



*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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analysis
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Cattywampus Puppet Council and the Good Guy Collective:

APPALACHIAN PUPPET PAGEANT & WHAT THE WATER TELLS ME

Hip-hop, theater, and puppets help grow new relationships and economies

The Appalachian Puppet Pageant takes to the streets of East Knoxville each year in a community parade that celebrates art, culture, and the resilience of the historically Black community it's rooted in. A 10-foot tall papier-mâché Dolly Parton puppet dances alongside papier-mâché animals to the sounds of live music while community groups and neighbors in masks and costumes march alongside each other in a spectacle of pure joy.

Parade participants typically work alongside the co-organizers, [Cattywampus Puppet Council](#) and the Good Guy Collective, for months leading up to the parade, creating their own puppets, imagery, and music in response to each year's theme. In this way, the community learns new creative skills and the parade tells a story that's woven from the experiences of each person and group who takes part.

But in 2019 as the parade was rained out and moved into a sheltered community space, Cattywampus Executive and Artistic Director Rachel Milford and [Good Guy Collective](#) organizer Jarius Bush looked around the room as MCs performed, people danced with puppets, and everyone laughed and had a good time. Realizing the sudden weather change and

disruption could have led to a disaster, Milford asked herself, "How did we still get everyone to play together?"

Getting everyone to play together is instrumental to the story of how these two seemingly disparate art and social justice organizations in Knoxville have created a collaboration together that is growing community relationships and new economies through art, culture, story, and finding collective joy.

The Good Guy Collective is a hip-hop collective that is comprised of an independent music label and community programs including a recording studio, hip-hop classes for youth, and hosting showcases to boost economic opportunities for performing artists. Cattywampus Puppet Council utilizes community-based theatre, parades, and participatory workshops to build power, creativity, justice, and liberation in the Southeast.

Most people don't associate hip hop with puppets, but shared vision, community needs, and lived experiences brought Bush and Milford together in 2016 in an artistic partnership grounded in a political and economic analysis that has expanded the community's notion of what is possible while expanding the creative reach of both organizations' missions.

"We realized that in general in East Tennessee, there is a tremendous lack of funding for this work unless it's Christian based," Milford says. "There is a lack of space, a lack of resources, so we got together and met with the idea of sharing space together to provide programming. What grew out of this meeting was a collaborative theater project and through this creation process of merging hip-hop, giant puppets, acting, spoken word, and movement all together; we also built strong relationships with one another and so many other community members."

WE REALIZED THAT IN GENERAL IN EAST TENNESSEE, THERE IS A TREMENDOUS LACK OF FUNDING

Bush adds, "I believe hip-hop is one of the most revolutionary art forms and it's a culture that comes from youth using whatever resources they have to express themselves – spray paint, dance, DJs – taking what you have and creating art from it. That's what marinates Good Guy and Cattywampus and how we work together – we both take what we have and make art with it."



Rachel Milford in a scene from What the Water Tells Me (photo courtesy of Cattywampus Puppet Council)

Storytelling is another common approach that links their work together, and the storytelling traditions that underlie both hip-hop and Appalachian cultures led to their first major collaboration – *What the Water Tells Me*, a theater piece that brought their different mediums together to tell a story about environmental justice and water issues in their community.

The collaborative process was an experiment that unfolded through its creation and ultimately involved almost 100 community members in bringing the final product to life. Bush wrote the soundtrack, composing beats, singing and performing the music while Milford directed and led the visual component of creating puppets and props with both bringing in collaborators focused on dance, costuming, and poetry.

“There’s an underlying method we operate in when we collaborate – the connection, the relationship with whatever space and place we step into,” Bush says. “The parade is an expression of creating together and it’s the same

thing with *What the Water Tells Me*. It’s cool to see all these different walks of life come into the same space and see that connection in creativity.”

What the Water Tells Me toured regionally in both urban and rural settings and included an audience talk-back that often led to conversations continuing into the night.

“The theme of how we come into the world innately connected to each other and the land, and how systems come in and sever that, it really resonated with people and created a space for people to tell their own stories,” Milford says. “We have a lot of gratitude because it often feels we have to create everything we want to exist here. We have gratitude when people participate and also help us create something, so people supporting it who didn’t think of themselves as artists was amazing.”

While Cattywampus and Good Guy Collective work together using art and culture, their work is rooted in strategies to shift power and create social change, including expanding

economic opportunities for the arts, artists and arts groups.

“We think about arts and culture as being the most important piece in driving any change we want because we are creatures of stories. If we want to create leverage to make changes on a local or national scale, we have to shift culture,” Milford says. “It’s a fundamental piece of our work. We believe everyone is an artist and that everyone has important stories to share and we see these projects as tools to help people feel empowered, give them a voice, and talk about what matters to them.”

Their work together has been formalized through support from Alternate ROOTS and its Partners in Action grant, providing funding for their work to continue and grow. Both Bush and Milford say their organizations’ work and their personal well-being have suffered from a lack of resources and arts funding in our region, particularly in general operating support and resources to build their capacity for their work. In recognition



The Appalachian Puppet Pageant makes its way through East Knoxville, with the giant Dolly Parton puppet in tow (photos courtesy of Cattywampus Puppet Council)

of these challenges, they are paying the support forward and leveraging their grant funds to boost resources for their broader communities.

Cattywampus is incorporating a Teaching Artist program into their work, providing income for local artists, and is also in its second year of running its Parade Youth Intern Squad, where LGBTQ+ identifying youth of color get paid to learn cultural organizing skills through helping to coordinate, create art for, and lead community outreach for the annual Puppet Pageant. The Good Guy Collective is supporting local artists and activists by hosting album release parties and providing

music entertainment to benefit local community organizations.

Bush and Milford say rooting the annual Puppet Pageant in East Knoxville to bring revenue into the community is another economic strategy they're working toward with their art, alongside providing arts education in schools and programs that have lost funding for arts programming.

"There are religious, economic, and political challenges to what we're doing," Milford says. "In general, arts funding in our region is geared toward tourism and trying to bring outside folks into our community when there

are people here, amazing artists, who don't have food or housing. We're swimming in social capital – we know how to work together, to work collaboratively and collectively, and Appalachia has so much to teach the rest of the country about how that's done because we've had to do it for so long out of necessity. We have amazing creative people and relationships, but the other challenges are real."

While their own story is reflective of the communities and the Appalachian region they are engaging, Milford says these stories can bring about the changes that are needed.



Jarius Bush, left, and Rachel Milford, right, in a scene from *What the Water Tells Me* (photo courtesy of Cattywampus Puppet Council)



“THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING STORIES AND SHIFTING CULTURE TO MAKE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE, I THINK IT’S TREMENDOUSLY IMPORTANT AND I THINK IT’S IMPORTANT THAT ALL THIS TRANSFORMATION WORK WE’RE TRYING TO DO BE JOYFUL AND PLEASURABLE,” MILFORD SAYS. “IT IS INHERENTLY HEALING TO TELL YOUR STORY, AND TO SEE YOURSELF AS SOMEONE WHO MATTERS AND WHOSE STORY MATTERS. GETTING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO MAKE ART AND BE IN COMMUNICATION IS A POWERFUL TOOL FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ORGANIZING.”

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)

