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## Painting the Horizon: A Look at Art, Community, and Identity in Appalachia

James Gooch

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**Painting the Horizon: A Look at Art, Community, and Identity in Appalachia**

**James Gooch**

**A professional project submitted  
to The Reed College of Media  
at West Virginia University**

**in a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Science in  
Journalism**

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**Morgantown, West Virginia**

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## ABSTRACT

### **Painting the Horizon: A Look at Art, Community, and Identity in Rural Appalachia**

**James Aaron Gooch**

*Painting the Horizon: A Look at Art, Community, and Identity in Appalachia* highlights the lives and careers of five native West Virginian artists from around the state. Focusing on the many ways art has enriched their personal lives, this professional multimedia project also seeks to demonstrate how these individuals—as mentors and teachers—are using art to generate positive change, a stronger sense of community, and revolutionize the cities and towns they call home. Showcasing the best of West Virginia, *Painting the Horizon* aspires to make a lasting contribution to the information already available on culture and art in terms of identity, community, and therapy in Appalachia. By following the models of civic and community journalism, it seeks to inform audiences of the talented and devoted artists living in the Mountain State, as well as the inherent power art possesses to make an enduring, positive impact in rural Appalachian communities. *Painting the Horizon* will be published on a subsite hosted by the digital publication *100 Days in Appalachia*; it will include written stories composed by the project author, audio excerpts from each interview, as well as a selection of original photographs and sample artwork provided by the subjects.

## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to all those who stood alongside me throughout this journey. To Professors John Temple, Dana Coester, Rosalie Peck, and Dr. Bradley Freeman, thank you for not only sitting on my graduate committee but for the tremendous patience, guidance, and council you have afforded me over the past several months as I pursued two master's degrees. I certainly couldn't have done it without you.

In addition, I would like to offer thanks to several others who have inspired, encouraged, and taught me along my journey. To my parents, my teachers (both at Concord University and WVU), my fellow classmates, and my patient spouse, thank you—for everything. There is so much more to learn over the course of a lifetime; however, I know that the lessons you've already taught me and your continual support will be enough to get me through, just as it always has. May the next 27 years be as fruitful as the first. L'chaim!

Lastly, I would like to thank all of those who agreed to be interviewed for this project. It is my hope and prayer that in telling your stories and showcasing your dedication to your crafts and communities, *Painting the Horizon* will not only inform but inspire others to follow in your colorful footsteps.

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*Introduction*

What true power does art possess? What real level of worth does it hold within our individual lives and communities, specifically in rural Appalachia? With recent questions arising within legislative circles, both in West Virginia and Washington D.C., as to what gradation of value and validity should be placed on art and those who do art, it is imperative that closer analysis be devoted to this subject, perhaps more now than any other time in history.

*Painting the Horizon: A Look at Art, Community, and Identity in Rural Appalachia* is a professional multimedia project that seeks to shed light on the lives of artists from around the state of West Virginia, in addition to the ways in which they are using their work to transform their own lives, as well as their respective cities and towns. After visiting with and interviewing them, I fervently believe that these people, hollow-reared and mountain-raised, possess a first-hand understanding of what it means to be Appalachian and harbor the answers to these crucial questions.

Each story featured in this project will highlight five fundamental concepts: the personal stories of five West Virginian artists, their thoughts and feelings concerning the sociocultural and socioeconomic climates in rural Appalachia, the national and global representations of Appalachia, recent political situations revolving around the arts, and just why the arts are crucial to their own wellbeing and that of the communities in which they reside. By telling these stories in as raw and transparent a way as possible, this project—through written feature stories, photographs, and subject artwork—seeks to make a long-lived contribution to the ongoing dialogue concerning the arts in the Mountain State and make a lasting, positive impact on broader societal perceptions of Appalachia and its people.

*The Project***Project Description**

This project will be carried out in various West Virginian communities, including Morgantown, Princeton, Elkins, Charleston, and Williamson, which will supply a diverse range of experience and insight into the subjects being explored within this project. As the researcher and project coordinator, my goal is to obtain as many perspectives and narratives as possible to ensure an accurate and up-to-date depiction of life and the arts in the Mountain State.

Throughout the course of this project, I will be traveling to each of the aforementioned cities and towns to interview five visual and performing artists who are not only producing art but are using their respective media to revolutionize their larger communities.

Along with being Appalachian artists, these individuals are unified by one explicit commonality: the conviction that art possess the power to evoke positive, long-lasting change on both individual and communal levels. By combining narrative story telling with various multimedia components (audio recordings, photographs, and supplemental media provided by the interview subjects), *Painting the Horizon* aspires to validate this belief and combat common societal misperceptions surrounding Appalachia—ideas espoused by the media, native Appalachians, and people outside the region.

Each of the five interviewees will be asked a list of core questions about Appalachia and the arts, which will then be followed by a series of more individually tailored questions that will provide substantial insight to their unique lives, circumstances, and efforts to rejuvenate their communities through art, as well as foster more organic conversation. The proposed written feature stories will be composed using information gained from these interviews and will be accompanied by short audio excerpts from the interviews, as well as photographs documenting

their lives and careers (original and provided) and artwork samples supplied by the subjects themselves (photographs, MP3s, videos, etc.).

### Final Project Format

In its final form, the project will be assigned a URL and a subsite on *100 Days in Appalachia's* main website. There, visitors will be able to read the written narratives and view/watch/listen to the supplementary multimedia components, including original and provided photographs, audio excerpts from the interviews, and other content provided by the subjects that showcases their artwork, community outreach efforts, and/or their everyday lives as artists. Because *Painting the Horizon* will not be published until after the end of the Summer 2018 semester, it—for sole the purpose of project defense—will be organized as a Microsoft Word document accompanied by a Google Drive file that will house the various multimedia components.

### **Professional and Educational Qualifications**

Since early childhood, I have always been fascinated by story, which I assume is what led me to become an undergraduate English Major at Concord University, where I extensively studied creative storytelling and journalistic feature writing. During my time at Concord, I wrote for two on-campus publications (*The Concordian* and the *C.U. Alumni Magazine*), and was encouraged by Prof. Rosalie Peck to expand my journalistic talents and interests by apply to the MSJ program at West Virginia University's Reed College of Media after graduating in 2015.

As a result of my graduate career at WVU, where I have obtained a wealth of knowledge and in-depth understanding of various media practices, I have also been granted the opportunity

and privilege of serving as a staff writer and editor for GayTravel.com, the largest name in LGBT travel worldwide. Part of my job with GT has focused on researching and telling the stories of numerous people and places around the globe, many of which have been centered around the arts and culture. There is no doubt that this experience has played an integral role in my choice of subject matter for this professional project. *Painting the Horizon*, both its written and multimedia components, will provide me the chance to bring all of my experiences and skills together, which will undoubtedly benefit me personally, academically, and professionally as a journalist.

### **Skill Development**

Harkening back to my professional and educational qualifications, this project will allow me to expand upon my current journalistic skillset. While I have indeed had some experience with photographing, interviewing, writing, and publishing human interest feature stories like those to be highlighted in this project, *Painting the Horizon* will give me the opportunity to further hone my craft as a writer, editor, photographer, and all around storyteller.

Where photography is specifically concerned, I—by employing the use of various photo editing software and educational websites like Lynda.com (amongst others)—will be forced to acquire the knowledge needed to effectively see my desired outcome for the project to full fruition. These are skills that I believe and understand to be invaluable as a journalist and are skills I am eager and excited to perfect as best as I can over the course of this project. In addition, by consulting and working with a number of other people, including an editor and someone proficient in audio recording and editing, I will cultivate such new skills as project

coordination and gain a better understanding as to what it is like to collaborate with a creative team to achieve journalistic goals.

