

Partners, Neighbors, and Friends: The Practice of a Place-Based Education

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At Emory & Henry College, our vision for a place-based education integrating service with learning led in 1996, to the approval of the creation of a new major in Public Policy and Community Service. A rigorous and interdisciplinary service learning major, all of its courses are designed to help students better understand the impact of local, regional, national, and global structures and institutions on social change. As the curriculum evolves, we are institutionalizing in it a systematic study of several primary conceptual themes: citizenship, service, religion, public ethics, cultural diversity, public policy, place-based politics, social justice, and social change. The program aims to empower students by enabling them not only to understand critically the necessity and processes of social change but also to become agents of change in Southwest Virginia, Appalachia, and beyond, while they are students.

Building a place-based model of education means that we not only challenge but also dismantle the old divisions and boundaries between what is not education and teaching and what is. To this end, in 1996 the College also established the Appalachian Center for Community Service. All of the service components for the major and the other service learning courses offered throughout the curriculum are set up, monitored, evaluated, and coordinated through the Center. The Center is also responsible for overseeing three significant scholarship programs that require students to perform community service in exchange for financial assistance: the Bonner Scholars Program, the Appalachian Center Associates Program, and an AmeriCorps program.

Campus-wide service projects and events, as well as the ongoing partnerships with agencies, organizations, and places throughout Southwest Virginia are all the responsibility of the Center's staff.

Working in these places and partnerships are students who have become engaged in service for a variety of reasons, blurring the lines between service performed for classroom learning, scholarship expectations, and personal commitment. At any given time, in any given place, a range of students are involved. As our model for a place-based education develops, we are finding that this education is too large and too urgent to be contained by a single classroom or lecture format.

Building a culture of service and enacting a model of place-based education requires more than institutional structures and policies. An education that takes seriously the life of a place necessitates thoroughgoing attention to three critical educational and political practices. The first practice is *reflection*. Service without reflection is pointless charity, perpetuating the prevailing structures and systems arrayed against our places and our common life. When thoughtfully planned and implemented, reflection acts to connect students' classroom experience with their field experiences, challenging the forces of oppression and neglect. Students' experiences in real places with real people help to form a lens through which theories are tested and the limits of concepts are pushed. Journals, class rituals, artistic expressions, one-on-ones with classmates, small group discussions, class discussions, essay tests, personal autobiographies, and provocatively posed personal response papers are but a few of the means of reflecting critically on experience, substantively and relevantly joining theory and practice.

Social justice is the second practice necessary in place-based education. If we are not to be a part of the general tendencies of the dominant culture and society in the first years of the twenty-first century, we must look upon our relationships with students, custodial and support staff at the College, and the people and places of our area not as resources for our work, but as part of the long processes of building economic and social democracy in these places. In our work with places and people, we continually ask ourselves why are we in these places, doing this work. Is it because of the classroom, or is it because of the integrity and future of the place itself? Moreover, when we move beyond seeing ourselves and our students as transients in the community, and come to realize that all of us have a mutual interest in the outcome of the issues and questions we are facing, justice becomes a foundation upon which we build our relationships.

A commitment to social justice also influences the type of courses we offer, the structure of those courses, and the ways we encourage student leadership. We consider teaching and learning as collaborative endeavors, ongoing, and deeply interrelated. In this model, teachers, students, our neighbors in the community, and the places themselves—all both teach and learn. In the classroom, students always sit in a circle; take responsibility for leading portions of class discussion on a daily basis; are provided with class time to tell their own stories, and are asked to contribute poems, music, visual art, meaningful quotes, and other material that will help the class' understanding of that person and the issues being dealt with by the group in that session.

Collaborative partnerships are the final and most critical practice of a place-based education. We are now working to build a sustainable partnership with the people of two places. The first is eastern Washington County, Virginia. The second partnership is with Caretta, in

McDowell County, West Virginia. Both the Caretta and the eastern Washington County partnerships raise a number of important citizenship and justice issues, pointing to many of the failures of the new economy.

Washington County is the fifth largest county in Virginia, stretching from the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the south and east, across a broad limestone valley running on a northeast-southwest axis, and to the crest of the Allegheny Mountains to the north and west. Primarily a rural county, Washington County has a population of nearly 50,000 people.

