialogue is a facilitated and structured conversation that requires a commitment to listen and speak respectfully. Dialogue groups agree upon ground rules or guidelines that provide safety for participants to engage in conversation on difficult issues of the past, present and future. Often, dialogue participants develop increased tolerance toward views and experiences different from their own.

Dialogue can interrupt the cycles of blame and revenge. It provides an environment where a new conversation can develop about controversial issues, in order to build more positive and authentic inter-communal relationships. The purpose of dialogue is learning. Dialogue is neither for the purpose of convincing others about an option nor to make decisions. Dialogue focuses on building bridges of understanding between groups of people.

Participants can expect to:

- Listen and be listened to in ways that enable all speakers to be heard
- Speak and be spoken to in a manner that respects each participant and encourages mutual understanding
- Be in an environment that is emotionally and physically safe
- Speak as an individual, not as a representative of a government, school district, ethnic group, etc.

Participants are asked to:

- Respect the ground rules or guidelines
- Honor confidentiality
- Speak truthfully and from your own experience
- Discover and listen to the truth of others
- Avoid using negative stereotypes and generalizations
- Dialogue rather than debate
- Be willing to learn new ideas and to be changed by the experience
- Tolerate differences and complexity
- Take responsibility for their beliefs and actions
- Have a positive influence on their communities after the dialogue

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FOSTERING DIALOGUE THROUGH GOOD COMMUNICATION

***The dialogue process is about practicing a new kind of speaking
and a new kind of listening.***

Active Listening:

Hearing and understanding the truth of the experience of others

- Give the speaker your full and undivided attention
- Listen to learn, not to verify existing assumptions or expectations
- Listen with empathy, to see the problem from the other person's point of view, to walk in their shoes
- Ask questions to clarify or expand your understanding, not to challenge or engage in debate

Authentic Speaking:

Telling the truth of your own experience

- Speak for yourself, not for a group or position
- Speak to communicate your own experience, not to persuade others
- Distinguish your opinion or belief from fact or 'truth'
- Acknowledge the experiences and assumptions that have shaped your views and opinions
- Speak from your heart



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REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Reflective listening is a communication strategy involving two key steps: seeking to understand a speaker's idea, then offering the idea back to the speaker, to confirm the idea has been understood correctly. It requires responding actively to another while keeping your attention focused completely on the speaker. In reflective listening, you do not offer your perspective by carefully keeping the focus on the other's need or problem. Thus, reflective listening consists of a step beyond what is normally thought of as listening:

- Hearing and understanding what the other person is communicating through words and "body language" to the best of your ability.
- Responding to the other person by reflecting the thoughts and feelings you heard in his or her words, tone of voice, body posture, and gestures.

Reflective listening has more than one purpose. You can use reflective listening to help you understand what the speaker is saying. It also allows the speaker to feel heard. Reflective listening can help the speaker achieve his or her outcomes. Listening can help the speaker clarify his or her thoughts on some matter, decide on a course of action, or explore his or her feelings to some new depth. It is useful for both speaker and listener.

Reflective listening is useful in a variety of situations. You can use listening to help when another person is experiencing a difficulty or problem. Also, the communication skills of problem solving, assertion, conflict management, and negotiation all require extensive listening. In social situations, listening can create a climate of warmth between people. Listening is also important for handling resistance or anger in others. It is needed to settle disputes. Leading group discussions/conversations require effective listening as well. Directions can be clarified by listening. In general, reflective listening is useful in conducting any difficult conversations with another.

The reflective listening process offers a number of benefits:

1. It lets the speaker know that she or he has been heard, understood, cared for, and supported.
2. It gives the other feedback on what he or she said and how it came across.
3. It allows you to check your own accuracy in hearing what the other has said.
4. It avoids the illusion of understanding.
5. It helps prevent the "mental vacation" in which you are inattentive during the conversation.
6. It helps the other focus on self, vent, sort out issues, express feeling, and deal more effectively with emotions.
7. It allows the other to move to deeper levels of expression at his or her own pace.
8. It helps the other to think and articulate more clearly.
9. It helps the other arrive at a solution to his or her own problem.
10. It helps you clarify what you are expected to do.
11. It helps you deal effectively with the issue, problem and/or needs the other raised.

From "Reflective Listening," by Neil Katz and Kevin McNulty.

ROADBLOCKS TO COMMUNICATION

Without realizing it, people typically inject communication barriers, also known as roadblocks, into their conversation. This prevents effective communication. Communication roadblocks typically impact communication negatively. These roadblocks are especially likely to be destructive when those involved are interacting under stress. These undesirable responses include:

I. JUDGING THE OTHER PERSON

1. **Criticizing:** Making a negative evaluation of the other person, their actions, or attitude. “You brought it on yourself—you’ve got nobody else to blame for the mess you are in”
2. **Name-calling:** “Putting down” or stereotyping the other person. “She’s crazy” “He’s just a jock”
3. **Diagnosing:** Analyzing why a person is behaving as they are: playing amateur psychiatrist. “I can read you like a book—you are doing that to irritate me” “You’re so OCD”
4. **Praising Evaluatively:** Making a positive judgement of the other person, their actions, or attitudes “You are always such a good boy. I know you will help me tonight” “You’re so amazing” (Many people find it difficult to believe that some of the barriers like praise are high-risk responses)

II. SENDING SOLUTIONS — *often compounds a problem or creates new ones without resolving the original dilemma.*

1. **Ordering:** Commanding the other person to do what you want to have done. “Do your homework right now” “Why?” “Because I said so...”
2. **Threatening:** Trying to control the other’s actions by warning of negative consequences that you will instigate. “You’ll do it or else...” “Stop that noise right now or I will keep the whole class after school”
3. **Moralizing:** telling another person what they should do. “Preaching” at the other: “You shouldn’t get a divorce; think of what will happen to the children” “You ought to tell him you are sorry” “You should...”
4. **Excessive/Inappropriate Questioning:** Closed-ended questions are often barriers in a relationship; these are those questions that can usually be answered in a few words—often with simple yes or no. “When did it happen?” “Are you sorry that you did it?”
5. **Advising:** Giving the other person a solution to their problems. “If I were you, I’d sure tell her off” “That’s an easy one to solve. First...”

III. AVOIDING THE OTHER'S CONCERNS — *getting conversation off track.*

1. **Diverting:** Pushing the other's problems aside through distraction. "Don't dwell on it. Let's talk about something more pleasant" "Think you've got it bad?! Let me tell you what happened to me!"
2. **Logical Argument:** Attempting to convince the other with an appeal to facts or logic, without consideration of the emotional factors involved. "I don't know why you're so worried to walk alone at night. Kent State has one of the safest campuses in the Midwest"
3. **Reassuring:** Trying to stop the other person from feeling the negative emotions they are experiencing, "Don't worry, it is always darkest before dawn. It will all work out okay in the end"

IV. ADDITIONAL ROADBLOCKS

1. Telling other people they are sending roadblocks: When people are introduced to the roadblocks, a fairly typical reaction is, "That's just what my husband (boyfriend, girlfriend, mother, etc.) has been doing all these years. Wait till I tell them about all the roadblocks they send" Or "Gosh, my boss uses just about all these barriers. The next time they do it, I'm going to point out how they are roadblocking me." This type of roadblock actually belongs in the judgement category.

If you want to improve your communication, pointing the finger of judgement at others is a poor place to begin.

V. SUMMARY

Certain ways of verbalizing carry a high risk of putting a damper on the conversation, being harmful to the relationship, triggering feelings of inadequacy, anger, and/or dependency in the other person. These barriers to conversation tend to diminish the other person's self-esteem and to undermine motivation. They decrease the likelihood that they will be self-determining and increase the likelihood that they will put the focus of evaluation outside themselves. They also increase defensiveness in the other party. Roadblocks derail conversation. They decrease the efficiency in conversation, as you are not actually finding out the information you need to know or helping the other person. However, these conversational bad habits can be corrected. As you learn to listen, assert, resolve conflict, and solve interpersonal problems more effectively, your use of the roadblocks will inevitably diminish.

Adapted from *People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts*, by Robert Bolton, Ph. D., New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1979, pp. 15-26.

GROUND RULES FOR DIALOGUES

Purpose: To create and protect a safe space

Constructing the boundaries of the conversation—the limited context and manner in which it will take place—is a big part of what allows it to open and deepen into new awareness.

Establishing ground rules by group consensus involves the whole group in creating optimal conditions for freedom of expression and exploration. The ground rules express the spirit of the discussion, which is based on listening respectfully and without argument while discussing issues that may tempt us to argue. The ground rules provide a container that encourages everyone to take an active part, even those who tend to hold back.

The group creates the ground rules; the facilitator makes sure that there is agreement, that the list is complete, and the rules are followed.

