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Making, Keeping, and Revitalizing the Arts in Appalachia

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Abstract

The arts are essential to the health, the very life, of the community (Anderson, 2003). Arts administrators and artists have long known this, but in the past fifteen years or so the term *Creative Placemaking* has taken hold in the arts, urban planning, and community development circles. Creative Placemaking also occurs in rural communities, far from urban planners, cultural districts, and gentrifying groups. This paper explores the country's first County Extension Agent for the Arts and the success of her Creative Placemaking in Pike County, Kentucky, a coal mining community of 63,000.

Tom Anderson (2003) argued that the arts are essential for a community's "social wholeness and cultural health" (p. 65). In articulating this, Anderson champions what Rocco Landesman later termed *creative placemaking* (Webb, 2014). As the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) white paper on creative placemaking stated, the arts are front and center in the social, economic, and cultural wellbeing of the community, instigating and supporting community development in equal partnership with other economic and community drivers

The UK Fine Arts Extension Program is the first such program in the United State; thus it may serve as a model for other Extension programs and for rural communities without Extension offices

(Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Many creative placemaking initiatives exist in urban settings, but others occur in rural locations, as *The Art of the Rural* website documents. This paper examines the development of the University of Kentucky (UK) Cooperative Extension Agents for the Fine Arts, focusing on its creative placemaking initiatives, its successes and challenges, specifically in the rural community of Pike County, Kentucky. The UK Fine Arts Extension Program is the first such program in the United State; thus, it may serve as a model for other Extension programs and for rural communities without Extension offices ([UK Pike Extension History](#)).

Methodology

This study employs qualitative interviews with arts agents, their program coordinator, deans at UK, and College of Fine Arts (CFA) faculty who were involved in the project. Interviews were conducted three ways; in person, via the telephone, and by email. Additionally, the study makes use of annual reports, promotional literature, newsletters, and websites created by the arts extension agents. Materials were provided by the agents or their supervisor and I also gathered information from stakeholder meetings and through attending Pike County events.

This investigation is driven by two questions: 1.) What makes the UK Fine Arts Extension initiative successful? 2.) Can this initiative serve as a model for other arts and community leaders? At one time, Fine Arts agents worked in five different counties: Pike, Greenup, Whitley, Muhlenberg and Boyd. However, due to limited funding only three counties remain in the program—Pike, Greenup, and Whitley. As indicated, this study focuses on the Pike County program, and specifically, on the most successful of its projects, the Artists Collaborative Theatre.

The data was cross-checked against information from other sources whenever possible. However, due to one of the originator's retirement and another's death, the ability to follow up on some of the information, particularly regarding the project's inception, was limited. Additionally, this study may be limited by my tangential involvement in the program during its initial phase, and therefore, by my familiarity with some of its participants. To help mitigate these limitations, this study was reviewed by a number of individuals, both stakeholders and those not involved in the program. In reviewing the materials and information gathered from interviews, several themes emerged: the importance of personality, the reality of politics; and, the need for partnerships.

Literature Review

Since the publication of the NEA white paper on creative placemaking (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010), articles and websites have documented creative placemaking activities. ArtPlace, a consortium of funders, have also encouraged creative placemaking projects with documentation. Gadwa Nicodemus (2014) identified a number of rural communities in which successful creative placemaking has occurred demonstrating that rural areas offer unique resources through a sense of community and distinctive culture. While a number of studies describe urban programs, *The Art of the Rural* specifically focuses on the arts within the rural landscape. Schupbach (2015) found that ensuring artists participated in a city's planning process led to stronger outreach and awareness of the community's possible contributions. Forman and Creighton (2012) identified the multiple benefits of urban creative placemaking, including local spending, positive rebranding, ability to attract talent, and a more nimble economy. Bedoya (2013) challenged the notion of creative placemaking. He insisted on the need to keep community members, their needs, assets, and ideas in the forefront of any community arts activity. Bedoya (2013) emphasized the "aesthetics of belonging" as essential to the process of what he called creative placekeeping (para. 12). Allen, Bowker, Stamper, Owusu-Amankwah, and Davis (2014) assessed the creative placemaking activities in five counties in Kentucky. The results of this investigation revealed that Kentuckians valued the creative placemaking activities in their communities. This Kentucky study affirmed Gadwa Nicodemus' findings that creative placemaking succeeds in rural locations.