In the towns and counties of Southwest Virginia, there is arguably not a county or a county seat as prosperous, or as concerned about its marketing image, as Washington County and the county seat of Abingdon. Abingdon's appearance of economic vitality is due largely to the high percentage of professionals in the town and an aggressive public relations strategy sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and the County's Tourism Office. A regional center for the performing and visual arts, with a diverse arts community, Abingdon's proximity to Interstate 81 and the vacation areas of Grayson Highlands and western North Carolina enables it to play host to a thriving tourist trade. Fast becoming a retirement center, Abingdon enjoys a reputation for its sophistication, beauty, and pleasant quality of life. Washington County is one of the few counties in Southwest Virginia that is not dramatically losing population. The county touts itself as a welcoming place for those individuals, businesses, and industries wanting to become a part of the new economy.

Looking only at Abingdon and the county-sponsored promotional campaign, Washington County demonstrates a remarkable divergence from the struggles beleaguering many places in Southwest Virginia and Appalachia. By looking at the whole place of Washington County,

particularly eastern Washington County, we realize that the county is not so different from the places that have provided most of the resources and much of the labor that have made possible the new economy. A place-based education compels us to examine the multiplicity of forces and contradictions that constitute this place, running counter to the images of success and upward mobility many people have of Washington County. When we look to the people who live along the back streets of Abingdon, in the rural hollows stretching up from the central valley into the mountains, and in the rural communities outside the Abingdon-Interstate 81 corridor, we easily find the contradictions and conflicts that define this place, shaping and limiting the lives of many people who live here.

The first years of the new global economy and prosperity were also years when many local businesses closed in the small towns and hamlets of eastern Washington County. Places outside the Interstate 81 corridor that had once had been thriving trading centers for the surrounding agricultural area witnessed their entire business sections wither. For localities adjacent to the Interstate, the former business sections were replaced by convenience stores located at the ends of exit ramps. Large tracts of farmland and smallholdings alike have been sold for housing developments and industrial parks. During this same time period, there was a widening disparity between Abingdon's wealth and the standards of living that often prevailed in the eastern portion of the County.

Washington County and Abingdon's current status as the preeminent localities in far Southwest Virginia make civic local leadership difficult in the communities outside of Abingdon. However, with the Meadowview Civic Club, Glade Spring Town Square, Inc., Meadowview Volunteer Fire Department, the Meadowview Ruritan Club, several local churches,

and other organizations and concerned individuals, we are forging a partnership focused on serving the needs of children and youth in the two school districts of the eastern portion of the County.

As part of the process of place-based partnerships in eastern Washington County, the Appalachian Center hosted on the Emory & Henry campus a series of focus groups in which over two hundred persons from the places of this area were invited. Held over several weeks, the informal brainstorming discussions centered on three questions. What are the needs and issues facing this part of Washington County? What are the resources, assets, and strengths of our communities? Building on these resources and strengths, how can we better work together to meet the needs of the people and places of eastern Washington County? From these conversations, a range of work is evolving and a priority list is emerging to guide future work. Beyond the ideas and input, which are essential to the place-based partnership we are working to build, this process demonstrated anew the Center's willingness to listen and respond to ideas and concerns of persons and places not traditionally part of the College's work.

Today in Washington County, students and staff members are working to develop community centers in Meadowview and Damascus. Students are helping to organize a locally grow produce outlet, offering farmers alternative revenue sources as the traditional tobacco market declines. Teams of students have helped host a large gathering of middle and high school students from eastern Washington County, focusing on leadership empowerment and citizen education. Developing regional hiking and biking trails, recruiting and conducting hearing and sight screening clinics for very young children from families with high financial need, community sponsored clean-up and tree-planting days, tutoring in math and reading for young

learners in need of individualized attention, and group mentoring work are but a few of the means by which students are helping address local problems. From a larger perspective, students and staff are working to address policy and justice issues by working with the County's Department of Social Services to investigate the impact of welfare to work legislation on the people of eastern Washington County. Students have worked to write grants to bring safe drinking water to a local community not served by a public water supply. As individuals and teams, students have worked with citizens to conduct surveys, resource mapping, and needs assessments in a number of places in the area.

West Virginia's southern most county, McDowell, is located in the Allegheny Plateau. McDowell rests atop the richest and most abundant vein of bituminous coal ever discovered by humans. In the early days of the industrial revolution in the county, there were mines in which the coal seams were seventeen and eighteen feet high. The quest for the wealth derived from this natural resource is the historical and cultural reason for McDowell's astounding population figures. In 1865 there were less than 2,000 people in McDowell. By 1900, at the beginning of the industrialization of the area, the population was 18,747 people. In 1948, at the height of the post-World War II economic boom, the population was over 100,000 people. Today, there are less than 28,000 people living in McDowell County.