Basic ground rules to include:

- Honor confidentiality
- Respect differences
- Speak in the first person and from individual experience, not as a representative of a group
- Describe experiences, not opinions
- Do not try to persuade or change others
- Listen openly and without interruption
- Respect air time; be aware of those who are more quiet, or have a language barrier
- Avoid cross talk and side conversations



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DEBATE vs. DIALOGUE

Debate	Dialogue
Goal is to win	Goal is to discover common ground
One listens to find the opponent's weak points	One listens to understand
One criticizes other points of view	One openly considers all points of view
Assumes one right answer to a question or problem	Assumes that many different ideas can contribute to a fuller solution
Comes from a position which one defends	Expresses feelings, concerns, fears, and uncertainties
Exposes faults in the positions of others	Demonstrates strengths on all sides of an issue
Looks to strengthen a predetermined position	Uncovers brand new possibilities and opportunities
Further polarizes antagonistic positions	Builds bridges of understanding
Promotes competition	Promotes collaboration

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FUNDAMENTALS OF CULTURAL ORGANIZING



Culture War in a Nutshell

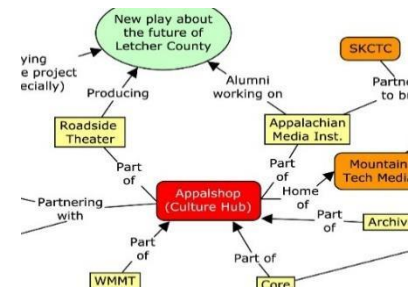
How to Organize for Community Cultural and Economic Development

There are FIVE BASIC PHASES*...

*NOTE: In practice, these phases will inevitably overlap, shift, and deviate. This work is always a journey of discovery, and there's no formula. Keep innovating through collective energy, intuition, reflection on actions, and action on reflections.

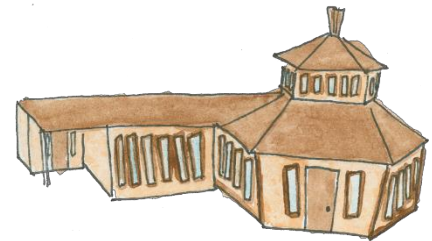
1. Assemble a planning team, and make a power map.

- Make sure the planning team includes a SPONSORING ORGANIZATION for initial support and a LEAD ORGANIZER.
- Get the team together and make a POWER MAP that identifies the (1) *institutions*, (2) *individuals*, and (3) *initiatives* that you could draw on for support, and how they're connected.



2. Find where communities are already organizing themselves, and build strong relationships with their leaders.

- COMMUNITY CENTERS OF POWER = organizations controlled by ordinary people, where everyone in the community can be co-creator and consumer.
 - They often include community centers, volunteer fire departments, cultural and faith organizations, grassroots action groups, and locally-owned businesses.
 - They typically do *not* include governments, health and welfare providers, and other top-down institutions.
- LEADERS = people (1) with a *following*, who others in the community look to for leadership, and who (2) are working to *develop those followers into leaders themselves*. They don't have to have official titles, positions, or degrees.
- ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONAL MEETINGS = face-to-face meetings with those leaders, where the organizer asks questions and shares stories to identify mutual self-interest, including cultural values, personal drives, material needs, and spiritual hopes.



3. Make space for those leaders to make things together.

- Start by making anything that's in the group's mutual self-interest. From the start, make room for ART/CULTURAL WORK: deliberate expressions of communities' shared intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material traditions and features. Making plays, poems, songs, dances, writings, paintings, food, etc. together creates a group that knows and trusts each other well enough to act together.
- Early on, do a STORY CIRCLE, where leaders share personal stories and start recognizing the values and interests they share.



4. Start projects to build wealth, based in partners' mutual self-interest.

- Ideas for new projects will soon emerge: collective projects, done by multiple partners together, and individual projects, done by single partners with support from the group.

- Every project idea is a good idea, as long as it (1) comes from partners' own values and interests; (2) grows the community's collective VOICE, AGENCY, AND OWNERSHIP; and (3) works toward building COMMUNITY WEALTH, directly or indirectly.
- Start building a PARTNERSHIP FUND, to offer seed money for projects in the shared interest of the group.
- Make sure to keep art/cultural work in the mix of projects, to keep the work grounded, reflective, imaginative, and inclusive.



5. Keep growing and deepening the relationships, and the work.

- Stay connected, accountable, and responsive by meeting regularly—as a whole group, in smaller working groups, and for one-to-one relational meetings.
- Keep the door open to new partners who see their values and interests reflected in the work, with the goal of embodying the community's full diversity and complexity.
- Make space for leaders to step up, taking on new and more challenging projects and leadership opportunities, toward increasing the group's collective POWER.



...and FIVE “BEST PRINCIPLES”

1. We own what we make.

Our work is rooted in collective and inclusive voice, agency, and ownership. Before taking on a new partner or project, do a gut-check: are they committed to “we own what we make”?

2. Work from the grassroots up.

The work's base is communities' centers of power, where everyone in the community can be co-creator and user. Non-grassroots groups can be involved, but they can't be in control.

3. Start from stories.

Sharing stories—in story circles, art/cultural work, and ongoing reflective meetings—allows everyone to interact in safety and on even footing, and to develop shared understandings and values.

4. Build collective power out of shared self-interest.

POWER = the ability to act = *organized people + organized money + organized ideas*.

SELF-INTEREST = the basic desires and passions that cause us to act as we do.

5. Embrace productive tension.

Our work is about making change toward a future where everyone's voice is valued and everyone's contribution counts. As change happens, there will be tension—among folks with different approaches to making change, and with folks interested in maintaining current inequalities. Remember: tension (as in a rope) can mean something's ready to move!

ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONAL MEETINGS

One-to-one relational meetings are a way to build *power* through *public relationships*.

- POWER = the ability to make things happen the way we want them to.
= organized people + organized money + organized ideas.
- PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS are based in mutual *self-interest* and *accountability*.

The goal of a one-to-one relational meeting is

- to better understand the other person's *self-interest*: the basic desires and passions that causes that person to act as they do.
- to determine if that person could become a *leader* or *active participant* in the work you're involved in.

An effective one-to-one relational meeting

- has one and only one agenda item: *to learn about the person's self-interest*.
(No recruiting, informing, convincing, selling, preaching, or dating!)
- is scheduled *intentionally* and *in advance*, preferably in a *neutral location*.
- is usually between 30-60 minutes long.
- is focused on the other person. Follow the *70/30 Rule*: listen 70% of the time, talk 30%.
- is about *asking questions* and *sharing stories*, following the rule *Probe But Don't Pry*:
 - Ask follow-up questions that get beneath surface-level explanation:
How come you...? How did it feel when...? Was there a moment when...?
 - Don't go deeper than the person takes you, but if they open up a door to a tough place, and you think learning more will help you understand what motives that person to act, walk through that door boldly!

Five basic steps of a one-to-one relational meeting:

- 1. INTRODUCTION:** explain who you are, who you represent, why you wanted to meet.
- 2. WARM UP:** start from what you know about the person and what you have in common. Ask a few easy questions, and share a little about yourself in response. When in doubt, start with something like: "Tell me a little bit about yourself. How'd you get into this work?"
- 3. DEEPER QUESTIONS:** after a few minutes, once you've got a rhythm going, start in with the "hows" and "whys." Try to get a sense of how the person navigates challenging relationships, situations, and feelings. Use your 30% talking time to share personal stories and experiences that help make a connection or set up a follow-up question.
- 4. OFFER AN INVITATION:** if the person shows potential, end with a modest invitation. Meet again? Come to a meeting or an event? Introduce to other leaders?
- 5. EVALUATION:** take a few notes after you're done (*don't* take notes during the one-to-one). What is this person's story? What matters most to them? What excites, angers, and motivates them to act? What do they *want* most / what is their *self-interest*? And: how did you do? What worked best? What do you want to do differently next time?

PRINCIPLES OF BUILDING POWER

Power = the ability to make things happen the way we want them to.

- If things aren't right, it's because we haven't built enough power to make them right — yet.
- Our goal is to bring **the world as it is** into line with **the world as it ought to be**.
- Yes, we **do** get to have a say in how the world ought to be, and to make it happen together!

Power = organized people + organized money + organized ideas.

- When we are **serious** about building power, that's the goal of everything we do: every meeting we have, every event we run, every project we take on, every issue we choose.
- When we **evaluate** an action, we ask: *did this help us **build our base** of organized people, organized money, and organized ideas?* In other words: *are we more powerful coming out than we were going in?*
- That's what makes organizing different from project management or event planning. In project management and event planning, the project or event is the end goal. *In organizing, the project or event is not the end but the means.* The end is building power.

