



*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  
collaboration*

# OPPORTUNITY SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA | RALLY SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

## Arts, culture, and craft entrepreneurs prove their value as economic drivers

In 2011, staff in the Office of Economic Development at the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVa-Wise) recognized a challenge. With a mission to encourage economic development in Southwest Virginia by connecting the community with the college's resources and building professional and leadership development, there was one piece missing: A culture of entrepreneurship.

"Entrepreneurship is critically important," says Shannon Blevins, Associate Vice Chancellor for Economic Development and Engagement at UVa-Wise. "Helping people identify their talents and passions, and helping them create their own jobs and business, they will stay with your community, they won't leave, and when you're thinking about retention and growth strategy, entrepreneurship is so important."

In the last 10 years of supporting entrepreneurs in Southwest Virginia, UVa-Wise and its partners have found that the talents and passions of communities often center around the

arts as a central connective tissue that pulls towns together, beautifies public gathering areas, and provides unique points of pride that invite tourism and inspire new economic innovations. It was a winding path to get there, but one that has strengthened not only entrepreneurship and economies, but the fabric of communities who've participated in the process.

In a region that had historically relied on one industry, the coal industry, to fuel its economy, UVa-Wise knew it would take a regional response to shift the culture to one that could grow and sustain community-based businesses. Over five years, they created and published a regional blueprint toward entrepreneurship, brought together dozens of entities in Opportunity

Summit events that strengthened partnership and collaboration by providing a one-stop-shop for would-be entrepreneurs, and hosted Entrepreneur Challenge competitions that provided investment grants to winners.

The lessons learned through these collaborative projects launched a unique network of entrepreneurship-support organizations that now provide a model across the state, with partners like the Virginia Tourism Corporation, The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, and Friends of Southwest Virginia working together with UVa-Wise to provide leadership and guidance to 33 different supporting organizations across 19 counties.



*Narrows RALLY project participants highlighting their work at the Narrows Fall Festival (photo credit: <https://virginiasmtnplayground.com/narrows-completes-rally-southwest-virginia-project/>)*

## THESE SMALL COMMUNITIES, YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW RESOURCEFUL THEY'VE BEEN

The years of collaboration and increasing partnership ultimately led to the Opportunity SWVA initiative and its RALLY program that stands for Real Action Leadership Learning (the Y stands for Yay!). RALLY provides hands-on learning and mini-grants, engaging community leaders in collaborative processes that support and sustain small businesses, often centered around arts and culture. In a region where arts heritage springs from a Do-It-Yourself mentality born of necessity and innovation, the connection with entrepreneurship is a natural link.

“We saw that entrepreneurs were in towns and communities that weren’t very business friendly,” Blevins says. “So we saw that we needed to provide additional support to create buzz around entrepreneurship, for leaders to see it as a viable part of strategies for economic development. We’re chasing larger industries that were out of the region, chasing huge projects, but entrepreneurship is just as important to economic development.”

To build business-friendly communities, RALLY brings together communities across sectors to envision what they want locally, identify a project, work together, build relationships and skills, and establish a strong network that can carry on the work after the RALLY experience ends. Participation includes a \$3,000 mini-grant for the community to kickstart their collective project.

Becki Joyce, Director of Community and Economic Development at UVa-Wise says RALLY works with communities in a two-phase process, supporting participants in identifying

a project together, then supporting them in the fundamentals of project management and providing coaching and mentoring to build leadership within the community to see the project to completion.

“One of the first things we do in a community is ask people to tell us what they love about where they live,” Joyce says. “We always get similar responses: family atmosphere, the friendliness of the community, the history and culture of our communities. The projects serve as reminders of that and instill pride in their community and the mini-grants go toward something they can attach to and celebrate about their place.”

Gate City, VA is one participating community that wanted to revitalize an old theater as part of their project, but they needed help getting the community to buy into the revitalization and needed assistance to apply for grants and fund the revitalization.

RALLY provided its \$3000 mini-grant, and engaged the community in cleaning the theater up, painting it and hanging lights. Since the theater didn’t have a roof, the community got creative with their limitations and turned it into an outdoor theater. To raise money, they hosted movie screenings and community events each weekend like a Great Gatsby viewing that included antique car parades and a costume theme. Because of the support of the RALLY program, the community’s work has evolved and they’ve moved forward with grants to revitalize and rebuild the theater.

Other communities like Pennington Gap and Dungannon have participated with projects to paint murals on windows and storefronts of downtown buildings that are awaiting revitalization. The town of Narrow’s RALLY project brought the community together to create large posters that marketed tourism and local businesses using photos taken by citizens and cultivated through a community-wide photo contest. The photos also

highlight available business space to encourage entrepreneurship, and the RALLY mini-grant was supplemented by support from the New River Valley Regional Commission, providing assistance in the start-up or expansion process for potential business owners.

The program has seen real successes, seeing participants grow in their leadership, including a natural outgrowth of RALLY participation that brought participating communities together to cross-pollinate skills and ideas, strengthening the regional fabric of an entrepreneurial spirit.

But one critical piece is at a crossroads: funding support for the critical mini-grants that give communities the kick-off resources to bring their collective visions to life ended in April.

“These small communities, you’d be surprised how resourceful they’ve been to stretch that amount and use it as a seed to grow such good projects,” Joyce says. “We’re looking now for the sustainability piece for communities to build onto that \$3,000.”

Since the program launched, 392 entrepreneurs have been supported and \$100,000 has been invested in regional businesses and communities, strengths that grow alongside the increased collaboration and partnership that sustains not only the programming but the participating communities.

“This region, over the last 10 to 15 years, has worked to establish itself as a destination for tourism,” Blevins says. “We have exceptional craftsmen, talented musicians, we have the food and Appalachian cuisine. There’s little bits and pieces of this throughout all these communities, and, the beauty of RALLY is that a community creates their own experience. All have their own personality and RALLY supports that by building on the natural, creative skillset of the region and building on those skills to monetize and build resources.”

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](https://Appalachiafunders.org))