While the population figures for McDowell County are startling, the social costs and lived experiences behind those figures are even more sobering. Promotional material from the 1930s and 1940s touted McDowell as the "Nation's Coal Bin," "America's Fireplace," and the "Billion Dollar Coalfield." Today, the County is now the twelfth poorest in the United States, with the highest rate of teen pregnancy in West Virginia. Fully one-fourth of every household in

the county receives some form of government assistance. As it has been for over a century, companies not located in McDowell own either the surface rights or mineral rights, usually both, to 85 percent of all the land in the County. Until the later years of the twentieth century, the coal companies' ironclad control of every facet of life in the County severely hindered the building of democratic traditions. Today, civic organizations, grassroots democratic movements, and citizen engagement, are all coming to exert a profound impact on life in McDowell, particularly in Caretta.

Caretta was originally owned and controlled by George L. Carter and his Carter Coal Company. One of two towns operated by Carter in the Big Creek District of McDowell County, the town was named by joining Carter's wife's name, Mayetta, to Carter's own surname. Although Caretta was built as a model coal town, drawing attention to the amenities it offered, there was little room for democratic processes. Refusing to allow the possibility of unionization, taking any such attempts by the miners as a personal insult, Carter's son sold the town and the company to United States Steel in the mid 1940s.

US Steel, its subsidiaries, and successor, Olga Coal, operated the mines at Caretta until the middle 1980s, when operations ceased. When the company pulled out, what little public infrastructure was in place soon collapsed. The school was closed due to declining enrollment, the water treatment facility ceased operations. In anger and protest, seven Caretta women began to organize their neighbors. This group lobbied for and forced the County to build a water treatment facility, one of the few in the County. They helped established the first year-round, children's day care facility in McDowell. With time, the people organized Big Creek People In

Action (BCPIA) as a democratically run citizens' action group concerned not just with Caretta but also with the entire Big Creek District.

An intergenerational, multi-racial, economically diverse group, BCPIA is our host organization in McDowell. The visionary and creative leadership of Franki Patton Rutherford, Executive Director of BCPIA, and the work of Regina Sanders, Dyanna Spriggs, and Mavis Brewster have ensured the growth of our partnership in Caretta. There is a flowering friendship and support network between members of BCPIA and a number of students involved in community service at Emory & Henry. Rutherford and her colleagues design placements for students, write grants to support the work of BCPIA, conduct reflection sessions for visiting students, and make presentations on the Emory & Henry campus about Caretta and BCPIA's ongoing work in that place.

To address years of neglect on the part of larger, elite colleges and universities, the College's community service and admissions staffs are working aggressively to recruit McDowell County students to the service-based scholarship programs at the College. The College actively supports an ACT tutoring program that BCPIA conducts in the local high school. Because of the distance from Emory & Henry, sixty-eight miles, the primary service engagements in McDowell County are either short-term, day or weekend events, or summer-long work. Students have funded and organized seasonal carnivals for children, and housing rehabilitation work. Students have investigated allegations of prejudicial decisions against women involved in domestic violence cases in the McDowell County court system, and worked as tutors in an adult literacy program. They are producing videos and publicity materials for BCPIA.

The collaborative partnerships in both eastern Washington County and in Caretta have been processes of place-based trust building. Place-based trust is a distinctly different process than college-based trust, refusing to accept the traditional hierarchies and class divisions that have formerly defined our relationships with these places. The center of gravity is shifting from places working to earn the College's trust, to the College working to prove its trustworthiness. A long and fragile process, building a trust that is grounded in place means that as an educational institution we have acknowledged publicly the distance and elitism that has defined our previous relationships in those places. Before launching our place-based work, we committed to allowing the people of a place to define the terms and parameters of our relationship in that place. We began our partnerships by apologizing for our years of containment within the divisions of class and intellectual snobbery, that sees places outside of the academy as objects to be studied and consumed. We work to assure citizens that in our commitment to the places around us we want to be partners with them over the long haul. In the instances in which a student or a project does not meet expectations, Tal Stanley, the Volunteer Service Coordinator, who has oversight over all the place-based partnerships and service programming for the Appalachian Center, immediately addresses citizens' concerns.