Power ≠ service. To build a powerful alliance that represents our communities in their full diversity, we'll need to *work with our neighbors* in ways we might not be used to:

IN RELATIONSHIPS BASED IN SERVICE ...	IN RELATIONSHIPS BASED IN POWER ...
One person fulfills another person's <i>need</i> .	We work together to get what we both <i>want</i> .
We work <i>for clients/consumers</i> .	We work <i>with our neighbors</i> .
Our <i>differences</i> are reinforced.	Our <i>commonalities</i> are reinforced.
Experts are <i>on top</i> .	Experts are <i>on tap</i> .
We work from <i>statistics</i> .	We work from <i>stories</i> .
The work is based in <i>institutions</i> accountable to people and groups outside the community.	The work is based in <i>community centers of power</i> accountable to the community itself.
We define people and communities by what they <i>don't</i> have (deficits).	We define people and communities by what they <i>do</i> have (assets).
We start with the <i>project</i> and then find the <i>people</i> to do it with.	We start with the <i>people</i> and then figure out the <i>project</i> , together.

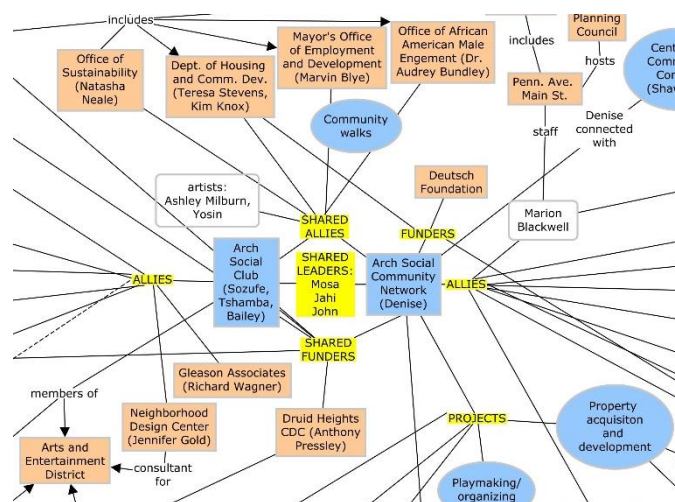
Power analysis. Every community includes many groups looking to build power—including potential allies and potential threats. It's important to keep track of who's out there, how they're connected, how much power they have, and what their **self-interest** is. Two key maxims:

"No permanent friends; no permanent enemies." — Saul Alinsky, organizer and teacher

"Jesus said 'love your enemies.' He didn't say you wouldn't have enemies!"
— Grant Stevensen, organizer and Lutheran pastor

POWER MAPPING: A QUICK GUIDE

Power mapping is a simple and effective way to (1) understand the power relationships that currently exist in a community, (3) identify the most important organizations and leaders to connect with, and (3) craft an effective strategy to grow community power.



Power mapping is most effective when it's done by a group of people in the community. All you need is a big sheet of paper and a few markers.

There are many ways to power map, but here's a one simple method:

- 1. Write the name of your organization(s)** near the center of the sheet of paper. Put a rectangle around each of them. If you've got multiple organizations, draw lines showing the ways they're connected. (You may also want to label the lines to explain the connection.)
- 2. Write the names of the most important leaders of each organization** just outside the rectangle, and draw a line connecting these leaders to their organization, and to each other as appropriate (again, label the lines when helpful).
- 3. Write the name of the other organizations, projects, and individuals** that have important connections to these organizations and leaders. Put rectangles around organizations and circles around projects; individuals are indicated by not having a shape around them. Then draw all the lines you need to explain how they all are connected, and label those lines when helpful.
- 4. And so on:** keep adding organizations, projects, and individuals—and the lines connecting them—until you feel like you've got a map that represents all the important players. Think about all your current and potential *allies*, *opportunities*, *obstacles*, *resources*, *advocates*, *threats*, and how they're all connected.

Once your power map is done, make sure to review and reflect on it as a group. What do you see? What's surprising, exciting, frustrating? What new possible assets, needs, relationships, projects, sources of strength, and challenges can you now identify?

And maybe most importantly: **who are the people (potential and current leaders) you need to do one-to-ones with**, and maybe invite to a meeting, a story circle, a project-planning session, or otherwise into the work?

A QUICK GUIDE TO SPOTTING COMMUNITY CENTERS OF POWER

Community centers of power — a term derived from civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin — **are organizations of, by, and for all the people in a community.** In a community center of power, *all are welcome, and communities speak and act for themselves: telling their own story instead of letting others speak for them, acting together across differences instead of succumbing to divisions, and building and owning their community's cultural and economic wealth.*

Community centers of power are as diverse as the communities they represent. Some have their own brick-and-mortar buildings, while others meet wherever they can. What matters is what's happening, who's involved, and whether the power is held by the whole community or by a select few.

Administrative, marketing, and service-delivery organizations are usually **not community centers of power:**



Community centers of power are **centers of community life:**



To spot a community center of power, look for signs of commitment to the “ABCs”:

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Is the organization **accountable to the people, all the people**, of the community it claims to represent?
- Is the organization **part of the community** — not serving it from above or below?
- Do the people in the organization, including the people in charge, **reflect the full diversity** of the community?

BELONGING

- Can anyone take part and **feel like they belong**?
- Can everyone access all parts of the work? If there's a building, **can everyone go everywhere**, including into the production areas?
- Do the spaces where the organization meets—and the stuff hanging on the walls—demonstrate **the organization's central place in community life**?

CO-CREATION

- Does **everyone help set the agenda, make things together, and keep the value** of what gets made?
- Can anyone in the community step up and **participate in leadership**?
- Does the organization **adapt itself** to new participants, new challenges, and new opportunities?

THE FOUR QUESTIONS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

1. Who are the **organizations** you are partnering with, who represent the people you want to work with?
2. What evidence is there that those organizations are **of, by, and for the people** they claim to represent, in their full diversity?
3. What is the **nature, length, and depth** of your partnership with those organizations?
4. How are you **co-creating and setting the project's agenda together** with those organizations, and with the people those organizations represent?

THE ART OF FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS



CRAFTING DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

The middle, core phase of a dialogue is usually launched with a question. The nature of the question and how it is phrased will profoundly affect the tone and shape of the ensuing dialogue.

A question designed for a debate helps to sharpen and differentiate positions. A question designed for a dialogue will allow for difference, but also helps illumine unexplored common ground. A good dialogue question:

- Is open-ended and cannot be answered with a yes or no, I agree or disagree response
- Takes participants deeper than the level of opinion or position
- Encourages participants to delve into their experience and to explore their thinking in a fresh manner
- Allows for ambiguity or ambivalence
- Calls forth new, unrehearsed responses



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TIPS FOR ASKING DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

Crafting questions for dialogue is one of the most important skills a facilitator can develop. A well-crafted question can set the course for a constructive dialogue process, while a poorly crafted question can create confusion or defensiveness. This is true for questions posed by both the facilitators and the participants. Learning to ask dialogic questions is a skill that develops with practice. This skill is useful for both the facilitator and the participants as they learn to engage with each other.

- ▶ **Ask questions that show interest or curiosity.**
- ▶ **Avoid questions that contain judgment.**
- ▶ **Make sure your questions are understood; repeat them if necessary.**
- ▶ **Reframe questions if they seem to miss your goal.**

Ask open-ended questions such as:

What has been your experience with _____?
Can you share what you believe about _____?
What does _____ mean to you?
How has your life been impacted by _____?

Ask clarifying or probing questions such as:

I'm not sure I understand; can you explain further?
Can you say more about that?
Can you share more about your experience?
Can you share what has contributed to your belief/feeling/perception/idea about _____?

Ask group process questions such as:

Can you share what you are feeling about _____?
What was it like for you to hear _____?
Can you take a moment to reflect on _____?
What are you noticing about the group right now?

Next page →

Ask yourself:

What is the goal of my question?

Is there a hidden meaning?

Am I trying to persuade or convince with my question?

How is this question likely to be received?

What is the tone or feeling associated with my question?

Be aware of:

Built-in assumptions

Personal biases

Drawing conclusions about what participants say without probing more deeply

Hidden or shared judgments

Leading or persuading

Too much focus on “facts” rather than experience

Too much focus on either past or future

Re-circulating arguments

Questions that begin with “Don’t you think”



Text reprinted from Diasporas in Dialogue: Conflict Transformation and Reconciliation in Worldwide Refugee Communities, edited by Barbara Tint

ESSENTIALS FOR DIALOGUE FACILITATION

The main responsibility of a facilitator is to create, protect, and maintain a safe space for open communication throughout the phases of a dialogue or workshop.