Background

In 1914 Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act that established the Agricultural Cooperative Extension Program, a part of higher education's land grant mission. The act specifically charged universities with applying their expertise to help meet the needs of communities around their states (USDA Extension History, ND, para. 5). Federal, state, and county

dollars funded the Program. These Extension programs, organized through the universities' colleges of agriculture, employed agents to work with community members to identify problems and solutions and to serve as a link to the resources of the university. During the Great Depression, Cooperative Extension expanded its programs to teach farm families, specifically women, about nutrition, home poultry production, canning, home nursing and related home skills (USDA Extension History, ND, para. 6). As the population of the United States moved from farms and ranches to urban and suburban locations, specific Cooperative Extension initiatives expanded to meet community needs (USDA Extension History, ND, para. 8).

There are four main Extension Program divisions: 4-H Youth Program, Family and Consumer Sciences, Agricultural and Natural Resources, and Community and Economic Development. Due to economic factors, the total number of agents who serve these programs has declined in recent years (J. Henning, personal communication, 2016), but Extension offices remain in or near the approximately 3,000 counties in the nation (USDA Extension History para 10).

The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Program specifically serves as a link between the university and the 120 counties of the Commonwealth. The Extension mission seeks to improve the lives of community members through educational processes thereby helping people help themselves (UK Extension). The Extension office organizes the 120 counties into seven districts, each with a supervisor and with program coordinators who work with the various divisions (UK Extension). The Kentucky Extension Program maintains the four primary Extension divisions in each of these counties. Three of these counties also offer Fine Arts programs. Because of its creative placemaking mission, the Fine

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In 2005 Robert Shay, the dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Kentucky, collaborated with Scott Smith, Dean of the College of Agriculture, and Larry Turner, associate dean and head of the Extension Program at UK, to actualize Shay's idea of an Extension Agent for the arts. Shay et al. (2005) hypothesized that an arts agent could help

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develop a rural community's arts and artists, and by extension, the community's economy. Arts agents would provide information, advice, and resources in much the same way agricultural agents helped farmers with research and business solutions. Shay et al. (2005) reviewed possible counties for their pilot project based on three criteria: a high poverty rate, limited or no access to the professional arts, and funding for an agent's salary (counties provide Extension agents' salaries). Several counties met the first two of the criteria but lacked sufficient funding. Pike County, in the Kentucky Appalachian region, met all the criteria.

Community

Pike County is a community of 786 square miles of mountains and "hollers" (i.e. hollows) that sits on the Kentucky-Virginia border. Few roads connect towns within the county. The population density is 82 persons per square mile with 63,000 total residents, 98% of whom are white (U.S. Census Quickfacts, n.d.). As with many Appalachian towns, coal is the major employer, but employment opportunities have declined with changes in the industry. Per capita income stands at \$19,351, and the poverty level is 23.4% (U.S. Census Quickfacts, n.d.). Abuse of prescription and illicit drugs presents a serious challenge in many communities in the region ("Now, It's Heroin," 2014).

Pike County has many assets. Affluent individuals, including a former governor, physicians, and coal operators, reside there. The University of Pikeville offers a range of degrees in arts,

sciences, business, education and osteopathic medicine which complement the programs at the community and technical college. Pikeville Medical Center, a 261-bed hospital, connects to the Mayo Clinic Care Network. The Eastern Kentucky Expo Center (a 7,000 seat facility) located in Pikeville, the county seat, (population approximately 7,000), presents various entertainments and hosts conferences. According to the Community Profile in *The Lane Report* (n.d.), Norm Crampton lists Pikeville in both editions of his book *100 Best Small Towns in America* (p. 2). The Breaks Interstate Park (between Kentucky and Virginia), known as the “Grand Canyon of the South,” attracts hikers and vacationers (Breaks Park, n.d.). The arts, especially music, storytelling, and crafts, are part of the cultural practices and traditions of the region. However, many of these individuals take these skills for granted and do not consider themselves to be artists (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015).

Organizational Challenges

Shay et al. (2005) encountered a number of problems in establishing what was an innovative, and thus unfamiliar, program. Without a model to help explain the role of the arts agent, Shay et al. (2005) found that it was difficult to get “buy-in” from some individuals (R. Shay, personal communication, 2012). Extension personnel did not understand how the arts could complement or integrate into their work (Allen et al., 2014). Some community members were wary of “do-gooders” from the university who might come into town for a specific reason only to leave shortly thereafter (R. Shay, personal communication, 2012). Others questioned the value of using limited resources to support the arts (Allen et al., 2014). Given that funding for the salary came directly from the county, local officials had to agree with the allocation of funding for the arts agent’s salary. (A vacant Pike County Extension agent position meant that new funding sources were not needed.) The initiative also required community and business support.