### *The Research*

#### **Research Statement**

While it is true that Appalachia, over the course of history, has fallen victim to the unfortunate perceptions and stereotypes imposed upon it by the mass media and a society that has largely deemed it undereducated, culturally deficient, economically depressed, and drug addicted, it contrastingly has much to offer, especially in terms of art and culture. Although these classifications are overwhelmingly hyperbolic, they do appear to have their roots in factual information; nevertheless, it is imperative that light be shed on art native to the Appalachian Mountains and the lives and efforts of those producing it in order to combat negative stereotyping and the perpetual threat to defund the arts by our state and federal governments.

By telling the stories of five Appalachian artists (two visual artists, a musician, an actor/director, and an elected official), which will be informed by a series of core questions and supplementary conversation, as previously described, *Painting the Horizon* will add to the ongoing conversation concerning the validity and power of the arts within the Appalachian region. Moreover, through its original materials (written feature stories and photographs) and those supplemental elements provided by the interviewees, this project seeks to alter widespread societal misconceptions and testify to the many ways art is revolutionizing various Appalachian communities.

**Intended Audience**

*Painting the Horizon's* intended audience consists of several sub audiences. In addition to reaching much of *100 Days in Appalachia's* readership, this project aims to appeal to the larger communities of Morgantown, Princeton, Charleston, Williamson, and Elkins in West Virginia, as well as Appalachia as a whole. *Painting the Horizon* also aspires to reach both consumers and producers of art worldwide, as well as arts educators and those individuals and organizations involved in the perpetual battle to fuel and fund artistic initiatives within the region. Lastly, due to the decades of negative coverage of Appalachia in the modern media, it is hoped that the stories featured in *Painting the Horizon* will reach both local and national news outlets to stimulate change in the way the region is portrayed.

**Project Methodology**

As I began contemplating this project, which was originally conceived as an academic thesis, I pondered the type of research that I would conduct. Due to the nature of my undergraduate degree program, I knew I was far more talented in conducting qualitative research than I was at quantitative research, and to be honest, it is something I enjoy immensely as a writer and journalist. Speaking of journalism, I would have to say that my favorite facet of the field is the interviewing process, which perfectly fits the goals of this project.

After settling on an interview-oriented approach, I immediately began researching subjects to speak with. While I was fortunate enough to receive a lot of word-of-mouth recommendations, I also consulted a number of arts organizations in the state, one of which was the recently dismantled Department of Education and the Arts. In addition to interviewing, I decided to supplement the written feature stories (composed in AP-style) with various

multimedia components, including audio excerpts from the interviews, as well as original and provided photographs depicting the interviewees at work as artists and in their everyday lives.

All elements will be published on a subsite on *100 Days in Appalachia's* website, where anyone who is interested in the subjects explored will be able to learn more.

### **Project Limitations**

Having double majoring as both an M.S. in Journalism and an M.S. in Integrated Marketing Communications student, my time has been completely consumed by academia, most currently this professional project.

Because this project requires traveling to remote regions in Southern West Virginia to interview my subjects (some of which are four to six hours away), I have had to do as much advance research as I can to ensure I am adequately prepared for my interviews. In preparation for the interviews, email, text messaging, phone calls, and social media have all been used to set up the meetings, which has proven a little taxing and inconsistent, to say the least. As a result, there were many subjects who lost my consideration to be interviewed (mostly due to their lack of response and time constraints); nevertheless, I was fortunate enough to find others to be interviewed in their place. Moreover, while I would've loved to travel to additional cities and states as a part of this Appalachia-centered project, I was not fortunate enough to have the time to travel beyond the borders of West Virginia; with that said, I do hope to have the chance to do so in the future and expand upon what I feel to be extremely interesting and valuable work.

## **The Timeline**

### Explanation

Early on, when I began contemplating topics to study, I had initially planned on composing an academic thesis instead of a professional project. However, after exploring my options with a couple of College of Media faculty members, I realized that a project was better suited to my needs and aspirations. Therefore, the real work for this project did not commence until December 2017, when I formed my committee and began exploring potential subject options. Despite the delay, with the new year came a revived enthusiasm and commitment to seeing this project to full fruition. The proposed timeline for *Painting the Horizon* has been detailed below.

### Work Schedule

- 2017 December: Finalized professional project committee and project topic, as well as reached out to potential subjects.
- 2018 January-February: Began working on project proposal and established the “Core Questions” and other interviewing criteria. Finalized subject list and began scheduling interviewing dates.
- 2018 March: Began conducting interviews. First interview conducted in Charleston, WV with then Secretary of Education and the Arts Gayle Manchin.
- 2018 March 10-11: Visit Princeton and Williamson for interviews with two subjects.
- 2018 March 12-16: Compose Charleston feature story and edit photographs.
- 2018 March 19: Interview Morgantown subject.

- 2018 March 20-23: Write two feature stories (Princeton and Williamson) and edit the photographs.
- 2018 March 31-April 1: Travel to Elkins, WV to interview the 5<sup>th</sup> subject.
- 2018 April 2-6: Compose Morgantown feature story and edit photographs.
- 2018 April 9-13: Write final feature story and edit photographs.
- 2018 May: Finalize proposal and schedule proposal defense date with committee for early June 2018.
- 2018 June 6: Proposal defense 2:00-3:30.
- 2018 June: Compose Doodle Poll to set final project defense date for mid-July. Finish editing written feature stories and edit all audio components.
- 2018 July Finalize and upload all components (feature stories, photographs (original and provided), and subject artwork samples) to project website.
- 2018 July: Defend project by the third week of the month.

**Project Delivery:**

As mentioned, this project will be temporarily organized—for the sole purpose of defense—as a Microsoft Word document accompanied by a Google Drive file, which will house the project’s various multimedia components. Thereafter, it will be published as a series of stories on a *100 Days in Appalachia* subsite, the dates of which will be determined by the publication’s editors after the project defense. In the interim, the written stories and their supplementary multimedia components will be shared with the interview subjects and their families, which serves a dual purpose: for their enjoyment and to garner feedback for necessary edits prior to the final defense and publication of the series.

### *Literature Review*

Since before its conception, the state of West Virginia has been the victim of unfortunate stereotyping by the media, something that is not only a reality for the Mountain State but the Appalachian region at large. These perpetuated hyperbolic images of poor, uncultured, and unintelligent hillbillies with strange speaking patterns and behaviors has resulted in widespread outside misperceptions of Appalachia, as well as the tainted and distorted self-image its inhabitants have of themselves and their communities. However, while this is true, there is much good to be shared with those residing both outside and inside Appalachia, especially its rich and vibrant arts history and current artistic efforts, which—despite recent threats—has the potential to revolutionize the lives of struggling individuals and their communities. By embracing art and showcasing the history of Appalachia and its current artistic initiatives, there exists the possibility of defying detrimental stereotypes, creating stronger, more wholesome senses of identity and community within the region, and changing the way Appalachia is viewed by the media those outside of the mountains.

### **Appalachian Stereotypes**

For centuries, Appalachia and its inhabitants have fallen victim to many unfortunate stereotypes foisted upon the mountains by the outside world. While many of the regions encompassed by the American South have been lucky enough to escape their hapless portrayals, West Virginia and Appalachia at large continue to suffer from negative, misinformed stereotyping that is often perpetuated by the mass media (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999). Cloaked in the “garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, [ . . . ] hopelessness,” illiteracy, and—more contemporarily—drug addiction, there exists an immense contravention when it comes to showcasing a holistic picture of Appalachia (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999).