This can be achieved by attending to the following:

1. Opening phase: setting the stage

- Welcome
- Establish an environment of safety by building and upholding a safe container
- Clarify purpose of workshop or dialogue
- Allow sufficient time for introductions (people “join” a group when they speak into it)
- Review agenda and time schedule
- Establish and monitor communication guidelines with group
- Introduce and practice dialogue skills

2. Model effective group behavior and communication

- Respect all perspectives
- Model observance of ground rules through own behavior
- Learn and use participants’ names
- Encourage hesitant members and equal participation
- Provide verbal and non-verbal support
- Listen actively and empathetically

3. Oversee Process

- Manage the overall schedule and individual speaking time
- Keep group focused on the topic
- Monitor emotional tone; challenge if too safe/protect if too intense
- Watch for power dynamics within group; prevent dominance of a single view or faction
- Reframe the experience of each side in words the other side can hear
- Model honesty and acknowledgement
- Gently challenge denial and obfuscation
- Avoid the temptation of group members to make all suffering equal
- Acknowledge injustice and oppression
- Uncover root causes of attitudes and behaviors
- Help each side move toward the other
- Recognize and highlight the interdependence between groups

4. Closing Phase

- Reflect on what has been learned
- Explore issues of retention, reinforcement, and practice
- Bring the dialogue experience home:
 - ▶ Maintaining internal shifts and changes
 - ▶ Communicating your experience in dialogue to others
 - ▶ Spreading the goals, values, and transformative possibilities of dialogue

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IMPORTANT TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE CO-FACILITATION

Created by *the Center for Women & Community at UMass-Amherst*

BEFORE THE WORKSHOP

- Schedule ample time for planning
- Take some time to get to know each other
- Discuss each other's style of planning and facilitating
- Avoid making assumptions about one another
- Take time to discuss your views about the workshop topic
- Especially examine areas of disagreement
- Discuss any concerns about potential challenges that participants may present
- Agree on common goals for workshop
- Review each other's triggers
- Find out whether and when it is okay to interrupt
- Decide how to keep track of time
- Strategize about how to stick to the original outline and how to switch gears
- Plan ways to give signals to one another
- Divide facilitation of activities fairly
- Share responsibility equally in preparing and bringing workshop materials and resources
- Agree to arrive at the workshop site in time to set up and check-in before the workshop begins
- Schedule time after the workshop to debrief

DURING THE WORKSHOP

- Remember to keep a professional demeanor at all times
- Keep communicating with each other throughout the workshop
- Support and validate one another
- During activities that don't require constant attention, check-in with one another
- Include your co-facilitator even when you are leading an exercise or discussion, by asking, for example: "Do you have anything to add?"
- Use lots of eye contact
- Assert yourself if your co-facilitator is talking too much
- Remember that it is okay to make mistakes
- Take the initiative to step in if your co-facilitator misses an opportunity to address a myth

AFTER THE WORKSHOP

- If you can't meet right after the workshop, schedule a time to debrief before you leave
- Listen carefully to one another's self-evaluation before giving feedback
- Discuss what worked well
- Examine what did not work
- Brainstorm what could have been done differently
- Use written evaluations as a reference point to talk about the workshop, and assess your effectiveness as co-facilitators
- Name particular behaviors, for example: "When you kept interrupting me, I felt undermined and frustrated", or "I got the impression that some participants were bored," instead of "You always interrupt me" or "You were very controlling during the workshop."
- Realize the importance and potential difficulty of debriefing a challenging workshop
- Make sure to share any clean-up or return of resource materials

REMEMBER: YOU HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE

ON STORY CIRCLES

by Dudley Cocke

Roadside Theater's original ensemble members grew up without television, immersed in a world of local narratives. That oral tradition, often in ballad form, is the most prominent feature of Appalachia's shared Scots-Irish heritage, and it has shaped the content and determined the form of the company's plays. If you have ever enjoyed the experience of sitting with friends and kin singing, spinning tales, and recounting oft-told histories, you can quickly grasp the roots of Roadside's approach to theater-making. The play's tellers sometimes carry the narrative, sometimes portray characters, and often call out a phrase in unison with lines suddenly doubling and overlapping within a general motif of call-and-response. In the company's Appalachian performance tradition, as well as in those with which its members have been invited to participate (the southern African American and Puerto Rican customs, for example), call-and-response includes the audience. The result is the rich choral effect of harmony and counterpoint that is group storytelling, whether on a front porch or in an auditorium.

Not only does oral tradition effectively generate content for building plays, but, after performances of the staged show, story circles with audience and cast participating provide a nuanced feedback loop for audience members to integrate a production's experience into their own lives, as well as for the presenting artists to deepen their understanding of their performance. As it happens, the sharing opportunities story circles represent continue the play's action into a new act, providing a way for participating community members to develop deeper individual and collective meaning of what they have experienced. Story circles also are effective at eliciting valuable feedback and understanding for performers and thereby contributing to enriching the possibilities for presentation of plays in the future.

Based on the experience of many such public circles, Roadside's members concluded that the stories people were able to tell themselves and others, those they could imagine and understand, defined not only what they perceive to have occurred, but what they thought could be possible in their individual and collective lives. In the course of communicating personal stories, difficulties in a community often rise to the surface, including issues from which its members are suffering.

For example, in 1995 Roadside staged a play in a rural Montana county in which residents were bitterly divided concerning a proposal to close the jurisdiction's last one-room school and to consolidate its small high schools into one larger entity to serve all of the county's teenagers. Many students and parents supported the change, but several older members of the community were strongly opposed. Participants in story circles held after Roadside's performances turned to this controversy as their topic. At first, younger people shared stories about difficulties getting the classes they needed to get into college. Then the first older person, a woman in her eighties, began her story with, "They just don't have good fights in [our] schools like they did when I was a girl." She went on to describe the Saturday night dances at the one room schools she had experienced as a teenager, and how some of

From Dudley Cocke, "Community Cultural Development as a Site of Joy, Struggle, and Transformation," in Arts and Community Change: Exploring Cultural Development Policies, Practices and Dilemmas, ed. Max Stephenson (Routledge, 2015). The full article is available at <https://archive.roadside.org/asset/community-cultural-development-site-joy-struggle-and-transformation>.

the young men would go outside to take a nip, and a fist fight over a girl would inevitably ensue, be broken up, and the event continued. She also painted a picture of weddings held at the schools during the summer full moon so participants could waltz in the moonlight. After her story, the next teller, a younger man with teenage children, said, "I couldn't understand why you were so against getting a better education for our children. Now I see that the old schools weren't just places to learn reading and writing, they were the heart of the community. If big consolidated schools can't be that, how can we develop heart another way?"

Because stories are powerful and can easily be used to dominate and exploit rather than to empower and enrich and to secure collective development, Roadside's members are very formal about how they employ story circles. In essence, the group sits in a circle, and each person tells a personal story based on a mutually agreed theme. A Roadside facilitator introduces the sharing by suggesting that narratives should have characters, a setting, some aspect of conflict, and a beginning, middle, and end. No one can join a story circle late, and everyone must participate. Calculated by the amount of time allotted for the circle divided by the number of participants, each person is asked to tell a story of approximately the same length. The experience begins when the first person starts and then moves to the individual to that person's right. Even if someone tells a controversial story, there is no cross talk in response. Participants must wait to respond through their own story. As the telling moves around the circle, one may pass if not ready to share, for the opportunity to speak will come around again.

As practiced by Roadside, the story circle encourages deep listening. Naturally when the circle's theme is decided, participants immediately begin thinking about what story they are going to tell. However, facilitators suggest that they not share the narrative that first comes to mind, but rather offer a story that arises from listening to those shared by others. There is no timekeeper, as each group will create its own rhythm — for example, after listening to the preceding story, the timing of beginning one's own account is the teller's choice. After everyone has told their story, the group reflects together, now allowing interpersonal dialogue, about what just happened. Were there common or strikingly divergent themes? Was there now a new narrative in the middle of the circle?

Story circles engender appreciation for the unique intellectual, emotional, and spiritual qualities of each participant, and develop oral expression and listening skills. Each individual's story is a present to those in the circle, with the quality of the listening also a gift in return to the storyteller.

Dudley Cocke was director of Roadside Theater from 1978 to 2018, and from 2012 to 2014 he simultaneously served as acting director of the Appalachian arts and humanities center Appalshop, of which Roadside is one part. Under his direction, the ensemble performed and conducted residencies in forty-eight states, with extended runs Off-Broadway, and represented the United States at international festivals across Europe. In addition to his primary responsibilities at Roadside, which included stage directing and playwriting, he was involved in a full range of nonprofit arts activity: His essays on arts and culture policy have been published nationally and internationally, he cofounded two national multicultural arts coalitions, he served on the boards of three private philanthropic foundations, and he was regularly tapped to advise the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. In 2002, he received the Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities.

A QUICK GUIDE TO FACILITATING A STORY CIRCLE*

1) ARRANGE THE CHAIRS in a pleasant, quiet space so everyone can see each other and there are no extra chairs.**

2) Ask everyone to PUT EVERYTHING AWAY, take everything off your lap, and silence cell phones.

3) Give a little BACKGROUND INFO:

- In some form and fashion, people have been sitting around telling stories since we learned to talk 100,000 or more years ago. Socrates believed the living word has a soul of which the written word is properly no more than an image — and he refused to write down any of his thoughts!
- The story circle methodology has roots in Civil Rights organizing. It was developed by **Junebug Productions**, which grew out of the theater wing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in collaboration with **Roadside Theater** in the Appalachian coalfields. Story circles have been used in playmaking and organizing in communities across the country.
- **In a story circle you will mostly listen:** the point is to listen intensely and meditatively, creating a space where all voices can be heard and valued equally.



