

2008 Brushy Fork Annual Institute
Opening Address
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I'm going to share with you a story this morning that starts 45 years ago at the dawn of the War on Poverty. I heard this story first hand in 1994 when I had the good fortune to serve as facilitator for the Kentucky Appalachian Task Force, a group of leaders charged by Governor Brereton Jones to set priorities for development in East Kentucky.

The group included former and future governors, college and university presidents, Appalachian experts and recognized community leaders. We heard from people like John Whisman, who was considered to be the "Architect of the ARC" and Al Smith, former Federal Co-Chair of the ARC. One of the task force members was former Governor Ned Breathitt, who passed away in 2003.

I sat with Governor Breathitt at lunch during one of the Task Force meetings, and I took the opportunity to ask him if the issues of the 1990's had the same intensity as those of the early sixties when he became governor. He thought for a moment, then said, "No, no, I don't think they do."

Breathitt ran for governor in 1963 supporting civil rights. Let's recall some of the events of that year:

In May, Bull Connor used police dogs and fire hoses on civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, while television cameras rolled.

In June, NAACP representative Medgar Evers was murdered outside his home in Jackson, MS.

In August, Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech before 200,000 people in Washington, DC.

In September, four young girls were killed by a bomb at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

And in that year, Ned Breathitt ran for Governor of Kentucky on a platform of racial integration.

Here's how he told the story...he said:

The night before the election my opponent went on TV with a Bible on the desk in front of him, and the flag behind him. He looked straight into the camera and said, "If I am elected Governor, there will be no integration by executive fiat in Kentucky—I'll give this issue to the legislature and they'll know what to do with it."

Breathitt paused, chuckled, and continued:

Well, everybody knew exactly what that meant. There was no way the legislature would have passed integration in 1963. So I was worried—I figured my chances were pretty slim after that. And it was mighty close, but I won.

On election night, I got a phone call. It was John F. Kennedy. He said, “Governor, I’d like to congratulate you on your victory.” I told him, “Mr. President, I’m sorry I wasn’t able to give you a better margin.” Kennedy laughed and said, “Well, I know how that is!” You see, Kennedy had just barely squeaked in, too.

“Now listen, Governor,” Kennedy went on, “I’ve got some ideas about what we can do to help those folks down there in East Kentucky. I’d like to come down there and talk with you about it, just as soon as I get back from Dallas.”

Breathitt’s voice trailed off.

It was November 1963. Kennedy never came back from Dallas, but his dream of helping the people in the mountains survived. Under Lyndon Johnson, and with the guidance and tireless efforts of countless local, state and national leaders, the Appalachian Regional Commission was born and the War on Poverty began.

Today, hundreds of miles of improved roads, new water systems, and other community development projects attest to the work that poured forth from that vision. And while much remains to be done, we who have the privilege to carry such work forward do well to remember that we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Governor Breathitt was able to see another part of that bold vision brought to life as well. In 1966, under his leadership, Kentucky passed the first state civil rights law in the South.

This story would stand well enough on its own as it echoes such poignant moments from our nation’s history. But it also ties together two important themes that I’d like to reflect upon today.

The first of those is the ongoing struggle to address persistent poverty in Appalachia. And the second is the issue of diversity, and what it means to try to break down the walls, or at least find the doorways in the walls that divide us, by race, by ethnicity, by language, by gender, or by socio-economic status.

And these two themes, diversity and poverty, are not coincidental—they are inevitably tied together. And they are both critical issues that we need to address for our communities to move forward.

Over the last few years here at the Institute we’ve been talking about community transformation, and what it means for a community to be involved in the work of transforming itself—because obviously, no one else can transform your community for you. No amount of outside expertise, no amount of funding, can transform your community. Communities are transformed from within, by committed citizens—people like you.

And because we have had the privilege of working with so many of you over the years, we have begun to observe some key elements of transformation. We see how important it is to bring new people into the work of leadership. Communities engaged in transformation pay attention to the job of increasing their pool of leaders.

We have seen how important community spark plugs are—that one person who says “I will make this happen,” who gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night with that thought in their mind. But we know that spark plug can’t do it alone.