The detrimental results of such portrayals, as seen in popular films, television shows, and books like *Wrong Turn*, *Buckwild*, *Gomer Pyle*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, & *Deliverance*, which highlight everything from the region's "stereotypical feuds [to its] moonshine stills [to its] mine wars [to its] environmental destruction [to its] joblessness [to its] human depredation," have become, in a way, Appalachia's epithets and have casted the region into a perpetual state of otherness, earning it the superlative as the "strang[est] land inhabited by [the most] peculiar people" (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999). Nevertheless, despite the malignant side effects of this misrepresentation, perhaps the most unfortunate side effect resulting from such misrepresentation is the malignant self-perception of Appalachians and the ways in which many of them view themselves, their history, their present, and their future.

### Media and Self-perception

While it is safe to say that most contemporary Appalachians are confident enough to refute the clichéd stereotypes being kept alive by the media, there is no doubting the harmful influence these blanket generalizations have on the self-perceptions of those who call the mountains home.

In her 2016 University of Kentucky study, *Rural Reality: How Reality Television Portrayals of Appalachian People Impact Their View of Their Culture*, Ivy Brashear explores the ways in which modern media, specifically reality television and news outlets (especially those deemed to be trusted and well-respected, like *The New York Times*) impact the self-perception of native Appalachians. As a part of her research process, Brashear conducted a smattering of focus group sessions at Hazard Community & Technical College in Perry County, Kentucky, during which she presented a variety of media selections (written stories, video clips, etc.), encouraging in-depth conversation around the content. In short, her findings suggested an

overwhelming sense of “shame and embarrassment” amongst participants in terms of the media’s focus on Appalachia, especially where dialect, poverty, drug abuse, professional and academic opportunity etc. are concerned (Brashear, 2016). Participants collectively suggested that their dialect frequently miscommunicates to the broader world a lack of intellect and intelligence, their poverty a deficiency of ambition and capability, and the drug epidemic plaguing eastern Kentucky a disvalue of health and life. In her own words, Brashear states:

[P]articipants [appeared to be] much less aware of [ . . . ] the more positive aspects of their communities: assets, such as art, music and local foods; or the [positive] economic things happening, including small business development or increased high-speed broadband internet access. Participants were quick to talk about the region’s natural beauty and how tourism efforts were a good thing, but rarely mentioned any of the other markers of economic or cultural place-making success that are happening in their communities. They instead told me about the things [ . . . ] they have heard and seen talked about in the media [(entertainment and journalism)], or by powerful local, state or federal politicians. And those things tended to be negative. (Brashear, 2016)

However, while a breach between negative portrayal and positive reality does indeed persist, there are a host of individuals—much like Brashear—who are eager to shed light on this problematic circumstance and alter the course of both the internal and external perceptions of Appalachia.

### **Patching the Quilt**

To combat critical impressions of Appalachia, there are a number of factors to consider. In her article *From Stereotype to Regional Hype: Strategies for Changing Media Portrayals of Appalachia*, Jean Haskell Speer says that “[e]xamples of ill-informed and damaging media

portrayals [of Appalachia] are abundant” and pose “a continuing problem” that requires “an agenda for systematic action to influence the media” (Speer, 1993, p. 12-13). She goes on to say that “[f]or far too long, we have treated media stereotypes like the weather—everybody talks about them, but we have done little to change them” (Speer, 1993, p. 12). This change, Speer suggests, can be sparked by a six-strategy agenda, consisting of “[p]utting pressure on authorities who regulate media,” [a]pproaching local affiliates of networks” with threats of complaints to their parent companies, encouraging “advertisers [ . . . ] to boycott certain television channels and shows that misrepresent Appalachia, “[f]ocusing attention on the network, publisher, etc.,” “[t]argeting production companies of broadcast programs,” and “[u]sing media against media” (Speer, 1993, p. 15-16). Despite her exhaustive strategy, however, what’s left to be desired in Speer’s plan is exactly what to replace the negative perpetuations with—other than advocacy, of course.

To clean the slate, so to say, new stories must be pushed to the forefront of media coverage; unfavorable, hackneyed content must be replaced with fresh, positive perspectives of Appalachia, first on the local level by communities themselves, which will then spread nationally, as Speer implies. While there are many avenues to this end, it is commonly believed that by showcasing a community’s artistic endeavors the best of that community is showcased as well, something that Brashear, in *Rural Reality*, suggests is often neglected in media coverage of Appalachia.

## Art, Identity, and Community

### Art and the Self

In the artistic world, art—in all its mediums—is often viewed as a means of understanding and even creating identity. In the book *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Simon Frith devotes an entire chapter to music and identity; however, despite this section's focus on music, the author suggests that art is art, and what he says can be applied to any form. (Frith, 1996, p. 115).

Frith refers to art, specifically music, and identity as experiences. He says that “identity is *mobile*, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being” and that our artistic experiences—both making and consuming art— “is best understood as an experience of [the] *self-in-progress*,” and that one always informs the other (Frith, 1996, p. 109). He also quotes ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin as saying art:

‘seems to have an odd quality that even passionate activities like gardening or dog-raising lack: the simultaneous projecting and dissolving of the self in performance. Individual, family, gender, age, supercultural givens and other factors hover around the [artistic] space but can penetrate only very partially the moment of enactment of [artistic] fellowship. Visible to the observer, these constraints remain unseen by the [artists themselves . . . ], who are instead working out a shared [ . . . ] that involves both the assertion of pride, even ambition, and the simultaneous disappearance of the ego.’ (Frith, 1996, p. 110)

While Frith says that art and identity are interchangeable, fluid things, it appears as though Slobin, quoted by Frith, is saying art works to dissipate the self and egotism. Moreover, he continues on to say that the trivial things people consider to make up the self and identity fade away in artistic settings, and that in those moments human fellowship between artists and observers is strengthened in ways it couldn't be otherwise, thus building a stronger sense of

connectivity between members of a community. In other words, art—by stripping away the ego—fosters a sense of true identity on the individual level, which, in turn, also results in the ability to construct a collective communal identity.

### The Transformative Power of Art in Communities

This idea is echoed in Josi Kanter and Robert A. Schanke's book *Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community Through Theatre and Writing*; however, they have a few more things to say in terms of art and the rejuvenating power it possesses within communities.

Like the title suggests, *Performing Loss* highlights the ways in which art can transform individual lives and entire communities that have suffered unfortunate circumstances. As mentioned in Brashear's study, *Rural Reality*, Appalachia (particularly some regions in West Virginia) has suffered immense economic devastation and other traumatic hardships such as drug addiction. Kanter and Schanke believe that art possesses the ability to heal on the individual level and, as Frith and Slobin imply, heal the collective whole. In fact, in the opening paragraphs of the text, the authors state that art, specifically performance art, can transform the lives of "people who engage, consciously or not, with a variety of losses in their everyday lives, including those that transpire between nations [or states] and their citizens; between communities and their histories; between readers and their texts; between parents and their children" (Kanter & Schanke, 2003, 3). Perhaps the portion of this passage that is most applicable to Appalachia, specifically as it is portrayed in Brashear's study, is the "losses [ . . . that] transpire between "communities and their histories"; after all, Appalachian history has informed the stereotypes perpetuated by the media—harmful stereotypes that have, as previously mentioned, become hyperbolic, clichéd, and outdated. Some would argue that to combat these stereotypes and to

make peace with history, heritage—particularly the positive things such as art—must be embraced.

### Embracing Appalachia's Artistic Heritage

In their 2011 article, *Tradition, cultures and communities: exploring the potentials of music and the arts for community development in Appalachia*, published by the *Journal for Community Development*, Brian McGrath and M.A. Brennan propose that art is an opportunity for communities to define themselves and foster a sense of collective meaning. One of the key ideas explored in the text is “the loss of traditional [Appalachian] cultures and ways of life,” which has become an “ever increasing concern” (McGrath & Brennan, 2011). In mentioning to tradition, McGrath & Brennan are not suggesting Appalachians embark upon a reverse journey into the distant past, which would be counteractive to social progress and development; instead, they believe that the lack of emphasis on “unique characteristics largely shaped by their cultural behaviors, such as storytelling [and] music” have contributed to an overwhelming “cultural loss” and a lack of distinctive identity, something that can be found by looking to the rich artistic heritage of the region (McGrath & Brennan, 2011). And although not explicitly stated in the article, this decrease in cultural pride for Appalachia's rich artistic heritage has perhaps contributed to the media's not-so-favorable portrayal of Appalachian communities, which Brashear clearly states in her *Rural Reality*.