4) Explain that story circles follow a formal PROCEDURE:

- **These instructions will end with a prompt**, which we will agree to as a group, based on what we are working to learn and create together: *Tell a personal story about...*
- After the facilitator gives the prompt, we'll spend some time together in **silence**, until **someone is moved to begin with a personal story** that responds to the prompt.
- After the first person is finished, **the person to that person's left** will tell a personal story that in some way responds *both to the prompt and the story the first person told*. And so on around the circle: each person will tell a story that responds to the prompt and the stories that have come before.
- When it gets to be your turn, **you're welcome to pass**. We'll come back around in the circle at the end to offer everyone who passed another chance to tell a story.
- After everyone's done, if there's time we'll go around again for more stories, then we'll open the space for **cross-talk** (open discussion) about what we've just heard and experienced, and about the new **story in the center of the circle** we've started to create together.

5) Offer a few storytelling GUIDELINES:

- **Tell a story.** A story has characters, a setting, and a beginning, middle, and end. It's not an argument, an analysis, an opinion, a rant, a sermon, a lecture, or an explanation. Don't tell us how to interpret the story at the end. Just tell the story, and trust us to hear you.

- **Tell a personal story**, about something you have experienced.
- **Tell a story that lasts about x minutes**, where x = total time available / # of participants, leaving some time at the end for cross-talk. *But we won't use a timer.*
- **Tell a story that contributes to the story we are making together in the center of the circle**, building on the stories we've heard so far. The goal is to express our collective experience, in all its complexity.
- **Be prepared to hear stories that may bother you, upset you, or offend you.** If this happens, remember that it's just other people's stories, from their experience. Listen generously, and then when your turn comes you can share a story from your own perspective.
- **Don't think of your story in advance.** The first story that comes into your head usually isn't the best one to share. Rather than holding onto a story, listen to the stories before you and see where the story in the middle of the circle goes. It might help to *assume you're going to pass*, when you're listening to the people who come before you — then when it's your turn, take a moment and see if a good story pops up. If not, go ahead and pass, and we'll come back to you.

6) Share a few final, important RULES:

- **No cross-talk.** Only talk when it's your turn to tell a story; otherwise, just listen.
- **Avoid commenting on others' stories** when telling your own.
- **Everyone in the room participates** in the story circle, including the facilitator. Story circles have no observers or audience.
- **No one enters or exits the room during a story circle**, except in case of emergency. Latecomers may not participate.
- **If the story circle is being recorded, when you are telling a story you may ask for the recorder to be shut off.**

7) Ask if anyone has QUESTIONS. Then remind everyone that after you repeat the prompt there'll be silence until someone (not the facilitator) breaks the silence with a first story. Finally, REPEAT THE MUTUALLY AGREED-UPON PROMPT—Tell a personal story...—and the story circle begins!

8) If all goes well during the story circle, *you won't need to say anything at all*, other than when you're sharing your own story. Just make eye contact with each teller to acknowledge them at the start and end of their stories. Speak only if necessary: to stop cross-talk, for example, or in case of emergency.

9) Once you've gone around the circle, and gone around again for people who've passed, offer everyone a few moments to breathe and stretch, then open the circle up for CROSS-TALK. *What did we hear? What struck us? What surprised us? What were the major points of common ground and tension?* And, critically: *what story did we hear beginning to take form in the middle of the circle?* Be sure to end with a short discussion of NEXT STEPS to take together, based on what we've learned.

* This guide is just a quick overview. For a deeper understanding of story circles, check out the many resources on story circles on Roadside Theater's website: <https://archive.roadside.org/program/story-circles>, including an article putting story circles in the context of grassroots-led, culture-driven art and community development: <https://archive.roadside.org/asset/community-cultural-development-site-joy-struggle-and-transformation>.

**For details on conducting story circles via videoconference—far from ideal, but certainly better than not doing a story circle at all—contact Ben Fink at ben.fink@gmail.com.

MORE TOOLS FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY ACROSS DIVIDES



10 LESSONS FROM THE LAB:

HOW TO HAVE CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS ON DIVISIVE TOPICS

> From the Lab of Dr. Peter T. Coleman and his team at the *Morton-Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution* - icccr.tc.columbia.edu

#1: It's right to feel anxious.

Encounters over divisive issues are an increasingly common experience in families and among friends and acquaintances across this country, which is happening at a time of **extraordinary political polarization** in our society (we have not been this polarized in our voting since just after the U.S. Civil War in 1879). So **anxiety is normal** and is probably shared by your counterparts.

#2: It's emotional.

The feelings associated with tribal intergroup polarization can be intense and personal and are typically unresponsive to facts, figures and logic (especially when science and the news media are under attack as fake). So **logical argumentation is often particularly unhelpful** in these conversations. What helps is **establishing a base of positivity**: Having or building relationships with others across the divide that have a sense of friendliness, trust, tolerance, rapport and, ideally, humor. But establishing these relations takes time.

#3: They've got a point.

Despite your disdainful feelings, there are usually valid points on both sides. The world is changing at a dizzying pace and sometimes it is reasonable to need to hold onto a sense of past tradition in the face of such tumult. And we need to begin to accept inevitable change and necessary reform. Big government and wasteful spending can have adverse consequences on the efficient functioning of our society. And we desperately need such safety net programs as Medicaid, Medicare and the Affordable Care Act to function as a nation. These are all basic dilemmas all societies face and they must be understood as **dilemmas with trade-offs**. It is the oversimplification of such challenges that distorts public understanding and impairs our leaders' abilities to find compromises or even integrative, win-win solutions.

#4: This divide is bigger than all of us.

The current divisions in our society have been widening since the early 1980s. 9/11, the war on terrorism and the world financial crisis and economic collapse all **turned the heat up on our collective sense of threat and anxiety**, which has hardened these divisions. But we are also getting played. Our politicians play up these divides. The news media plays them for ratings. Social media algorithms sort our attention toward those who think like us. And our more tribal tendencies to seek out like-minded people seals the deal. These forces combine to create extremely strong normative tides that are hard to resist. The question for each of us to consider is: **Are we OK with being played? How and when are we feeding into this process?**

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#5: Initial conditions matter.

Sometimes we have opportunities to reset. How we choose to begin the next tough conversation—**how we initially engage with others and frame the conversation**—can go a long way in determining the climate of that event. If we enter ready for battle with our talking points sharpened and our statistics drawn, then battle we will. While it isn't easy to change a strong pattern of interaction, consider what you might do to set a different course.

#6: It's complicated.

The more serious problems we face in our world are **immensely complicated matters**. Because this complexity makes us anxious we are often comforted by overly-simplistic solutions offered by our side. But solutions to these problems will always be mixed with both good and bad consequences. Recognizing this from the beginning forces us to demand remedies that are more **feasible and sustainable** and to be less susceptible to snake oil salesmen solutions.

#7: You're complicated.

We all have our own conflicting impulses and ideas and do things at times that go against our values and better intentions. Research shows that **being mindful of such contradictions within ourselves makes us more tolerant of people who are different from us**, and so better able to work with them on common problems.

#8: You see what you look for.

Even when you feel Like "truth" is on your side, remember our human tendency to selectively pay attention to information that supports what we already believe, and to avoid attending to information that challenges our beliefs—this is what psychologists call "confirmation bias," and we all do it. None of us are neutral in the way we take in information, and that's ok, as long as we know it and can account for it in ourselves with **humility, honesty, and a little disciplined openness**.

#9: Pay attention.

Research tells us that over 90% of our daily behaviors are automatic— things we do every day without thinking (like driving a car or reacting to our kids, neighbors, coworkers and family). **Many of our automatic behaviors contribute to widening our divisions**. So pay attention and **try something new**. When was the last time you listened respectfully to the POV of a member of the other party just to learn what they might have to offer? Not to sell or persuade or criticize or demean, but just to try to understand or discover something new?

#10: Believe in change.

Research has shown that **when people believe that others can change, they tend to approach them more cooperatively**, see more value in engaging with them and voicing their concerns, perform better in negotiations, and have lower levels of intergroup hatred and anxiety and more willingness to interact or compromise with members of outgroups. As Nelson Mandela said, **"It always seems impossible until it's done."**

Why do we avoid talking to each other across our ideological divides?

By Becca Bass

Why is it so hard to even talk to people with different ideologies? The fact that liberals and conservatives have trouble communicating gets a lot of attention in the media, and around the water cooler. While we see this happening all over the place, we still have a lot to learn about the forces at play when we resist listening to each other's perspectives.