So we also know that transforming communities means building strong organizations to carry the work forward, to garner resources, and take collective action. Neither the organization without a spark plug, nor the spark plug without an organization will accomplish a fraction of what can be done when the two are combined.

But even a community with active spark plugs and strong organizations may find itself still struggling, still held back as if by some invisible force. Our region is rich in thoughtful experienced leaders, and we have a wealth of remarkable organizations doing excellent work. And yet our region still lags behind the nation as a whole. What is this unseen hand that keeps us from realizing our potential?

At another one of those Appalachian Task Force meetings, I had the opportunity to break bread with Paul Patton, who at the time was Lt. Governor, before his two terms as Governor. He had previously been County Judge Executive of Pike County. He knows the problems of East Kentucky from personal experience. Over lunch that day, he made an observation that has stuck with me ever since. He said, “We’ve got a lot of middle class people in Eastern Kentucky and they are doing just as well as middle class people any where else in the United States. The problem is that we’ve got a lot more poor people than most places do.”

Think about that. “The problem is that we’ve got a lot more poor people than most places do.” So when we talk about economically distressed counties, we’re not talking about poor communities, we’re talking about communities with a lot of poor people.

So transforming communities means, at least in part, transforming the lives of the people in the community. It means breaking down some of the walls that exist in every community, walls that separate the haves from the have-nots, the insiders from the outsiders. Those walls get built from both sides, and they must be taken down from both sides.

If we are going to address the socio-economic divide in our communities, we need to understand the lives of people whose circumstances may be very different from our own. If we are going to understand poverty, we need to understand why people get stuck in poverty. We’re going to have to ask ourselves some tough questions about why our communities have a lot more poor people than most places do.

We know that our region did not get where it is overnight. And we know that having an economy based on resource extraction—coal, gas and timber—has not built sustainable local economies. The profits from these enterprises have largely been hauled out of the region along

with the resources. But that's not the whole picture. We need to look deeper into what keeps people, and families in poverty.

There are divergent views about poverty in America, and even experts have serious disagreements about the underlying causes of poverty. The Heritage Foundation, a Washington think-tank, gives one perspective in their recent report. They say:

The typical poor family with children is supported by [what]...amounts to 16 hours of work per week. If work in each family were raised to...40 hours per week throughout the year--nearly 75 percent of poor children would be lifted out of official poverty.

Now that makes sense as far as it goes, but it's sort of like saying that if poor people had more money they wouldn't be poor. It just doesn't shed much light on the question of why.

Why are people poor? There is a school of thought that says that poor people are just lazy, that they don't want to work. And no doubt for some people that is true.

We do know that in some families, kids grow up never seeing their parents go off to work. If you are raised with that as the norm, it isn't even really a conscious choice, it's just how things are. For those young people, we need to make sure they have other examples and mentors in their lives who can help them discover greater potential for themselves, and real opportunities to get a good education so they can become productive citizens. Berea College has been providing that kind of opportunity for more than 150 years. I know that many of you are engaged in similar work.

We also know that some people get lost in drugs, alcohol and other dead ends that are destructive to themselves and to others. Those problems are often passed from one generation to the next. For them the answer really is treatment or incarceration. But that's still not the whole story.

There are also dynamics in our communities that can keep people stuck where they are. In many of our communities the opportunities are severely limited. If the people who control the avenues to opportunity in our communities believe poor people are lazy and don't want to work they probably won't give them a chance at one of those few opportunities. If poor people are convinced that the deck is stacked against them, that there is no point in even trying, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But there's more to the picture than people who simply choose not to work. What about people who would like to work, or who do work, but still fall below the poverty level?

I'd like to share a couple of passages from *World's Apart*, by Cynthia Duncan, who did extensive research in one eastern Kentucky county. She tells about one couple she interviewed:

For the past year and a half, [Gwen] has worked forty hours a week at a fast food restaurant...she earns minimum wage, and last year her income was \$5400.