To help overcome some of these challenges, Shay et al. (2005) enlisted the help of the most important county leader, the County Judge Executor, who became a prominent ally and helped stimulate support for the project (R. Shay, personal communication, 2012). Most Extension agents are native to the communities they serve. Finding a local individual with artistic and organizational skills, and with the ability to work within the parameters of the Cooperative Extension Program, proved to be another challenge.

Results

The UK Extension standard hiring process was used for the Fine Arts position (S. Smith, personal communication, 2005). Smith, Shay, and Tuner (2005) reviewed the applications and interviewed the candidates. They hired Stephanie Richards, a Pike County native, who

was in the process of relocating from Chicago to her hometown of Elkhorn City in eastern Pike County. Richards's credentials included three theatre degrees (in acting and directing; one from UK), professional theatre experience, plus experience in building arts partnerships and creating educational arts programs in other parts of the country. Richards also possessed charisma, personal energy, and well-developed listening skills (R. Shay, personal communication, 2005). She felt passionate about her community, its people, and the mountains (S. Richards, personal communication, 2007).

Richards began in January of 2006 and started to meet with various community and business leaders, artists, other extension agents, and other individuals in the community. Once it was discovered that she was "Peggy and Tommy's little girl," the attitude of some individuals with whom she met changed from suspicion of an outsider to the consideration of a neighbor (S. Richards, personal communication, 2011). Because Richards had developed arts and educational programs elsewhere, she was able to draw upon those experiences to begin formulating the program that would become "Pike Arts." As required by the Extension Program, she formed board of directors and a mission for Pike Arts. Given the size and inaccessibility of parts of the county, Richards and the board divided the county into four major sections to reach the greatest number of people and to address the somewhat different resources and challenges of each quadrant. In the first few years, Richards branded Pike Arts, created a database of artists, a newsletter promoting arts events, programs to assist artists, a venue for visual artists, and school programs. (Within a year of starting Pike Arts, the governor recognized Richards and Pike Arts' contribution to the vitality of the county by awarding her the Governor's Award for the Arts.) In 2008 Richards founded the Artists Collaborative Theatre (ACT), the subject of this study.

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Artists Collaborative Theatre

ACT is located in Richards's hometown of Elkhorn City in eastern Pike County. Elkhorn City has a population of approximately 951, a 30% poverty rate, and a per capita income of \$20,306 (City Data, n.d.). Richards serves as ACT's executive director in addition to her other duties as Extension agent. This all-volunteer community theatre presents 16 performances of eight different shows plus school matinees throughout the year (a total of 715 performances serving 50,050 audience members in its years of operation). ACT utilizes a \$400,000 black box theatre, built with Coal Severance Tax funds, which Richards acquired (*ACT Newsletter*, 2014, p. 10). The theatre operates within its budget of approximately \$100,000, with every production meeting its expenses or making a profit (*ACT Newsletter*, 2014, p.15). Audience surveys indicate that working individuals, including coal miners, and retirees comprise the majority of the adults in the audience (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015).

ACT offers free after school programs for some 50 students per semester (transportation is provided) and educational outreach programs that draw more than 2,000 matinee students per semester. 8,000 students from 11 different schools in Kentucky and Virginia participate in ACT outreach programs (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p.10). Advanced students teach and mentor younger students, and a student play tours to schools and community centers. Additionally, ACT productions attract tourists, drawing visitors from 24 states (*ACT Newsletter*, 2014, p.10). Approximately 200 volunteers participate in and help staff the theatre, contributing 100,000 hours in 2013 alone (*ACT Newsletter*, 2014, p. 2; *ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p.10). ACT serves as a "transitional partner" for residents of a drug rehabilitation program, providing those residents with a positive social environment in which to work. ACT also offers complimentary theatre tickets to the residents of this drug rehabilitation program (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p.10).