### **Art as Therapy**

The idea of art as a personal means of psychological and physiological therapy has become increasingly popular of the past few decades; in fact, a number of higher education institutions across the country and the world offer four-year degree programs in art and music

therapy. In their 2010 article, *The Connection Between Art, Healing, and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature*, authors Heather L. Stuckey and Jeremy Nobel explore the positive results art can effectuate in the bodies and minds of those who engage with it. Stuckey and Nobel believe state that:

[t]he idea that creative expression can make a powerful contribution to the healing process has been embraced in many different cultures. Throughout recorded history, people have used pictures, stories, dances, and chants as healing rituals. There has been much philosophical and anecdotal discussion about the benefits of art and healing, but less empirical research exists in the literature. In fact, although arts therapy has been used clinically for more than a century and has been recognized as a profession since 1991, much of the published work is theoretical in nature, with little discussion of specific outcomes. Only in recent years have systematic and controlled studies examined the therapeutic effects and benefits of the arts and healing. (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010)

Nevertheless, in their research the pair found concrete evidence to support the idea that “[e]ngagement with creative activities has the potential to contribute toward reducing stress and depression and can serve as a vehicle for alleviating the burden of chronic disease,” which occurs partially due to art’s ability to generate a sense of “meaning and meaningfulness” (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).

### **The War on Art**

Despite the many benefits both consuming and making art has on identity, community, and psychological and physiological health, there have been many recent efforts by the United

States' state and federal governments to defund artistic initiatives. Many believe, including *The Nation's* Laila Lalami, that if measures are taken to enact the proposed legislation, the country at large—especially economically vulnerable communities—would suffer at great cost.

In her April 2017 *The Nation* article, *Save the Arts, Save America: From film festivals to free concerts, public support for culture benefits us all*, Lalami expresses her personal concerns and opinions surrounding national budget cuts that directly affected the arts. She says that “[p]ublic funding for the arts and humanities is a popular target for a particular breed of conservative” and that cutting funding is a strictly political maneuver with no sound reasoning behind it (Lalami, 2017). She justifies this opinion by quoting Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, who argued that arts organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts is, “in effect, welfare for rich liberal elites”; after all “[t]hat’s who consumes the products that they produce” (Lalami, 2017). He continues to imply that money is being taken from blue-collar workers such as coal miners to fund these initiatives. This, per Lalami, couldn’t be further from the truth. “In reality,” she says, “40 percent of funds from the NEA go directly to states to finance arts programs, particularly in rural areas that don’t have a robust arts infrastructure. Furthermore, the combined budget for the NEW and the NEH [(National Endowment for the Humanities)] is under \$300 million per year,” which is “0.008 percent of the federal budget” (Lalami, 2017). Lastly, she continues by saying that these programs afford children from poor and underserved communities artistic experiences that actually serve to enhance academic performance, which “includes the children of coal miners” (Lalami, 2017).

As the evidence suggests, there is no doubting the innumerably ways Appalachia has suffered at the expense of the media. From its ongoing perpetuation of misinformed stereotypes

to its negligent coverage of the exceedingly wonderful things happening in the region—including but not exclusively limited to art—at large, the mass media has done a tremendous disservice to Appalachian communities, especially in West Virginia. However, though this may be true, there is tremendous opportunity to shift the tide. As previously stated, by covering the vast array of artistic and cultural happenings in the Mountain State—things people and communities tend to take pride in—the media possesses the power to change the existing narrative and favorably shift the persisting societal perceptions of West Virginia and other Appalachian regions. By doing this—with the understanding of art’s transformative power—the media possesses the ability to alter the ways in which these individual communities view themselves collectively and individually, a cause *Painting the Horizon* hopes to contribute to.

### *Trust in the Media*

It is safe to assert there has never been 100 percent confidence in the media, especially over recent years. If the issue of trust in the media had never been questioned before, it certainly was during the onset of the 2016 Presidential election. That year, speculation rapidly arose not only concerning the mass media’s ability to accurately report news but whether or not it, in some instances, fabricated stories altogether in order to cater to its various audiences. Now, nearly two years later, the same is true, if not worse; in fact, per a late 2017 study by The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, “[a]lmost half of Americans—44 percent—indicate that they believe the news media fabricates stories” to push their individual agendas (Poynter, 2017). However, while this may be accurate, there is much that can be done to restore faith in the American press.

According to Nancy Watzman of Harvard University’s Nieman Foundation, the only way perceptions of the media will change is if journalists recognize their responsibility to generate

that change (Watzman, 2018). This sentiment is echoed by Columbia Journalism Review's Lewis Wallace, who says the media should be asking itself questions like "Why are we telling the stories we tell, and whom do they serve? What ethics and values should govern our work? Should journalism, in short, take a lesson from activism?" (Wallace, 2018). From these questions should, a new approach to journalism should rise—"engaged journalism" that is devoted to actively interacting with communities and giving voice their people (Wallace, 2018). He also contends that journalists, like community organizers, should be accountable to their constituents, or in this case, their audiences, something he, along with countless others, believes will restore trust in the media (Wallace, 2018).

### **Trust and *Painting the Horizon***

When I conceived the idea for *Painting the Horizon*, I—as an aspiring journalist—committed myself to portraying my subjects and their stories with as much precision and accuracy as I could. In telling these stories, I sincerely hoped to share information that would first and foremost benefit my interviewees and their respective communities, as well as my potential readership. But to accomplish this, I had to continually interact with my subjects to ensure I conveyed not only the cold, hard facts but also the things that mattered most to each of them. To analyze the interviewing process and all the post-interview correspondence between myself and my subjects, I decided to create and distribute follow-up survey questioning their individual levels of trust in both the media at large and me as a journalistic storyteller.

Of the two surveys I received back, both subjects expressed a certain level of distrust in the media overall. One subject, Lori McKinney, says that while she had been interviewed several times before by local media outlets concerning her work in her community, she often finds that "they stretch things out of proportion and perpetuate more myth than actuality"

(McKinney, 2017). The second subject, Kim McClanahan, says this was her first ever interview and that while she was “nervous about the entire thing,” she wasn’t concerned that she would be misquoted or misrepresented. She states that “the only opinions [she] has of the media is what [she’s] accumulated as a consumer of the news [but . . . ] there is no doubt in [her] mind that they twist things to suit their own purposes and try their best to sway the opinions and perceptions of their viewers, readers, and listeners to match their own and tell the stories they want to tell” (McClanahan, 2018).

When asked whether or not they were concerned about letting me tell their stories, each agreed that they had full confidence in my abilities. In fact, Lori McKinney said:

I am not worried at all that you will do a great job. One thing that eases my mind is that you are from Princeton yourself and you know this place, its people, and its story so well already. Another reason I trust you is because you’re a fellow artist, and you recognize the importance of art and its place within our lives and communities. You also mentioned replacing negative media coverage of Princeton and other areas in West Virginia with more uplifting, positive coverage. This alone is enough to make me trust you. I personally feel the media sometimes only reports all the terrible garbage out there because they don’t have to go looking for it; it’s an easy gig. What you’re doing is hard work, in my opinion. You have sifted through a lot of potential topics to cover and subjects to interview to find stories you believe are worth telling. There is no doubt in my mind your work will benefit not only me as an artist but Princeton, a community that deserves to be heard and represented. Oh, and one last thing: you sent me like nine pages of follow-up questions after our interview. Between that and all the

phone calls and text messages and Facebook messages, that proves to me that you want to get it right. It says a lot about you as a person and as journalist, so no worries from me. (McKinney, 2018).