She says “I would like better, but it’s really hard to get a job in a small community like this. Most of the time it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

[Her husband] Billy works in timber, running a skidder and bulldozer for a small logging operation. Since his work depends on good, dry weather and machines not breaking down, he averages about three or four days a of work a week. He has to go on unemployment every winter. Last year he earned \$12,000.

They have no benefits and pay cash for medical care, and Gwen cannot get ahead enough to put together the money to go back to school.

Billy and Gwen are both working, and just getting by, but with no health insurance they are just one serious illness away from financial disaster. And they have three kids.

Our good friend Vaughn Grisham often points out that you can go to any community, and ask the question: “what is your greatest asset?” they will always tell you: “it is our people.”

But, Grisham goes on to say, unhealthy, uneducated people are not an asset, they are a liability. In the long run, it will cost the community. Who’s job is it to do something about this?

As long as people in poverty can be seen as somehow “other” than the rest of us, we can hold ourselves separate. We can lump them together, assign them a place in our worldview, and continue our lives. It’s not our fault.

After all, Jesus did say, “The poor you will always have with you.” But I don’t think he meant for us not to do anything about that. Now I’m not going to preach a sermon to you this morning, or maybe that’s exactly what I’m doing, but I will say this. There are people who don’t have much compassion for those who are worse off than they are. I think that’s real spiritual poverty.

But I don’t think that’s the case for this group—you are here today because you do care, because you are committed to improving your communities. If we are going to take on this difficult and critical work, we need to begin by understanding the dynamics at play.

What I’ve been getting at is that poverty is a complex issue, and I believe that proposing simple answers to complex problems is one of the surest ways to get it wrong. Addressing deep seated problems in our communities will take time, commitment, planning, and lot of coordinated efforts that involve all the sectors of our communities—business, education, government, health care, social services, youth programs, financial institutions.

No amount of resources poured into a community will do much good unless the community weaves a basket to capture those resources. And that basket is the organizations, the programs, the agencies and the local leaders that are working together with a clear plan to move the community forward.

Today, I am very pleased to announce a new program that can help Kentucky communities weave that basket. It is a collaboration between Brushy Fork Institute, the Kentucky Department for Local Government and the Appalachian Regional Commission. Through this new program

we will be distributing Flex-E-Grant funds to Kentucky's distressed counties. In this new collaborative effort, Brushy Fork will be providing training and encouraging teams of leaders from distressed communities to develop plans to move their communities forward.

Flex-E-Grants will help them get projects off the ground and help to bring more people into the kind of broad-based efforts that can produce real, measurable progress in their communities. We believe that this combination of coordinated local leadership, training to build capacity, inclusive planning and targeted resources provides excellent opportunities for community transformation.

We are integrating this approach into the Annual Institute with a new initiative that builds on our Community Transformation program. This year, we have encouraged communities to put together teams to attend the Institute together, and most of these teams are taking part in Vaughn Grisham's new track on community development. Would everyone who is here as part of a community team please stand up?

Those teams that come from distressed counties in Kentucky will be eligible for Flex-E-Grant funds under this new program. We'll also have a second round of funding next Spring that will be open to all Kentucky distressed counties.

I'd like to recognize our partners who are here today from the ARC headquarters in Washington, Sue Moreland, and from the Kentucky Department for Local Government, Matt Sawyers, Peggy Satterly and Lynn Littrell. Thank you for being here.

And congratulations to all of the community teams for coming together to develop a shared vision, to draw together all those good efforts that are already ongoing in your community and create new efforts to fill the gaps that exist. And we know it takes building new bridges, making new connections, and addressing all kinds of diversity.

We have made diversity one of the themes of the Institute this year. Our keynote speaker tomorrow, Linda Hooper, will share the remarkable story of what happened when they began teaching students about diversity in a small Appalachian town in Tennessee. We also developed a special initiative this year to increase the diversity among our participants. I'm particularly pleased to see the fruits of that work as I look around the room today.

Whether we call it breaking down walls, or crossing lines, or simply opening doors, we must commit to this work. If we do not, our communities, our organizations and our individual lives will not reach their fullest potential.

But you know that—that's why you're here.

So let's get to work!