In recent research, Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl (2017) explored the way that liberals and conservatives avoid interacting with ideologically different views on a range of issues, including same-sex marriage, abortion, gun control, and legalizing marijuana. They found that a majority of both liberals and conservatives avoid listening to opposing arguments on these issues. Why? First, researchers found that it was not because people were already informed about the other side. Instead, people on both sides of the liberal-conservative divide reported avoiding other opinions because they were afraid of experiencing negative emotions and afraid of the effort required to engage other views. Participants also indicated they were afraid of damaging a sense of shared reality, causing an argument, and hurting the relationship with a person with different views.

Given that lack of communication between liberals and conservatives threatens to further divide us, it is important to explore ways to identify and overcome some of the fear at the root of our avoidance. If fear of experiencing negative emotions and of damaging relationships deters people, maybe we need to ask: how do we make difference and dissonance less threatening to people? How do we foster a stronger belief in the constructive value of engaging with difference? Approaches that bring people together across lines of difference—like educational spaces and facilitated dialogue—could perhaps be helpfully informed by these findings. For example, facilitators could play a role in normalizing negative emotions, or find ways of modeling the possibility of maintaining relationships across difference. While the experience of fear can be paralyzing, it doesn't need to be. Perhaps understanding the fears that often drive our behaviors can help us create interventions that address, reduce, and ultimately overcome those obstacles.

Frimer, J. A., Skitka, L. J., and Motyl, M. (2017). Liberals and conservatives are similarly motivated to avoid exposure to one another's opinions. Journal of Experimental Psychology, 72. 1-12.

INTERGROUP CONTACT THEORY

By Jim A. C. Everett

In the midst of racial segregation in the U.S.A and the 'Jim Crow Laws', Gordon Allport (1954) proposed one of the most important social psychological events of the 20th century, suggesting that contact between members of different groups (under certain conditions) can work to reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict.

Indeed, the idea that contact between members of different groups can help to reduce prejudice and improve social relations is one that is enshrined in policy-making all over the globe. UNESCO, for example, asserts that contact between members of different groups is key to improving social relations. Furthermore, explicit policy-driven moves for greater contact have played an important role in improving social relations between races in the U.S.A, in improving relationships between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and encouraging a more inclusive society in post-Apartheid South Africa.

In the present world, it is this recognition of the benefits of contact that drives modern school exchanges and cross-group buddy schemes. In the years since Allport's initial intergroup contact hypothesis, much research has been devoted to expanding and exploring his contact hypothesis. In this article I will review some of the vast literature on the role of contact in reducing prejudice, looking at its success, mediating factors, recent theoretical extensions of the hypothesis and directions for future research. Contact is of utmost importance in reducing prejudice and promoting a more tolerant and integrated society and as such is a prime example of the real-life applications that psychology can offer the world.

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Condition	Meaning	Example	Evidence
Equal Status	Members of the contact situation should not have an unequal, hierarchical relationship.	Members should not have an employer/employee, or instructor/student relationship.	Evidence has documented that equal status is important both <i>prior</i> to (Brewer & Kramer, 1985) and <i>during</i> (Cohen & Lotan, 1995) the contact situation.
Cooperation	Members should work together in a non-competitive environment.	Students working together in a group project.	Aronson's 'jigsaw technique' structures classrooms so that students strive cooperatively (Aronson & Patnoe, 1967), and this technique has led to positive results in a variety of countries.
Common Goals	Members must rely on each other to achieve their shared desired goal.	Members of a sports team.	Chu and Griffey (1985) have shown the importance of common goals in interracial athletic teams who need to work together to achieve their goal.
Support by Social and Institutional Authorities	There should not be social or institutional authorities that explicitly or implicitly sanction contact, and there should be authorities that support positive contact.	There should not be official laws enforcing segregation.	Landis' (1984) work on the importance of institutional support in reducing prejudice in the military.

Source: Intergroup Contact Theory: A summary of the foundation and history of dialogue work.

To read the complete article, go to: www.in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR TOPICAL CONVERSATIONS

Developed by Essential Partners — whatisessential.org

Dialogue on Gender Expectations

- Talk about a gender expectation or a stereotype of your gender that makes it easier for you to be who you really are in public spaces and/or the workplace.
- Talk about a gender expectation or stereotype of your gender that makes it harder for you to be who you really are in public spaces and/or the workplace.
- Share an experience of your gender in public spaces and/or the workplace that highlights something you would want to address, change, or explore further.

Dialogue on Experiencing Racial / Ethnic Differences

- What life experience has most significantly taught you about encounters across racial/ethnic difference?
- Share an experience that you've had when you became aware that race, ethnicity, or bias about another core identity was a significant factor in your work and/or personal life.
- Share an experience you have had with people of different races or ethnicities that left you feeling hopeful for you and this campus or higher educational community?
- Share an experience that left you feeling there was still work to do.
- What is a place you see a need or an opportunity for this campus or higher educational community to further relationships across differences of race or ethnicity?
- What are resources in your community that could address that need or opportunity?

Dialogue on Guns and Gun Violence

- Could you tell us about a life experience that has shaped your beliefs about firearms and firearm issues?
- When you think about the proper role of firearms in communities, what's at the heart of the matter for you?
- What do you most care about?
- Most people, within their overall conviction and values commitments on issues like this, have some areas of less certainty or places where they feel pulled in different directions, whether by competing values, feelings or relationships with others. Could you speak about places where this might be true for you on this issue?

Dialogue on Electoral Politics or a Specific Political Issue

- Can you share a formative personal experience that shaped your current political beliefs or partisan identity?
- What has your relationship been to the issue / the politician / the political group?
- Can you share an experience that caused you to re-examine your beliefs, whether you did or did not ultimately change your position?
- In what ways have you felt out of step with the party or groups you generally support? In what ways do those groups not fully reflect what's important to you?

50 QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK FRIENDS AND RELATIVES IN POLITICAL ARGUMENTS

By Kenneth Cloke, Center for Dispute Resolution

In the aftermath of the election, when talking with friends and relatives we may find ourselves disagreeing with—in addition to the substantive points we want to make, here are 50 questions we can ask to help make our conversations more interesting and productive.

1. What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so passionately about this issue?
2. Where do your beliefs come from? Family? Church? Work?
3. What do you think your beliefs might be if you had been born into a different family, religion, race, gender, class, or time?
4. What is at the heart of this issue, for you as an individual?
5. Why do you care so much about this issue?
6. Do you see any gray areas in the issue we are discussing, or ideas you find it difficult to define?
7. Do you have any mixed feelings, doubts, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding this issue that you would be willing to share?
8. Is there any part of this issue that you are not 100% certain of or would be willing to discuss and talk about?
9. What questions or points of curiosity do you have for people who have different views?
10. What are some of the key words or phrases that divide us?
11. What are some of the key words or phrases that unite us?
4. What are some “hot button” political words or phrases for you?
5. How would you define each of those words or phrases? What do they mean, suggest, or imply to you? Why? What experiences have you had with them?
6. What emotions do you experience, or get triggered by, with each set of words?
7. Do you think other definitions, meanings, experiences, or emotions are possible? How?
8. What do you think our conversation would be like if we decided not to use the words that divide us or trigger us emotionally? Are you willing to try, right now?
9. Even though we hold widely differing views, are there any concerns or ideas you think we may have in common?
10. What underlying values or ethical beliefs have led you to your current political beliefs?
11. Do the differences between our positions reveal any riddles, paradoxes, contradictions, or enigmas regarding this issue?
12. What facts, if proven to be true, might cause you to think differently?
13. Is it possible to view our differences as two sides of the same coin? If so, what unites them? What’s the coin?
14. Without discussing either of our preferred candidates, what principles do you believe the candidate you support stands for? Why are those principles important to you?
15. What are your goals for this election, other than to elect the candidate you support? Why are those goals important to you?

16. How might we extend those principles and goals to this conversation we are having right now?
17. What do these principles and goals require of us, in the way we treat each other, or how we talk to each other about the candidates we each support?
18. What forms of political argument or support do you feel are ineffective, counter-productive, or encourage you to resist?
19. What forms of political argument or support do you feel are effective, productive, or encourage you to think and learn from those you disagree with?
20. What ideals or principles do you think both candidates share?
21. What do you think will happen if our arguments or support become too adversarial or confrontational?
22. How might we work together to prevent that from happening?
23. Can you separate political issues from the people who hold them?
24. Is there anything positive or acknowledging you would be willing to say about the people on the other side of this issue?
25. Instead of focusing on the past, what would you like to see happen in the future? Why?
26. Do you think we are disagreeing about fundamental values, or over how to achieve them?
27. Is there any way that both of us could be right about different aspects of the issue? How?
28. What criteria could you use to decide which ideas or approaches work best?
29. What processes or ground rules could help us disagree more constructively?
30. Would it be possible to test our ideas in practice and see which work best? How might we do that?
31. What could be done to improve each of our ideas?
32. Could any of my ideas be incorporated into yours? How?
33. Is there any aspect of this issue that either of us have left out? Are there any other alternatives to what we are both saying?
34. What other information would be useful, or would you like to have in order to address some of these questions we have discussed?
35. What could we do to improve our process for disagreeing with each other in the future? For encouraging future dialogue? Would you be willing to do that together?
36. Do you think this has been a useful and constructive conversation? If so, how? If not, what could we do better?
37. What is one thing I could do that would make this conversation work better for you?
38. Would you like to know one thing you could do that would make it work better for me? Are you willing to do that next time we talk?
39. What made you willing to participate in this conversation? Why did you agree to talk with me, even though we disagree?
40. What did you learn from our conversation?
41. What would you like to do differently in the future if we disagree? How could we make our dialogue ongoing or more effective?
42. Do you think it would be useful to continue this conversation, to learn more from each other and what we each believe to be true?