In a parallel statement, Kim McClanahan, although a bit less wordy, said similar things:

Your level of engagement meant a lot to me, as somebody who had never been interviewed before. Also, your level of preparedness coming in was very impressive. I must admit that I was a little worried at first, when you started asking questions about the opioid crisis here in Williamson, but once I realized where you were heading with the story and your desire to showcase the good things about our town, my nervousness dissipated (McClanahan, 2018).

If I learned one thing during this process it is just how important it is to, as McKinney says, “get it right—something I knew going in but didn’t fully realize until the end (McKinney, 2018). As I continue to reflect on the concept of engaged journalism and the points highlighted by Wallace, I only hope that I continue to pursue and tell the stories that matter most—stories that enlighten, enrich, and broaden the perspectives of my audiences and accurately represent and benefit my subjects and their respective communities.

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*Appendix I: Core Questions*

- 1) As a West Virginia native, and as an Appalachian, what are your feelings concerning the stereotypes imposed on Appalachia by the media and broader society?
- 2) How do you feel about some of West Virginia and Appalachia's unfortunate circumstances? (Poverty? Education? Mental health? Drug abuse?)
- 3) Do you feel artistic endeavors can make a positive, lasting impact on these circumstances? If so, how? If not, why?
- 4) How has art enhanced or transformed your personal life?
- 5) What personal value do you place on art? What power do you feel it has in terms of the word "community"?
- 6) How does art play a role in creating a sense of identity on both individual and communal levels?
- 7) Why do you think art so imperative in creating a healthy, vibrant West Virginia and Appalachia at large?
- 8) Do you feel your work and the work of other artists in your city/town has impacted your community? If so, how? If not, why?
- 9) What are your feelings concerning proposed legislation on both state and national levels to defund artistic initiatives? What advice, if any, would you afford your elected officials?
- 10) Within five years' time, what impact would you like to see your work has made on your community? What are your dreams, goals, and aspirations in terms of your art and your community?

*Appendix II: Consent Form*

**Media Consent Form**

Without expectation of compensation or other remuneration, now or in the future, I hereby give my consent to James A. Gooch to use my image and likeness and/or any interview statements from me in various publications, advertising, or other media activities, including the Internet. This consent includes, but is not limited to:

- (a) Permission to interview, film, photograph, audio record, or otherwise make a video reproduction of me and/or record my voice.
- (b) Permission to use my name.
- (c) Permission to quote or paraphrase from the interview(s), the film, photographs, or audio recordings in part or in whole in publications, newspapers, magazines, and other print media, as well as on the Internet, television, or radio.

This consent is given in perpetuity and does not require prior approval by me,

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name)

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Guardian's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The parent or legal guardian of the aforementioned minor hereby consents to and gives permission to the above on their behalf.

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

---

*The following is required if the consent form must be read to the parent/legal guardian:*  
I certify that I have read this consent form in full to the parent/legal guardian whose signature appears above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Organizational Representative or Community Leader)

*Appendix III: Post-interview Survey*

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

1. Was this your first time being interviewed as an artist and/or business owner?
2. In terms of the media's coverage of various events, on a scale of 1-5, how much or how little do you trust the modern-day media to accurately report stories?
3. Please explain your answer for question to the previous question.
4. Concerning this interview, did you have any concerns coming in? If so, please explain what those concerns were.
5. Having gained some distance from our meeting, do you have any outstanding concerns about whether or not you will be portrayed accurately? If so, please elaborate?
6. Are you confident that this project will be beneficial to you, your business/organization, and/or community? Why or why not?

*Appendix IV: Copyright Approval*

**Lori McKinney**

Hello,

I, Lori McKinney, as the owner of the copyright to 3 songs- "Looking Out the Window," "The Conundrum" and "Letting Go," give my permission for the songs to be used in James Gooch's presentation and media of his choosing.

Signed,

*Lori McKinney*  
Option 22  
P: 304-320-8833  
7/24/2018

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*Appendix V: Written Feature Stories***Kim McClanahan**

Hailed as the landscape that once gave rise to the infamous Hatfield and McCoy feud, today Williamson, WV proudly relishes its calamitous history. Nearly 130 years after the feud, the small city on the West Virginia-Kentucky border has become a popular destination for history buffs and motor sports enthusiasts alike, favored by those who cherish the Appalachian Mountains and their unique stories. For many others, however, Williamson is more than a land of ghosts, folktales, and backwoods trails. For people like Kim McClanahan, this hollow between the hills is home, or as she says, “more than home.”

“I’ve pretty much spent my entire life here” says McClanahan, 38, “and I’m really proud of that. I’ve been blessed enough to raise a family here, to explore my creativity here, and now my husband and I even own a business here.”

Play & Paint, an eclectic conglomeration of the artistic and what McClanahan jokingly describes as “the nerdy,” stands in the hub of Williamson’s downtown district. A direct reflection of their mixed interests and passions, one quarter of the shop is overseen by her husband, Josh, and boasts a smorgasbord of fantasy tabletop games and other merchandise, while the rest functions as a gallery that features McClanahan’s work and a classroom/studio devoted to the visual arts.

But long before Play & Paint’s grand opening in July 2017, McClanahan, like many artists, got her start in a much humbler environment. Recalling her childhood in the neighboring town of Delbarton, McClanahan, a mother of three and a completely self-taught painter, exhibits an almost tangible fondness for both her family and her art.

“There wasn’t a lot to do here when I was a kid, certainly not in terms of art. And while I wish there had been, I never had to search too far for fun,” she recollects. “My earliest memory is of my aunt Dora, who’d sit with us in the living room floor with a heap of crayons, pencils and a stack of blank paper. She always encouraged my imagination, so I attribute my love of painting to her. Mind you, now, my tastes and abilities were a little unrefined and limited then. All I could draw in those days were unicorns and heart people, whatever the hell those were,” she chuckles. “But it didn’t matter how good or not good I was. I enjoyed it, and I still do.”

Though painting was initially a means of self-entertainment, McClanahan claims it quickly evolved into something more. Having continually battled chronic depression and anxiety over the course of her life, she says art became a vital form of therapy that enabled her to overcome many of her darkest and most private battles.

“For me, art has always been about mental health. Even as a child, I knew that when things got tough, I could leave my world and its problems behind and go off into an alternative universe filled with color. Today, it’s not so much of an escape as it a coping mechanism. As an adult, my art helps me confront and deal with my circumstances rather than shy away from them.”

It isn’t difficult to see the many ways McClanahan’s personal life has crept into her work. Home to a smattering of her most intimate creations, *Play & Paint* is a public testament to her individual struggles with depression and anxiety, something she believes affects “far more of us than we know.”

“There are so many people suffering in silence, which is mostly due to the stigma surrounding these issues,” McClanahan says. “And to be very honest, I feel that’s truer here than a lot of other places.”

Like many in southern, WV, McClanahan was raised a Christian. And although she still describes herself as a “person of great faith,” she simultaneously believes too much emphasis is placed on religion when it comes to mental health, especially in her community.

“A lot of people around here believe that if you have enough faith, Jesus will fix it. Now, don’t get me wrong, I believe in God,” she says, “but this exclusive way of thinking leaves little room for professional help. And around here, people are often shamed from seeking the help they need and are made to feel that their faith is insufficient when their circumstances don’t change. I know this is true because it has happened to me.”

At the pinnacle of her depression, McClanahan says she was once forced to make a two-hour trip from Williamson so no one in town would know she was consulting the advice of a therapist. Experiences like this is what prompted her return to school as an undergraduate counseling major, as well as the creation of Play & Paint.

