Stories of Health in Rural Appalachia

DEVELOPING AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY ART, POETRY AND FICTION BY PEOPLE FROM RURAL APPALACHIAN COMMUNITIES
Introduction:

The people of rural Appalachia face a disproportionately high prevalence of poor health, including a high percentage of individuals who suffer from diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer. Additionally, they encounter many external obstacles to improving their health status; they struggle with a health professional shortage, high poverty levels, high prevalence of drug addiction and limited access to healthy food and clean water. The coal-mining industry contributes to the poor health of rural Appalachia. However, many people are unwilling to divulge their understanding of the coal industry’s effect on their health out of respect for the aspects of their culture and familial history that are closely intertwined with the coal industry. Sometimes, what is difficult to vocalize is easier expressed through visual art, poetry and fiction. I want to create an anthology of visual art and literature that reflects the struggles and triumphs people of rural Appalachia experience in maintaining their health and wellness today.

Background:

Growing up in a small Kansas town and witnessing first-hand how my rural community changed over time sparked my interest in other rural communities across the United States. Throughout my undergraduate career at the University of Kansas, I developed a fascination with the changing culture and environment of rural Appalachia. I created alternative spring break trips to Whitesburg, KY, and Appalachia, VA during my sophomore and junior years of college. I wanted to allow the participants in my alternative spring break the opportunity to learn how coal mining has shaped the culture and socioeconomic environment of rural Appalachia. We met with local activists and community members to better understand the struggles rural Appalachian communities face today and learn about how local people are addressing these issues at the grassroots level. While I was in Kentucky and Virginia, it became clear to me that many Appalachians are concerned about how poverty, limited access to healthcare, and environmental changes related to coal-mining have affected the health of their families and fellow community-members.

After returning to Kansas, I continued conducting my own research on the unique challenges people face in maintaining their health in rural Appalachia. However, due to a strong sense of pride in the hard labor their family members and ancestors poured into the coal mines, as well as a fear of speaking ill of the powerful coal companies, issues related to coal mining, including health concerns, can be sensitive subjects for many people of rural Appalachia. Because of this, it can be difficult for Appalachian’s to freely tell their stories of health, especially to an outsider like me. This is why I want to use art and literature to access Appalachian peoples’ unique stories of and concerns over health.

I studied English literature in college, because I am interested in the many ways people tell their stories. I want to utilize the skills I developed as an English major to access the stories of health and healthcare in rural Kentucky and Virginia through art and literature. I will use these stories, as well as the stories I hear by meeting with and talking to activists and physicians in the region, to produce a short anthology that is a compilation of contemporary art, poetry and fiction related to healthcare in rural Appalachia. I hope that it inspires critical reflection on the state of healthcare in the U.S., as well as reflection on the strength of community action and solidarity.

Description:

I will visit rural Kentucky and Virginia at the start of the summer (June 1-21) to collect stories, information and art, and then use the rest of the summer to create an anthology of art, poetry and fiction.

For instance, a page in the anthology might include a piece of art like this one:
This above image is a small section from a larger poster created by the Beehive Collective called “The True Cost of Coal.” The illustration depicts a frog with back pain caused by working at the mine, a mother frog in a garden who has had her gall bladder removed (visible scar) and cannot grow healthy food to feed her family due to the lack of access to clean, healthy water (black water flows from the tap). In the bottom right-hand side of the image, a frog is paying a mule for Oxycontin pills and bottled water.

Throughout the anthology, I would refrain from directly interpreting the art for the viewers, to avoid putting words in the mouths of the artists and writers. Instead, I will include information I’ve gathered through research on the state of health and healthcare in rural Appalachia or interviews that I’ve acquired by meeting with community members and physicians to accompany the images. The goal of including this other information would be to facilitate informed interpretation of the art, poetry and fiction on the part of the readers of the anthology.

Timeline:

A large portion of my summer will be spent conducting research online and maintaining contact with organizations that can provide me with access to art, poetry and literature from rural Appalachian’s online. I will, however, spend three weeks in rural Kentucky and Virginia, meeting with physicians, scholars, activists and historians.

March 8-16 I will conduct research to acquire a more complete picture of the unique struggles people of rural Kentucky and Virginia face with regard to health and healthcare.

June 1 Drive to Hazard, KY.