Summary:

PITFALLS OF DIALOGUE, by Jonathan Kuttab*

1. Assumption of symmetry

Acknowledge asymmetry of power, privilege, opportunity, and rights. This includes the right to opportunity, safety, dignity, and equality.

2. Ignore basic conflict issues

Seek truth rigorously without attempts at accommodation. We try to accommodate because dialoguers are nice people but we have to keep our entire societies in mind and not just those in the dialogue circle. We cannot talk about shared dreams and customs while ignoring the major oppressions, conflicts, and structural injustices in the society.

3. Accept the status quo as the basis for building a future

In many circumstances, the status quo is not acceptable and cannot be the basis for the future. Question legitimacy.

4. Pressure to compromise genuine principles

Avoid panaceas and platitudes that minimize real differences in attempts to please the other side. Resist pressure to say things you are not sure are true. Do not pressure others to make statements or alter positions in order to be accepted or pleasing.

5. Dialogue as substitute for action

Do not pretend that dialogue is action. Acknowledge dialogue as a first and essential step. Dialogue does not by itself establish justice or bring peace. Social change requires committed engagement.



**Kuttab is a Palestinian lawyer and human rights activist. Reprinted from Conflict Resolution Notes, January 1998, pp 25-26*

THREE APPROACHES TO MAKING CHANGE

Openly Elitist (Paper), Pseudo-Populist (Scissors), and Populist (Rock)

	OPENLY ELITIST (those dedicated to top-down change, including traditionalist and corporate conservatives, as well as technocratic liberals and progressives)	PSEUDO-POPULIST (left- and right-wing sectarians who claim to speak for the people, who are usually supported, and often fully controlled, by elites)	POPULIST (organizations and alliances that create the conditions for all the people in a community to speak for themselves and act together)
Basic activity	Administration	Consumption	Co-creation
Approach to public life	Advocacy	Mobilizing	Organizing
Approach to value	Deficit-based, functionalist (masses have needs, elite fulfills them)	Deficit-based, conflict-based (out-groups must be devalued for in-group to be properly valued)	Commonwealth-based (everyone contributes; everyone's contribution enhances the value of the whole)
Change is made through	Institutions	Media, protest	Communities' centers of power
Change is made by	Professionals and entrepreneurs	Activists and advocates	Communities' leaders and broad-based organizations
Culture is understood as	Amenity, market value	Messaging	Meaning-making
Approach to culture	Elite-made, elite-consumed	Elite-made, mass-consumed	Folk/local: of, by, and for the people
Makers (or, the solution)	The elite (corporate, scientific, government, moral, etc.)	The in-group (ideological, racial, geographical, etc.)	The people (co-creators of the commonwealth)
Takers (or, the problem)	The masses	The out-groups	The organized exploiters (plunderers of the commonwealth)
"Community" is understood as	Demographic / administrative categories	Identity categories, affinity groups	People in a place who make things together and own what they make
"Oppression" is understood as	A deficit of service, resources, privilege, representation	A standoff between fixed identity categories (villains vs. victims)	A shifting, contextual relationship among people and groups
How to solve problems (including oppression)	Unify the elite and administer solutions	Unify the in-group and defeat the out-groups	Unify the people and co-create solutions

	OPENLY ELITIST (those dedicated to top-down change, including traditionalist and corporate conservatives, as well as technocratic liberals and progressives)	PSEUDO-POPULIST (left- and right-wing sectarians who claim to speak for the people, who are usually supported, and often fully controlled, by elites)	POPULIST (organizations and alliances that create the conditions for all the people in a community to speak for themselves and act together)
Power is	Given	Taken	Built
Power is exercised	Top-down	Through charismatic leaders and vanguards	Bottom-up
Style	Enlightened pessimism	Anger, outrage, grievance	Prophetic hope
Ordinary people and traditions are	Disdained	Heroes and victims (in-groups), villains (out-groups)	Loved (but not uncritically)
Poor, working-class, and rural areas are	Home of the helpless and/or deplorable	Holy ground (home of the in-group), despised (home of out-groups)	A crucial part of who we are: where this country and its wealth were built
Approach to knowledge	Received orthodoxy (consensus of elites)	Counter-orthodoxy (propaganda, memes, conspiracy theories)	Curiosity, inquiry, skepticism toward all orthodoxy
Approach to education	Formal education (learn from elite)	Indoctrination (learn from in-group's charismatic leaders and vanguard)	Popular education (learn from and teach each other)
How to become more powerful	Scale a model	Generate outrage	Build alliances
Work across difference is understood as	Service, charity, engagement	Intersectionality (left-wing variants); Weakness (right-wing variants)	Solidarity
Government is	A necessary check on the people	The enemy	Of, by, and for the people: an unfulfilled ideal
Culture war is	A necessary struggle to protect what's right	An existential struggle to survive	A manufactured distraction
End goal is	Technocracy, corporatocracy, meritocracy	Restructure society on terms dictated by the in-group: social justice (left-wing variants); national socialism (right-wing variants)	Democracy

BUILDING A PUBLIC NARRATIVE

Public narrative is a framework for sharing ourselves in a way that helps us build powerful *public relationships*—the kind of relationships we need in order to co-create and organize effectively.

We draw from our public narrative whenever we share personal stories in public: in one-to-one relational meetings, in community meetings, in story circles, in speeches at public events, and in all other kinds of interactions with coworkers, clients, elected officials, and other neighbors.

The difference between public narratives and other kinds of personal story-sharing is that **public narratives are carefully crafted, intentional, and controlled**. Public narratives aren't sharing for its own sake, or for the sake of making friends, getting sympathy, or asking for help. **Public narratives are sharing in order to co-create and build power together with our neighbors.**

Organizer and teacher Marshall Ganz, who developed the idea of public narrative, says an effective public narrative has three parts. Each part answers one of the three questions posed 2000 years ago by Rabbi Hillel in Jerusalem:

1. *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*
2. *If I am for myself alone, what am I?*
3. *If not now, when?*

In other words:

1. **The story of self.** *Stories of self* show people who you are, where you come from, what matters to you, and why you do what you do. Effective *stories of self* revolve around a moment where you *faced a challenge, made a choice, experienced the results of that choice, and learned an important lesson.*
2. **The story of us.** *Stories of us* connect our stories of self to some kind of bigger “us” that includes both ourselves and the people we’re talking with when we’re telling the story. That “us” could be a community, an organization, a town, a state, a nation, a line of work, or anything else that the people hearing our story will see themselves as part of. Effective *stories of us* demonstrate who we *all* are, where we *all* come from, what matters to *all of us*, and why we *all* do what we do.
3. **The story of now.** *Stories of now* bring “us” into the present moment—a moment where together, we *face a challenge and have a choice to make.* Effective *stories of now* urge us to take action together, and draw on our shared stories and values to offer hope for how we can overcome the challenge and make change together.

Our stories of self, us, and now continue to develop as we continue to develop ourselves, our communities, and our work. Our public narrative is the “bank” of stories we have to draw from, always taking care to select appropriate stories and adapt them depending on the situation we’re in and the person/people we’re talking with. Like all other principles of co-creation and organizing, the structure of a public narrative is just a guide—take what’s useful and leave the rest!

CREATING PARTICIPATORY GROUPS

Participatory Groups:	Conventional Groups:
Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.	The fastest thinkers and most articulate speakers get more air time.
People give each other room to think and get their thoughts all the way out.	People interrupt each other on a regular basis.
Opposing viewpoints are allowed to coexist in the room.	Differences of opinion are treated as conflict that must either be stifled or “solved”.
People drew each other out with supportive questions. ‘Is this what you mean?’	Questions are often perceived as challenges, as if the person being questioned has done something wrong.
Each member makes the effort to pay attention to the person speaking.	Unless the speaker captivates their attention, people space out, doodle or check the clock.
People are able to listen to each other’s ideas because they know their own ideas will also be heard.	People have difficulty listening to each other’s ideas because they’re busy rehearsing what they want to say.
Each member speaks up on matters of controversy. Everyone knows where everyone stands.	Some members remain quiet on controversial matters. No one really knows where everyone stands.
Members can accurately represent each other’s points of view – even when they don’t agree with them.	People rarely give accurate representations of the opinions and reasoning of those whose opinions are at odds with their own.
People refrain from talking behind each other’s backs.	Because they don’t feel permission to be direct during the meeting, people talk behind each other’s backs outside the meeting.
Even in the face of opposition from the person in-charge, people are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs.	People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.
A problem is not considered solved until everyone who will be affected by the solution understands the reasoning.	A problem is considered solved as soon as the fastest thinkers have reached an answer. Everyone else is then expected to “get on board” regardless of whether they understand the logic of the decision.
When people make an agreement, it is assumed that the decision still reflects a wide range of perspectives.	When people make an agreement, it is assumed that they are all thinking the exact same thing.

From Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-making, by Kaner, Lind, Fisk, Berger, and Toldi

RESOURCES FOR CONTINUED LEARNING

Two key articles:

- “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” by Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp: researchgate.net/publication/7046266_A_Meta-Analytic_Test_of_Intergroup_Contact_Theory
- “Community Dialogue Guide: Conducting a Discussion on Race,” by the US Department of Justice Community Relations Service, permanent.fdlp.gov/lps62440/dialogueguide.pdf

Organizations with useful resources:

- Karuna Center for Peacebuilding (karunacenter.org) – free training guides
- Sustained Dialogue Institute (sustaineddialogue.org) – issue sheets for topical conversations on identity-based topics
- Essential Partners (whatisessential.org/our-method) – free dialogue guides
- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (ncdd.org) – many free resources
- Minnesota Bureau of Mediation Services (mn.gov/bms) – resources for difficult conversations
- Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (gppac.net) – globally-focused resources including “Multi-Stakeholder Processes for Conflict Prevention & Peacebuilding: A Manual”
- The Dialogue Company (thediologuecompany.com)
- Department of Justice Community Relations Service (justice.gov/crs) – trainings and interventions
- Alliance for Peacebuilding (allianceforpeacebuilding.org) – membership, conference, focus on evidence-based dialogue practices
- WEAVE at the Aspen Institute (aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/) – mailing list and tools
- Beyond Conflict (beyondconflictint.org) – videos, scientific data

Other online resources:

- Living Room Conversations – conversation agreements: livingroomconversations.org/conversation_agreements
- Conversation Café – principles for conversation: conversationcafe.org/principles-for-conversation-cafes

- Convergence – collaboration guide: convergencepolicy.org/how-we-work/approach
- Listen First Project – conversation guide: listenfirstproject.org/tips
- Essential Partners – guide for conversations across the red-blue divide: whatisessential.org/resources/ep-guide-conversations-across-red-blue-divide
- Organizing Community Wide Dialogue for Action and Change - guide: slideshare.net/slideshow/organizing-communitywide-dialogue-for-action-and-change/64359107
- Transforming the Color of US Peacebuilding - Types of Dialogue to Protect and Advance Multiracial Democracy: toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/policy-briefs/transforming-the-colour-of-us-peacebuilding-types-of-dialogue-to-protect-and-advance-multi-racial-democracy.html
- One America Movement – “How to Talk to Your Neighbor” guide: oneamericamovement.org/download-ttyn-guide
- “Public Dialogue and Deliberation: A Communication Perspective for Public Engagement Practitioners”: beltanenetwork.org/resources/beltane-publications
- “Can Deep Listening Heal Our Divisions?”: greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_deep_listening_heal_our_divisions
- Teamwork and Teamplay – active learning exercises: teamworkandteamplay.com/resources.html
- “Race in America” – dialogue guide from Essential Partners: whatisessential.org/resources/race-america-free-dialogue-guide
- “Fostering Dialogue Across Divides,” from Essential Partners: whatisessential.org/resources/fostering-dialogue-across-divides

Book recommendations:

- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen
- *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact*, by T. F. Pettigrew and L. R. Tropp
- *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical, Hands-On Guide*, by Lisa Schirch and David Campt
- *The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics*, by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright

Appendix II

A Bibliography of Articles, Stories, Documentaries, & Other Media about Hands Across the Hills

Many articles and recordings are archived on the Hands Across the Hills website:
handsacrossthehills.org

The material in this book includes excerpts from some of the radio and print sources listed here, new pieces written by participants, and unpublished phone interviews with Laura Cyan Anderson.

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Recorded Dialogues, Events, & Presentations by Participants

Confidentiality was a fundamental agreement among participants in Hands Across the Hills dialogues, though participants could discuss the experience without naming names or with specific permission. A few dialogues and discussions were held publicly online, and are included in this list.

- December 18, 2017: **Presentation by Hands Across the Hills participants in Leverett**, recorded by Amherst Media: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOFXM7eUeUo>.
- May 15, 2018: **Presentation by Hands Across the Hills participants in Leverett**, recorded by Amherst Media: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oS-G2ATCMa0>.
- October 25, 2018 (written remarks): **Paula Green accepts the Melanie Greenberg United States Peacebuilding Award of Excellence** on behalf of Hands Across the Hills: <https://www.paulagreen.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AF-P-Award-Talk-with-Bio.pdf>
- December 15, 2018 (written remarks): **"Bridge Building in Divided America: One Small Step in Tikkun Olam, Repairing the World,"** a d'var Torah talk by Tom Wolff at the Jewish Community of Amherst. <https://www.handsacrossthehills.org/single-post/2018/12/27/bridge-building-in-divided-america-one-small-step-in-tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world>
- December 9, 2020: Paula Green & Gwen Johnson speak at the **Institute for Healthcare Improvement** 31st Annual Forum. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaFI0axnpTQ>
- Dec. 13, 2020: Paula Green, Ben Fink and Gwen Johnson speak at the retreat of the **Tom Porter Program for Religion and Conflict Transformation** at Boston University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7RJnWzNnL4>
- February 10, 2021: **Dialogue held over Zoom** among participants in Letcher County, KY and Leverett, MA, facilitated by Paula Green. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERXajEyjgn8>
- March 23, 2021: Paula Green and Ben Fink speak at a Karuna Center for Peacebuilding event: **"The Power of Dialogue: Finding Friendship & Joy in Unpredictable Relationships."** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sr86fhNqAS8>
- April 6, 2021: **"Guns, Coal, Vaccines, and Abortion: East KY Meets Western MA,"** a live virtual encounter between Kip Fonsh of Leverett, MA and Gwen Johnson of Letcher County, KY, moderated by Ben Fink. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVe-O9-6gko>
- April 16, 2021: Paula Green and Gwen Johnson speak at the annual meeting of the **Center for Nonviolent Solutions** in Worcester, MA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWsX1QvwFU>
- May 27, 2021: **"Can We Trust the Government?"** — a live virtual conversation between Mike Gover and Gwen Johnson of Letcher County, KY and Kip Fonsh and Pat Fiero of Leverett, MA, moderated by Ben Fink. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xuc7uCXRxT0>
- March 13, 2022: **Building Bridges: a Zoom evening of song in honor of Paula Green**, led by Sarah Pirtle, Gwen Johnson and Ben Fink of Hands Across the Hills, and Eric Law of Kaleidoscope Institute. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9o-VghfTSIQ>



February 10, 2021 dialogue on Zoom among Hands Across the Hills participants



THIS IS THE STORY of how residents of two small communities, a thousand miles apart and on opposite sides of the political divide, became friends and neighbors. Letcher County, Kentucky, deep in the Appalachian coalfields, had voted 80% for Donald Trump in 2016, while Leverett, Massachusetts, in the heart of more affluent New England, had voted 80% for Hillary Clinton. A few months after the election, through sheer coincidence, the people of Leverett and Letcher County found each other — and they never let go. For the next six years they visited each other, supported both their communities, and worked through the hard stuff. And while the formal project has ended, the relationships remain.

This collection of primary documents, first-person reflections, and original analysis from participants in the Hands Across the Hills project offers stories and lessons about how we Americans have been divided against ourselves, and what we can do about it together.

"I learned so much from listening to the perspectives of rural Kentuckians whose lives are so different from mine. But even more meaningfully.... on the darkest of days, when too much time on Twitter made me want to pull the covers over my head and wail, seeing the deep human connections Hands Across the Hills made across lines of difference restored my faith in humanity."

— Erica Etelson, Co-Founder, Rural Urban Bridge Initiative

"The Hands Across the Hills project exemplified the best of peacebuilding in the U.S. after the 2016 election. It was not a ready model imposed on communities, but a program built by communities in Massachusetts and Kentucky to form a trusted partnership to understand and mitigate increasing polarization in the United States."

— Elizabeth (Liz) Hume, Executive Director, Alliance for Peacebuilding

"Hands Across the Hills is different from any other organization or dialogue group I've ever worked with. The personal connections, humanity, and leadership are remarkable. I believe the wisdom embodied in so many participants will transform all our communities into better places for everyone."

— Johanna Solomon, School of Peace and Conflict Studies, Kent State University