“I’ve just always wanted to help others with circumstances similar to mine. That’s why I chose this path. And while it was never my dream to own a business, when I realized my counseling degree wouldn’t be conferred for another year and a half, I began exploring ways I could help people now.”

Pondering the many ways art had helped her over the years, McClanahan decided that if people were unable to seek the help they needed, whatever their reasons may be, she was going to meet them where they were in the best way she knew how.

“That’s why my husband and I opened Play & Paint. We wanted a space where people could come as they are—no questions asked—be themselves and release their worries, their anxieties, and their troubles. And maybe—just maybe—they could leave a bit better than they came in. That’s our goal here. And as time goes on and I graduate with my counseling degree, I

hope to combine what I have learned academically and what I have always known about art to help those who need it most—to help those people like me.”

But this isn't McClanahan's only goal.

In addition to the stigma surrounding mental illness, McClanahan believes a certain amount of ignominy comes along with living in Williamson, which is something she—as both an artist and an entrepreneur—hopes to change.

“Unfortunately, the Hatfield and the McCoy feud isn't the only thing our town is known for,” she says. “As people all over the state and the country know, Williamson is at the heart of the opioid crisis here in West Virginia. And despite all the tourism and attention it receives, it really breaks my heart that this is all many people know about our town.”

According to a 2018 article published by the Charleston Gazette, over the past decade, pharmaceutical corporations shipped 20.8 million prescription pain pills into Williamson, a town of only 2,900 people. This equals approximately 7,000 pills per person, and of course not everyone in Williamson has taken or is currently taking these types of medications, which makes the numbers all the more staggering.

“Living in Southern, WV, we are constantly stereotyped by people both outside and inside the state. Many people—even here in WV—think we are poor, uneducated, uncultured hillbillies because of the things they see on television and in the media. And now because of what's happening in places like Williamson and other cities across the state with the pills, a lot of folks think we are all addicts, too, but that's not an accurate depiction of who we are. Sure, these problems do exist and there are a lot of hurting people here, who desperately need and deserve help. But what I want people to know and understand is there is so much more to Williamson

than what they are hearing and seeing. As an artist, I hope to prove that. I hope to show the world that there are a lot of amazing people here doing a lot of amazing things.”

In late 2017, McClanahan teamed up with a few other artists and passionate individuals to create what they call The Art Brigade, an assortment of like-minded people who are dedicated to reinventing their community and changing the ways in which not only outsiders see their hometown but the ways people living there see it, too. Although she is not at liberty to discuss all The Art Brigade has up its sleeves, she does say that—should all go according to plan—Williamson has a lot to look forward to in the future.

“Art has power,” exclaims McClanahan. “It can uplift, heal, and transform. And to tell you the truth, that is something the people of Williamson are in dire need of. If Play & Paint does one thing, I hope it shows our community—and everyone else, really—that there is so much more to life than our circumstances—we are so much more than the messes we find ourselves in. I want people here to know that we are more than what others say we are, and that we are certainly more than what even we think we are.”

In for “the long haul,” McClanahan says that she will remain faithful to her vision “‘til the work is done.”

“They say that nothing worth doing is ever easy, but then again, life itself isn’t easy. So if you’re going to do something hard, why not try do something worthwhile? That’s what I am trying to do with my life. At the end of the day, I only pray I will look back and think, ‘Wow, it was all worth it.’”

**Lori McKinney**

Hedged by an excess of dilapidated buildings and abandoned storefronts, in 2004, downtown Princeton, WV was but a mere shadow of what it had been only 30 years before. Once a thriving economic and cultural epicenter, most folks in town were under the impression that the district's glory days were well behind it. Reputed as a breeding ground of crime, drug abuse, and prostitution, most in the community viewed Mercer Street as a lost cause—the most hopeless of hopeless situations. But where everyone else saw despair and desolation, Lori McKinney, 40, saw opportunity.

But decades before McKinney, a successful musician, business owner, and community advocate, set her sights on Mercer Street in 2004, she was just another kid making mud pies in the backyard of her family home in Glenwood, WV, just a short 10-minute drive from Princeton. Despite her seemingly normal upbringing, however, she always felt a bit like a “fish out of water.” From her introspective thoughts to her artistic inclinations and big-city dreams, she never felt completely at home in her small-town surroundings.

“I was always craving something more than what I had,” she reminisces. “And with very few artistic opportunities in Princeton, which only increased my hunger for and curiosity of the outside world, I just wanted out. I was always searching for a way out.”

Like a mosquito hypnotized by a neon bug zapper, McKinney was drawn to bright lights and what she describes a “ta-da kind of world.” She recalls frequently begging her parents to ship her off to New York City, where she would enjoy a life of stage and stardom; however, to her displeasure, that never happened and was forced to settle for what she could get.

“I did show choir in school because that's what was there for us, you know. And I honestly of it—all of it. Everything from the bow ties to the sequins (A lot of sequins!) to the

choreography and the singing. In a way, I suppose I ended up majoring in show choir,” she laughs.

In 1996, McKinney found her ticket out of Princeton and was recruited into the Madisonians, “a sort of glorified show choir” at Virginia’s James Madison University. There, she majored in Musical Theatre, and during her last semester, she had the good fortune of studying abroad in London, England, where she says she discovered a unique sense of self and a clearer understanding of the world.

After graduation, McKinney spent the next few years auditioning for and performing in others’ productions; however, she soon realized that she was no longer satisfied by simply participating in art but desperately wanted to be a creator of art.

“After I got back from London, everything was different. I knew there was a different path for me than the one that I had been pursuing. I knew that I was a writer and an independent artist and I was looking for something . . . well . . . different. I’d always been fascinated with words and language, even as a kid. And the moment I slowed down and started combining that fascination with my love of music, it was pure magic. I started to have some really transformative experiences as a songwriter and began to recognize the potential it had to change not only my life but other people’s lives, which ultimately became my mission as an artist.”

For McKinney, there was nothing more powerful than the marriage of melody and lyrics, and she soon realized she wasn’t the only one who thought so. Upon meeting her “husband and soulmate,” Robert Blankenship, in 2004, which she describes as “hitting the jackpot,” the couple decided to plant roots in Princeton, McKinney’s hometown, where they began writing and recording together. They even started a band, Option 22, which quickly became recognizable around Princeton for its eclectic sound and inspirational message.

“I never planned to come back here, but I fell in love—in more ways than one. I fell in love with Robert. I fell in love with Princeton. I just fell in love. But as I remembered, there were still very few opportunities for artists and creative types here, and I knew that we could make a difference. I knew that just as much as I needed this place, it needed me, too.”

In addition to their band, McKinney and Blankenship also cofounded Culturefest World Music and Arts Festival in 2004, an annual weekend-long event of music and dance set against an awe-striking backdrop of mountains and sky.

“We wanted to afford other artists in our community a stage and a voice,” she says, “something I didn’t have much of growing up here. We also wanted to give music and art lovers something to look forward to. And while Culturefest was a great way to do that, and continues to be, we wanted to do even more for the people in and around Princeton.”

That’s when The RiffRaff Arts Collective was born.

In 2006, McKinney and Blankenship began eyeing a storefront on Mercer Street in Princeton’s downtown district, “the perfect place” to house their newly conceived business idea. However, as they well knew, the location was less than desirable.

“To say that nobody wanted Mercer Street is a complete understatement. A lot of people wouldn’t be caught dead here then, much less shop here or eat here,” says McKinney, looking down onto a street vastly different from the one she discovered just 14 years ago. “The community didn’t feel safe here and certainly didn’t want to be affiliated with some of the behavior that was happening.”

Despite having its basis in fact, McKinney says the truth is that while things were indeed “bad on Mercer Street,” they were not as terrible as many believed them to be.