In our efforts to form these collaborative partnerships, we apply the same practices of social justice that we apply in the classrooms. Stanley understands himself not so much as an agent of the College and its educational program as a fellow citizen and neighbor. He lives in eastern Washington County, his children attend the public schools there, and his family is active in a number of civic organizations. Stanley's extended family has deep roots in McDowell. Working to establish the foundations for these partnerships, he has refused to take control or to

provide any agendas, advice, or opinion to residents or groups, preferring to spend the initial time of these relationships listening and talking with citizens as they speak of their places and their lives. He has given much time to learning the stories of these places, recognizing the local names used for neighborhoods and areas, and understanding the networks of kin and neighbors that define the social fabric of both eastern Washington County and McDowell County. This has involved visiting with people in their homes, attending civic meetings, talking with community leaders as well as with those persons not thought to be among the leadership of a place. The building of a place-based trust also involves the civilities of being a good neighbor: attendance at funerals; congratulatory notes at weddings and graduations; the support of bake sales and bean suppers; patronizing local merchants, and allowing yourself to be laughed at and made fun of because “nobody down at the College does real work.”

We are also committed to making sure that every service event, whether short-term or long-term, leaves the place materially better than it was before the service work. This has meant that we have provided communities with collections of oral histories and artistic renderings of places and events, produced web pages for local agencies and organizations, made possible community carnivals for children, and through financial support and the work of volunteers helped enable the expansion of a number of community service programs serving the people of the areas in which we partner. Additionally, the Appalachian Center has opened the doors of the College to host events on the campus and assumed the financial burden for many activities, both on and off campus.

Demonstrating that we can be trusted also means giving attention to the small things that make civic engagement possible. After a service event or meeting in the community, whether at

Caretta or at one of the places in eastern Washington County, students and the Volunteer Service Coordinator are never the first to leave, but are willing to stand around and talk. Following an event, our people help make sure the garbage is taken away; help straighten the chairs; help with cleaning and moving the tables, and volunteer to sweep the floors and mop the kitchen. In a surprisingly short time, this patient building of trust and the doing of tasks often overlooked have produced profound results. Both locally and in McDowell, we have shown that we refuse the old divisions that formerly defined our relationships. Our students and our staff have shown that we are worthy of our neighbors' trust. Increasingly, we are regarded as partners and as friends.

These four years have taught us much. To adapt the lyrics of Sweet Honey in The Rock's *Little David Play on Your Harp*, "not everyone who talks about it, knows about it." A place-based model of education is not defined in theory or talking, but in the doing, both in the classroom and in the places of our partnerships. And we are fast coming to understand that the future of our common life depends on how well we learn the lessons our places are teaching us. But we are also learning that as important and critical as the lessons are, the building of a place-based education is as simple as building an honest relationship and being a good neighbor and citizen, refusing to run when the circumstances are difficult. In this process, we hope to provide our students with the civic, moral, and intellectual tools to care for the places of their lives, for all their lives, and by so doing secure the future of our own good places, Caretta, West Virginia, and eastern Washington County, Virginia, for the children who will come after us.

A tenth-generation Southwest Virginian, Tal Stanley grew up in Dublin, graduated from Emory & Henry College and received his Ph.D. in American Studies from Emory University in Atlanta. He is the Director of the Bonner Scholars (a service-oriented scholarship), and the Volunteer Service Coordinator at the College's Appalachian Center for Community Service. Tal is currently working on a book-length manuscript using the historical and biographical material his family had collected from places throughout the Appalachian region for over 150 years as the basis for a cultural and political history of McDowell County, West Virginia, and Newbern, Virginia. He is married to Susan Stanley, and they have two children, David and Sarah. In addition to his family and their accomplishments, Tal is inordinately proud of his vegetable garden, apple trees, and flock of Rhode Island Red and Barred Rock chickens.

A native of Charleston, West Virginia, Steve Fisher graduated from Wake Forest University and received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Tulane University. A long-time activist for social change in Appalachia, Steve has written and spoken extensively on the region and struggles for democracy in the mountains. He has been at Emory & Henry for twenty-nine years, and is now the Director of the Appalachian Center for Community Service and the program in Public Policy and Community Service. In 1999, he was named the Carnegie and CASE Baccalaureate Professor of the Year. Steve takes excessive pride in his flower gardens.