



*How Appalachian People
Use Art To Make Change:*

STORIES OF THE POWER OF ART

The following profile is part of a series envisioned by the Appalachia Funders Network and written by Elizabeth Wright
Photo courtesy of the Cattywampus Puppet Council



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www.keeperofthemountains.org

KEEPER OF THE MOUNTAINS | SOLARFEST

A music festival celebrates solar energy solutions

In a 2012 [Earthjustice video](#), Keeper of the Mountains co-founder Larry Gibson guides the camera crew across the lush, wooded property on Kayford Mountain in Kanawha County, West Virginia that his family has lived on since the 1700s.

As his tour proceeds through the woods and up the grassy mountain, it ends at what should be a breathtaking view of rolling green mountains as far as the eye can see. Instead, Gibson reaches the apex only to unveil one of the largest mountaintop removal coal mines in Appalachia – 7,500 sprawling acres of gravel and rock devoid of any plant life, trees, or beauty. After almost 30 years of constant destruction on the mountain he called home, the sight still moves him to tears.

“I’ve cried myself to sleep many nights thinking what I could have done different that day, and what can I do tomorrow to make a difference,” Gibson says, wiping his eyes. Although Gibson passed away in 2012 not long after the video was filmed, his love for his mountain home continues to make a difference through Keeper of the Mountains, the organization he co-founded in 2004 to fight mountaintop removal.

Keeper of the Mountains President Paul Corbit Brown says a conversation they had shortly before Gibson passed is the inspiration for Keeper of the Mountains’ work today.

“Larry was very discouraged because after years of fighting mountaintop

removal, we hadn’t been able to stop it,” Brown says. “I said, ‘we can keep fighting what we don’t want or spend our energy building what we do want: clean, renewable energy and jobs for people in West Virginia and everywhere. So, let’s turn this mountain into a beacon, a victory garden. Let’s use solar to push our message out there.’”

The idea of celebrating solutions and building alternatives led to SolarFest, a solar-powered music festival hosted annually by Keeper of the Mountains in Fayetteville, WV. It’s another living example of Gibson’s influence – he hosted an informal gathering every July 4 on Kayford Mountain that brought family and friends together around food and music.

SolarFest is an ever-growing community event that opens attendees’ minds to sustainable energy alternatives by showing them what is possible and letting them experience it for themselves in a fun setting that celebrates art and culture while still actively fighting mountaintop removal.

“I’m now 20 years into this fight and the only time we get together is at the Capitol or chained to a bulldozer being arrested, protesting, and yelling,” Brown says. “Maybe there’s room in this movement to have a moment of joy and community that’s not quite so harsh and abrasive. The more critical thing is to find a way to win the hearts and minds of our community and the people around us. If all they ever hear is ‘no fracking, no mining, no, no, no’ – how do we say yes to what we want instead of always saying no to what we don’t want?”



Rasta Rafiki performing at Solar Fest – photo by Xavier Walter from KOTM website



Photo of mountaintop removal – photo by Paul Corbit Brown

The festival brings people in with live music, but also includes dozens of tents featuring green energy vendors and environmental groups who share the job opportunities and energy-saving options solar and other sustainable sources provide without destroying communities' natural resources and environments.

"To show people what solar can do, we have huge solar panels that sit there quietly, soaking up the sun, and powering the stage," Brown says. "A lot of people have misconceptions about it and how functional it is - to demonstrate fully, we let the music go into the evening and sometimes show a movie and set up a big screen on the stage. Then we remind people they're watching a movie that was powered by the sun today, so it becomes a great tool for outreach to show that solar is a viable thing and it works all the time." Solar vendors onsite are available to meet with attendees and often leave

with multiple appointments scheduled to set up installation or provide estimates.

Keeper of the Mountains is also aligning the festival with their goals of creating jobs and economic opportunities in the region. The festival invites artists and activists to speak between music performances, providing in-service training to inspire attendees to get involved and highlighting artists whose work addresses injustice. Through grassroots fundraising, crowdsourcing, and business sponsorships, they ensure musicians, artists, and the venue are paid for their work.

"It's an economic development tool," Brown says. "It's about finding ways to help people understand the concept of moving money around in the community. As that money flows, everyone is getting help from that. We offer a healthy alternative to this

problem and the legacy of coal, and we offer it in a fun, inviting way."

Keeper of the Mountains has also taken this approach in leveraging support for other Appalachian organizations through the KOTM Foundation and from their primary funder, the [EACH Foundation](#). EACH president and founder Lionel Shaw says Brown's work at Keeper of the Mountains inspired the foundation to expand its funding to the Appalachian region for the first time. EACH is giving away 100 percent of its funds in 2020 and closing its doors, pursuing legislation in its home state of California to increase the minimum amount foundations are mandated to give annually.

"We like to fund bootstrapped organizations that are on the ropes and might have to close down if we can't save them," Shaw says. "We understand the restrictions of government funding for the arts, particularly in Appalachia, and we are trying to pick up to fill those gaps. We know the healing ability of arts and music to bring people together, lift them up, and improve communities' health and wellness - that's why we give."

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Keeper of the Mountains is also providing exciting and important support to other communities impacted by manmade climate change and environmental exploitation through The Dandelion Project, including Flint, MI, and Puerto Rico. Learn more about this work at <https://www.keeperofthemountains.org/news/the-dandelion-project>

This is a project of The Appalachia Funders Network's Art and Culture Group, profiling innovative projects in Appalachia that infuse community economic development work with arts and culture in order to strengthen strategies and outcomes. Through the profiles, we sought to:

- + Bring attention to the ways that arts and culture can integrate into any sector and across just transition issues;
- + Lift up arts and culture work in the region as a way to draw in potential new funders to the region;
- + Show funders who typically don't fund arts and culture that using arts and culture strategies can amplify project impact in new ways;
- + Demonstrate how funders are already engaging with and supporting this work;
- + Share perspectives of how projects can be funded holistically and across multiple sectors.

The project was originally envisioned before a pandemic brought our economy and in-person social activities to a halt and before the profound national attention on racial injustice began creating new openings for changing broken systems. These simultaneous crises and opportunities are now the context in which these profiles debut, and their themes are even more salient: art heals; art builds power; art resonates when other forms of communication fall short; art helps us reimagine new ways of being. These stories illuminate what is possible when communities set culture as the root for positive transformation.

The Appalachia Funders Network works across the Central Appalachian region to accelerate an equitable Appalachian transition by convening and connecting funders for learning, analysis, and collaboration. We envision a healthy, equitable, and vibrant region that, through strong partnerships, civic engagement, and leadership, preserves our unique assets and provides prosperity for all. (See more about the Network at Appalachiafunders.org)