“Much of the stigma and rumors surrounding Mercer Street were myths propagated by both the local media and various people within the community. Nevertheless, that was the widespread perception, and that is something we had to deal with going in. And to be quite honest, that is something we wanted to change, and we truly believed art had the power to evoke that change.”

Going against the grain, McKinney and Blankenship braved Mercer Street and completely refurbished the building that had caught their attention. Over the next several months, the pair lovingly crafted a home for what would eventually become The RiffRaff Arts Collective, a multifaceted enterprise that now boasts a state-of-the-art recording studio, a music school, and an art gallery. This effort—in conjunction with the rising popularity of Option 22 and Culturefest—generated a fresh, new interest in the community, and over the next several years, the couple began dialoguing and forming relationships with other like-minded people in the community—people who desired to see a revolution in downtown Princeton.

Birthered from the dedication and passion of a small group of on-fire Princetonians, with McKinney at the top, The Princeton Renaissance Project began working its magic in 2013 under the auspices of the Blueprint Community Program, which is sponsored by The WV Community Development Hub. Since its conception, the momentous organization has spawned a series of restorative initiatives geared toward creating a safer, more wholesome, and more vibrant Princeton—a Princeton its citizens can be proud of.

Today, The Mercer Street Grassroots District prides itself as one of the most vibrant and energetic arts and cultural districts in contemporary Appalachia. From its massive pavement-to-rooftop murals to its lush community garden to its host of specialty retail stores and unique eateries, downtown Princeton is a thriving hub of art and community. But for McKinney, this

evolution has been more than a coat or two of paint. For her, “it’s all about the people behind the paintbrushes.”

“The most rewarding thing about this experience has been the people. For every naysayer and pessimist out there who said it couldn’t be done, there has been two or three people to show up and make themselves available to the cause. But this is about so much more than seeing Princeton restored. It’s about humanity and compassion; it’s about our love for one another and our commitment to each other as a community. There’s nothing more spectacular than hearing ‘thank you’ as I walk down the street and being able to say that I was not alone in all of this. I only hope that we stay on this upward path and that we continue to evolve as a people to an even more vibrant, colorful, joyous, loving, and embracing place—that we continue to create opportunities for younger generations—for the young musicians, dancers, painters, and creatives of tomorrow—a sacred space where we exude a genuine sense of appreciation for each other and our art and our humanity. And so far, it’s looking pretty darn good.”

**Missy McCollam**

For more than a quarter of a century, The Old Brick Playhouse in Elkins, WV has been a cherished hub of culture and art, especially amongst the community's youth. Praised for its lengthy track record of spawning new generations of creative minds and providing various opportunities for authentic artistic experiences—even by the likes of former President and First Lady Barack and Michelle Obama—it's hard to imagine an Elkins without The Old Brick Playhouse. However, if one person remembers life before, it is the theatre's founder and executive director, Missy McCollam.

“Elkins has been an artistic community for years, but growing up here in the ‘70s was quite a bit different,” recalls McCollam, 51. “As a child, I wasn't really exposed to the arts, other than participating in one high school theatre production. It wasn't until I enrolled at James Madison University in Virginia that I seriously considered a career as an artist.”

The daughter of a successful entrepreneur, McCollam thought a career in business was future; however, in the springtime of her undergraduate days, she soon realized that wasn't to be the case at all. Well, at least not entirely.

“I enrolled as an international business student simply because my father owned a company that transported lumber overseas. But during my first semester, I signed up for a theatre course at, and after getting to know me and my talent a bit better, my instructor asked, ‘And why are you studying business again?’ Looking back on it, I suppose it was a fair question to ask,” she laughs.

Not long after switching majors, McCollam says she simply “fell in love with the theatre” and decided to further her studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where she earned an M.F.A. in Directing and Acting. Unable to get her fill, she journeyed across the

Atlantic to study at England's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, as well as various locations in Ireland and Africa. But despite her exotic adventures, McCollam says that she always had the plan to return to West Virginia, which she describes as "very odd."

"I say 'odd' because everyone wanted me to say 'I want to go to New York—I want to go to L.A.' But the truth is I never wanted to do any of that. I wanted to return to Elkins. The problem with that, of course, was there weren't any jobs for actors here."

Once home, McCollam, like many artists in the beginnings of their careers, began working a job as a waitress in a local restaurant to earn some extra money. But after one too many days of food-spattered aprons and heavy trays, she thought, "You know, I am really bad at waiting tables," and began exploring her alternatives.

"I went to my father, who was always very supportive of my aspirations, and told him I wanted to open a theatre. 'Alright,' he said, 'give me a business plan by 9 o'clock tomorrow morning.' That wouldn't have been a problem had I actually known what the hell a business plan was."

With the help of her brother, she scraped together a blueprint for what would soon become The Old Brick Playhouse. But to secure her father's help, he requested she give him a 10-year commitment.

"I was 24 years old when he asked me for those 10 years, which is really amazing because now I am 51, and I'm still here!" she exclaims.

When asked why she desired to come back to West Virginia, McCollam reiterates that she, "was an enigma."

“Adventure and exploration are an important part of growing up and developing a sense of self,” she says. “I believe that it’s only through this exit one can truly understand the concept of home. I traveled for about eight years, and all the while felt urgently homesick.”

Although she acknowledges many, especially artists, possess an almost inherent desire to flee the Mountain State, McCollam says it is more of a universal sentiment than some might think.

“You have heard that statement ‘the grass is greener on the other side’? Some people leave Appalachia because they seek what they perceive to be greater opportunity – others because they’d like to experience unfamiliar lifestyles. The same is true everywhere in the world, though. Some folks just want to get away. And for those who do leave, many eventually realize there’s no place like home. It gets a bad rap sometimes, for whatever reason. But the truth is, I love WV. My WV is full of beautiful, amazing, talented, and giving people. I am really proud to be a mountaineer, and I want to create an opportunity for others to be proud, too.”

Speaking of opportunity, since the theatre’s conception in 1992, McCollam has devoted her life to fostering various creative outlets for Elkins’ youth—outlets she herself wasn’t fortunate enough to have as a child in the same community. And with an alumni roster of over 4,000 youth who have worked with the theatre’s apprentice program, its various stage productions and summer camps, and its widely celebrated Polar Express Christmas attraction, it is safe to say that she has certainly done her part. “The only problem,” she says, “is funding.”

“As a nonprofit, 30 percent [of our funding] comes from ‘grant funding’, which means that those numbers are different every year,” says McCollam. “And oh how I wish I could count on one grant every year, but unfortunately those funding channels are never consistent, depending on political specifics. Our mission at The Old Brick is to enrich the lives of West

Virginians through live art. While our summer camps and Apprentice program entail a tuition fee, my one wish from the beginning was to make certain that any child or youth who wanted to participate could do so despite their economic situation. Today, student can request scholarship support and the OBP team finds it for them. We are so very lucky to live in a community who believes in investing in local youth because they never hesitate to sponsor Old Brick students. In fact, 60 percent of our students are on community scholarships. Nevertheless, it would certainly be nice to count on the steady support of our state and federal governments, but I don't foresee that happening anytime soon, despite my usual optimism.”

Since early spring, conversation surrounding the arts amongst Charleston's legislative circles has sparked genuine concern about the future of arts funding in the Mountain State. Between Gov. Jim Justice's decision to fire former Sec. of Education and the Arts Gayle Manchin in March, which was followed by the complete dismantling of the state department, “there is a lot to be afraid of,” McCollam admits. And despite the governor's newest initiative to merge the responsibilities of the former department with those of the Division of Culture and History and his continual reassurance that funding will not be cut, McCollam feels that WV has lost a true champion for the arts.