ACT's "Girls in Technology Program" teaches technical theatre skills (and the underlying math and science principles) to girls. Thus far, 39 girls have participated in this program. 8000 other students have enrolled in self-esteem building classes, creativity workshops, and critical thinking workshops (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 10). ACT also works with a number of Ethiopian students at a mission school in the area (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015). ACT annually gives \$500 to a high school senior who has earned enough theatre credits to obtain membership in the International Thespian Society, and ACT has awarded more than \$7,000 in scholarships to ACT graduating seniors who attend college (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 10). ACT generated over \$1,000,000 in local community and economic development in the years it has been in operation, and ACT has assisted other charities in raising money for their efforts, including \$60,000 for the Hospice

of the Bluegrass (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 10). The Theatre has received 11 awards including several Kentucky Theatre Association Competition awards, Southeast Theatre Conference Regionals awards, the State Extension Diversity Award and the National Association of Counties Award (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 9).

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Blood Song: The Story of the Hatfields and the McCoys

In 2012 the television series “Hatfields & McCoys,” starring Kevin Costner, brought renewed attention to this feud that occurred in Pike County. To capitalize on this, Pike Arts, ACT and the Hatfield and McCoy Arts Council collaborated to create an outdoor drama based on the actual events. Feeling strongly that the play had to be rooted in that part of the county in which the feud occurred, Richards hired a playwright to research the story and consult with community members (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015). ACT began working with local individuals who expressed an interest in acting in and

working on the production. Initially, ACT actors performed most of the roles, but by the second year local residents began to fill many of the parts. Residents now perform 90% of them (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015). Area officials allocated funds so that an amphitheater with support facilities for the performers could be built in McCarr, where the feud occurred (*Pike Arts Newsletter*, n.d., p. 2). Written by Virginia writer Chelsea Marcantel-Polaski, *Blood Song: The Story of the Hatfields and the McCoys* accurately presents the events of the feud in a way that celebrates the heritage of the region and garners the support and pride of the community. The play eschews stereotypical depictions of the Hatfield and McCoy families and Appalachians in general (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015).

In 2013, with press coverage from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Examiner*, 2,000 people attended 13 performances of the play during the month of August, bringing tourism to the area. In this first year, the all-volunteer cast and crew contributed approximately \$750,000 worth of their time and effort to the project. The following year Pike County

invested \$200,000 to renovate “Hatfield and McCoy Park” (home of the production) and later received the National Association of Counties award for showcasing and promoting local history (*Pike Arts Newsletter*, 2014, p. 2). Within two years, tourists brought in over \$500,000 (*Pike Arts Newsletter*, 2014, p. 2) to this economically depressed community that has a population of 1,882, a per capita income of \$15,521, a poverty rate of 20.7%, and a 13% unemployment rate (City Data, n.d.). But more than the economic advantages, *Blood Song: The Story of the Hatfields and the McCoys* infused the community with pride, and community members encouraged Richards and ACT to produce a Christmas production at a local church (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015).

Stories

For Richards, the statistical success of ACT and Pike Arts is less important than the lives that have been changed. Perhaps the two most dramatic stories are those that speak to the power of the arts to engage and stimulate individuals with physical and mental challenges. One woman with autism had never spoken in her thirty years, but during a production of *Honky Tonk Angels* at ACT, she became communicative for the first time in her life by responding to the music. However, the biggest breakthrough for this individual came while watching rehearsals of *The Miracle Worker*, which she attended with her sister-in-law. In this play, Annie Sullivan tries to teach the deaf Helen Keller how to speak, starting with the word “water.” Watching the scene closely, this woman loudly said “wa,” echoing Keller’s famous first word and gesturing along with the actress portraying Keller. Her sister-in-law reported that because of these theatrical experiences, the woman now functions at a much higher level with the ability to express some basic sounds, enhanced listening skills, and an ability to follow some directions. (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 11).

Another anecdote involves a young man with physical disabilities who wanted to act in *Blood Song: The Story of the Hatfields and the McCoys*. Due to his very limited reading skills, he was assigned a small role. By the following year, he had learned to read so he could audition for the play, reading from the script. Richards and the ACT performers worked with him to develop his acting abilities and to further his reading skills. Additionally, with the aid of a local lawyer whose help Richards enlisted, the man applied for Social Security benefits for first time. Richards also enlisted the help of a dentist who fixed the man’s teeth for a very small fee which was covered by an altruistic resident. This man discovered personal and practical skills through theatre and increased his sense of belonging to the community in the process (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015).

Discussion

Richards describes herself foremost as a teacher (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015), which is evident in the number of educational programs she has created and in the stories of community members' personal growth in which she takes pride. Her newsletters promote student successes, especially those who attend and graduate from colleges and universities (*Pike Arts Newsletter*, 2015, p. 1). Richards believes that participation in the arts can be transformative. She contends that participation in the arts and related educational programs can lift those who have potential but are limited by socio-economic struggles and low expectations often found in schools (*ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 12).