June 2-7 I will meet and volunteer with physicians and healthcare providers at the Center of Excellence in Rural Health in Hazard, KY.

June 8 Drive to Whitesburg, KY.

June 9-16 I will meet with and shadow physicians in Whitesburg, KY. I will also use this time to meet with historians, activists and community members through
Mountain Justice, a regional activist network, and Appalshop and Appalachian Media Institute, an organization that has a rich collection of art and media created by local people.

**June 17**
Drive to Appalachia, VA

**June 18-20**
I will meet with family physicians in Appalachia, VA. I will also spend an afternoon with AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers at Southern Appalachia Mountain Stewards.

**June 21**
Return to Kansas City.

**June 21-July 28**
I will continue organizing the anthology, conducting research, and maintaining contact with the organizations I worked with in Kentucky and Virginia. I will send them each a completed copy of my anthology to read (and correct if necessary) before the summer ends.

**Methods:**
A large portion of my work for this project will consist of independent research that I conduct online and through the interlibrary loan at KUMC. However, I will not be able to create the anthology without assistance from a number of organizations and physicians. I have been in contact with several individuals who I worked with when I planned the alternative spring break trips to Whitesburg, KY, and Appalachia, VA, (e.g. Elizabeth Barret and Dave Cooper), and I am currently reaching out to physicians and other community members. Here is my list of contacts as of now:

**Elizabeth Barret**
Director of Appalshop Archive
Appalshop and Appalachian Media Institute
Elizabeth@appalshop.org

Elizabeth Barret and I have communicated about my interest in utilizing the archive of Appalachian media and art at Appalshop.

**Dave Cooper**
Director of Mountaintop Removal Roadshow
Mountain Justice
Davecooper928@yahoo.com

Dave Cooper helped me organize the alternative spring breaks when I was an undergraduate student, and I have contacted him about helping me with this new project. He does a lot of work with community members and travels around the U.S. teaching people about the effects of mountaintop removal on rural communities.

**Ralph Fugate**
Southeast KY Regional Coordinator
Center of Excellence in Rural Health
Hazard, KY 41701
606-439-3557
Rfu222@uky.edu

I will work with Ralph Fugate to set up a volunteering and shadowing experience at the Center of Excellence in Rural Health rehabilitation center in Hazard, KY. This will allow me to meet with
physicians and healthcare providers who work in Hazard, KY, and talk about unique problems that rural Kentuckians face as well as the ways the Center of Excellence in Rural Health addresses these issues.

Matthew Hepler
Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards
511 Main Street
Appalachia, VA 24216
samsva@gmail.com
276-565-6168

I worked with SAMS during one of my spring break trips, and I plan on meeting with them mainly to discuss the effects mountaintop removal strip mining has had on the health of rural Appalachians.

Mountain Comprehensive Health
Whitesburg Medical Center
226 Plaza Lane
Whitesburg, KY 41858
606-633-4871

I will volunteer with and shadow physicians who work at Mountain Comprehensive Health to learn about their efforts to provide comprehensive care to the community members of Whitesburg, KY, and the difficulties they face in providing care in a rural community. Additionally I want to discuss that they provide personalized care based on the unique health problems of the Whitesburg population, like Black Lung.

Dr. Marlene Bielecki, M.D.
Family Medicine
226 Plaza Lane
Whitesburg, KY 41858
606-633-4871

I will meet with Dr. Bielecki to shadow her and talk to her about what she thinks are the main challenges for rural Appalachian communities with regard to health maintenance and healthcare access.

In addition, there are several organizations that I plan on maintaining contact with via email only. These organizations include:

1. Outta Your Backpack Media: a youth-based media group designed to counter misrepresentation in the media. Email: Obym.org
2. Aurora Lights: an organization that brings together people with different talents who have a shared interest in creating a multimedia representation of history and culture in Appalachia. Email: auroralights.org
3. Beehive Collective: an art collective that has created large works of art about coal-mining and resistance in Appalachia. Email: pollinators@beehivecollective.org

Budget:

My budget exceeds the Clendening Stipend by $330, but I have budgeted my spring semester loan money so that I will have $1,000 left over to use during the summertime to supplement the stipend.

<p>| Kansas City | June 1-July 28 |</p>
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**Bibliography:**