“During her tenure, The Old Brick collaborated extensively with former cabinet secretary Kay Goodwin and her excellent staff,” McCollam recalls. “We were lucky enough to receive funding that enabled us to provide programming for literally thousands of children and youth in our state. When Secretary Manchin came into office, our relationship continued, as did our collaboration. I respect each of those women [ . . . ] both [of which have] served as fabulous role models for me and have provided me with encouragement, inspiration, and support when I needed it the most.”

As for her feelings concerning the newly established Dept. of Arts, Culture, and History, McCollam says “it will take precious time to reinvent everything, and that in that time Arts groups will struggle.”

“You know what it takes to make it in WV? Grit! I have experienced many ups and downs in my life as an artist and as a director of a nonprofit organization. But despite all the blood, sweat, and tears—despite all the worry and grief that comes along with the job from time to time—I keep on keeping on. And you know something? I don’t plan on quitting any time soon. Just as much as I need art, I need these kids, and I’d like to believe they need me, too.”

Despite all the political uncertainty encircling the arts in WV, McCollam says the future of The Old Brick Playhouse is bright. With a series of new productions and attractions in the works, she says there is a lot to be excited about in Elkins.

“We have a lot up our sleeves here at OBP. And though we may be confronted by difficult times on occasion, we will to move onward and upward and continue to share our love of art and theatre with our wonderful community. If there is one thing I’ve learned over the course of my 51 years, it’s that the show must go on. And in the case of The Old Brick Playhouse, it will—I know that it will.”

**Debbie Palmer**

Today, Debbie Palmer, relishes a life of serenity and art. Now, four years into retirement, she spends much of her time tucked away in the basement art studio of her picturesque countryside home on the outskirts of Morgantown, WV, where she crafts intricately detailed mosaics inspired by the natural splendor of her surroundings. But when she's not up to her elbows in vibrant pieces of broken glass and cement, Palmer, 66, often reflects on her "very blessed life" with an earnest sense of gratefulness and awe. It is a life, she says, "that almost didn't happen at all."

Born in Schenectady, NY, and raised on the heirloom stories of her family's journey from the old country to the land of stars and stripes, Palmer, 66, the granddaughter of Italian immigrants and the child of first-generation American parents, always found herself immersed in the warmth and closeness of her "very large family," many of whom she says lived in the same apartment building, just a floor or two above.

"I had a very concrete and asphalt upbringing," she laughs. "But growing up in the city was always a lot of fun. At any point, I could wander out the door to a gang of neighborhood kids who were ready to play. And when I wasn't playing in the streets or parking lots with my friends, I was spending time with my family or in my bedroom, drawing and painting."

Always interested in art, Palmer realized early on that she had an obvious talent.

"I always knew I had something special and that I wanted more than anything to be an artist. But when I was growing up in the 1950s—even in a big city—pursuing art beyond a hobby just wasn't an option; it wasn't a viable academic path and certainly not something one did as a profession. So, when the time came for me to go to college, I decided to tap into my other interests: the sciences."

The first in her family to attend college, Palmer bid farewell to Schenectady in 1969 and journeyed westward to Ithaca, NY, where she enrolled as a biochemical pre-med student at Cornell University.

“Not being able to do what I really wanted, I satisfied my creative hunger by squeezing in as many arts electives as I could, which really got me questioning things.”

The summer before her senior year, Palmer snagged a job at a nearby hospital in hopes of obtaining references for medical school. But it wasn't long before she tired of the experience altogether.

“It just wasn't for me—not at all. I hated being in the hospital around disease and sickness. So, I returned the following semester to Cornell and had heart-to-hearts with a couple of my professors—one from the art department and another, who I was doing biochemical research with—and just kind of pieced out that I was going in the wrong direction.”

Despite grappling with her past and future, Palmer was faithful to her original plan and graduated with honors in 1973. Unlike many of her classmates, however, she crossed the stage with much more than a diploma in hand. Just a few years before, she met the man who would become her husband and immediately upon graduation, the pair decided to wed and venture off to Syracuse University, where Palmer finally had the chance to pursue her dreams. Much like a dog that's discovered an open fence gate, she bolted into her future as an artist.

“I look back and think how lucky I was to realize that I wasn't being true to myself. Unfortunately, that's something many people don't realize until it's too late. Then again, is it ever too late? Regardless, I'm just happy it happened when it did.”

In 1975, once the young couple had graduated yet again—this time her husband from medical school and Palmer with a B.F.A. in printmaking—they set their sights on a most unlikely place—unlikely for “a couple of northerners,” anyway.

“At the time, the only thing we knew about West Virginia was John Denver’s ‘Country Roads,’” she giggles. “But after doing some research, we realized Morgantown was the perfect place for us. My husband was looking for a residency in family medicine, and I for an M.F.A. program in printmaking, which was pretty specific. To our surprise, WVU had both.”

The plan, she says, was “four years and we’re out,” but it didn’t take long to realize that they wanted to stay, something Palmer attributes mostly to the city’s warm and inviting people and its overall attractiveness for raising a family.

Finally, with college life behind her, Palmer and her husband, settled into a new life in Morgantown. But after giving birth to her children and sending them off to school, she, like many parents of five-year-old children, found herself looking for something more, but she didn’t know exactly what that something more was.

“I never wanted to teach. I had never thought about it—not in the least. It wasn’t a part of the plan,” she says. “But when both of my boys were in Morgantown Day School, which doesn’t exist anymore [ . . . ] the art teacher left, and they said, ‘Will you teach art?’ I was like, ‘Well . . . I guess so.’ And then after a while I was like, ‘Wow, I think I really like this!’”

Though a complete jack-in-the-box-like surprise, Palmer says that she quickly realized teaching, especially high school, was her calling.

“The best part about that time in my life was getting to know those kids and trying to figure out what their special gift was,” she says. “It sounds a bit cliché, but I believe we all have something special buried deep inside us, and sometimes all it takes is someone to go searching

for it and to help us understand what that gift is and show us how to use it for our good and the greater good of those around us. I am so happy and honored and privileged to have been that person for so many children.”

Despite retiring from teaching in 2014, Palmer has continued her work with Morgantown’s children as the founder and director of BOPARC’s Arts in the Park summer program, which she jumpstarted in 1995.

“I began making friends in the teacher community in Morgantown and had become familiar with the challenges of teaching art in public schools, which is mostly due to a lack of funding. I wanted to provide a unique experience for kids that they weren’t getting in the classroom, specifically those kids who naturally gravitated toward the arts. Eventually, the focus changed from just creating art to getting them involved in something larger than themselves—projects that actually impacted where they lived and fostered a sense of ownership and pride in their community. After all, that’s what art is really about, isn’t it?”

Outside of Arts in the Park, Palmer leads by example, spending a lot of her spare time creating colorful conglomerations of shattered glass to adorn several Morgantown parks and public buildings. One of her favorite projects over recent years is a sprawling three-paneled tree of life mosaic, which stands along the banks of the Monongahela River near the city’s downtown district.

“The reason I love that piece so much is because each leaf was designed by a member of the community. Doctors, teachers, clergy people, you name it—they all came together to tell their stories and the story of their community. I love everyone brought their broken pieces together and created something beautiful. There’s a wonderful metaphor in there,” she chuckles. “But that’s what art does, you know? It brings people and their stories together in ways other

things can't and creates a unique sense of community where all our differences are not obliterated but are appreciated. Art is a powerful thing like that.”

Though her journey started out uncertain, if there is one thing Palmer knows for sure, it is that she has a purpose in life and that she has seen that purpose to fruition.

“Like a lot of other people, I spent a great many years in search of the one thing that would make me whole, and I am so lucky and blessed to have found that thing. I can only hope that the children I've encountered—many of whom are now adults—as well as this community, which has given me so much joy over the years are as inspired by me as I have been by them.”