Success stories are not the basis of ACT's and Richards's evaluation, but metrics such as those cited above are. Program Coordinators who supervise the Extension agents employ a Logic Model with well-defined goals, activities that support those goals, and metrics to measure them (UK Extension). The former Fine Arts program coordinator confirms that Richards routinely met her goals and that there has been little of negative substance to report (C. Stamper, personal communication, 2015). Richards admits that one of her weaknesses remains meeting report deadlines and other office work (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015). Community support for ACT and Richards has been strong. Richards offered that she did receive one negative comment from a community member, and she heard that a rumor circulated claiming the theatre of took sides in a political issue, which Richards denied. (S. Richards, personal communication, 2015).

In analyzing Richards's success, several factors emerge: her vibrant personality and seeming ability to engage with virtually anyone, her connection to the region, her theatrical and administrative skills, and her political acumen. Had she not been from Pike County and appreciative of the resources that could be found in the county's small towns, she may have chosen to stage *Blood Song: The Story of the Hatfields and the McCoys* in the much more prosperous city of Pikeville in a formal, indoor theatre. Instead she wanted the production be held in McCarr and acted by local residents who could take ownership of the production. As previously noted, the County Judge Executor is an extremely important official in the county. Richards included a letter of support from him in her newsletters and sponsorship packets (*Pike Arts Newsletter*, n.d., p. 2; *ACT Sponsorship Pack*, 2014, p. 8).

In the 2010 NEA white paper, Markusen and Gadwa identified the elements of successful creative placemaking initiatives, and Pike Arts exemplifies these elements. Richards succeeded in creating and promoting a vision that honors her community, has built partnerships, obtained "buy-in" and support from community members and local officials. As the creation of *Blood Song: The Story of the Hatfields and the McCoys* demonstrated, Richards honored the distinctiveness of the region and its traditions.

The original intention of the Extension Fine Arts initiative was to link UK's College of Fine Arts and its resources to the Fine Arts program. However, as the Pike Arts program developed, the resources of the university have not been needed. As an alumna of UK, Richards maintains contact with several faculty members and can call upon them if a situation arises that requires their assistance, but there is no longer a formal link to CFA. Richards would like to work with interns from the university, especially in the area of marketing (S. Richards, personal communication, 2013). However, the distance between Pike County and UK, the county's remoteness, and the lack of financial support makes this internship less appealing to students (G. Maschio, 2016).

Changes in personnel have affected the program. Although Shay remains active at the university, he is no longer dean of Fine Arts, and Scott Smith, former dean of the College of Agriculture, has retired. There is a new associate dean and head of Extension, necessitated by the death of Larry Turner. Stamper, the former program coordinator, now works with another Extension office. As other agents have left or retired from their Fine Arts positions, counties have not continued to fund those positions due to budget cuts or loss of grant dollars. As evidenced by the findings of Allen et al. (2014), Kentuckians value the Extension Fine Arts program, and they would vote to increase their property taxes to support it. According to Stamper, two other counties have expressed interest in starting a Fine Arts agents program, pending funding (C. Stamper, personal communication, 2015). However, given the state's current budget shortfalls, expansion of the Fine Arts Program is unlikely. Unlike the established Extension divisions (such as 4-H), arts agents do not have pre-existing programs that they can use and adapt to their communities, nor do the agents have Extension mentors who can guide and advise them. Thus, the agents have to be highly motivated and mature individuals with vision and an ability to work with a variety of people in different kinds of situations. Agents need to be people of energy and enthusiasm, possessing creativity, administrative skills, and an ability to work in supportive and collaborative ways.

As indicated, agents benefit from having roots in the community, although this may not be possible in every situation. Agents who do not have a relationship with the community find their jobs much more difficult (C. Hughes, personal communication, 2013). Agents must work to ensure that the arts are taken seriously and not seen as a drain on limited resources. Thus, the community's trust and respect are essential.

Given that Extension programs exist in every state and U.S. protectorate, an Agents for the Arts initiative could exist nationwide, fostering and helping to create art that reflects the

interests and the heritage of those communities while providing economic benefits. As the Pike Arts model documents, the arts can positively impact rural communities that are limited in financial, human, and physical resources, but rich in legacy, arts, and culture. Creative placemaking that expresses the community benefits the entire community.

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About the Author



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