



Living With Complexity

*Five years of the
Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange*



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The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange is a joint program of Art of the Rural and Appalshop. Both of these organizations and the Rural Policy Research Institute have stewarded the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange since the beginning.

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Kentucky RUX since 2014

2014



2015



2016



2017



2018



2019





About the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange is working to redefine the rural-urban continuum.

Every year, the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange (RUX) brings 75 Kentuckians together for a transformative leadership program rooted in Kentucky culture. Participants square dance with folks in recovery at a treatment facility in Appalachia, share traditional Bosnian coffee with immigrants and refugees in Southern Kentucky mosques, and listen to young veterans share their military service experience while staying on an army base in the Western Kentucky coalfields. From the mountains to the cities, RUX is uplifting local cultures to help people make meaningful connections and tell stories that are as exciting, diverse, and complex as Kentucky itself.

After only six years, RUX has been celebrated by the Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor, NPR's 1A, the Atlantic's CityLab, Huffington Post, Stateline, and NonProfit Quarterly. We've been featured at the Kennedy Center's Arts Summit and the National Rural Assembly, and in studies by the National Governors Association and Americans for the Arts. RUX is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and is replicating its unique model in Minnesota with support from the McKnight Foundation. As RUX continues to gain national recognition, Kentucky has the opportunity to lead the conversation on rural-urban interdependence.

What is RUX?

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange is a creative leadership program designed to build confidence, grow social capital, and bridge divides to unite Kentuckians.

How does RUX work?

RUX attracts Kentuckians who are interested in getting to know different regions of the state while developing leadership skills. Each year, the program accepts 75 new members representing the arts, agriculture, community development, education, health, and business.

Each cohort participates in six Weekend Community Intensives over a two-year period, meeting in communities across the state's rural and urban regions. Participants engage in conversations and activities that challenge their identities as Kentuckians and help them see their similarities with one another.

RUX works with three communities each year to host programming that celebrates Kentucky's history, culture, identity, and places. We supplement this contextual learning by exploring the social issues that define each region with those directly affected, so that cohort members gain compassion and context through a first-hand account of the region.

After 17 Weekend Community Intensives in 10 communities, we have tested the durability of our relationships with conversations and experiences that mire many Kentuckians in disagreement, and we came out stronger for it. As a result, RUX alumni possess many unique attributes that make them a greater asset in their communities: a greater intercultural understanding of Kentucky's many identities, histories and cultures; the ability to share their own stories and learn practical strategies to advance their work at home; and an invaluable network of Kentucky's creative class that reaches far beyond the usual suspects.



The Currency of Connection Framework

The Currency of Connection framework was developed through long-term collaboration with Kentucky artists. RUX weaves local cultural practices, cultural organizing strategies, and leadership frameworks to develop an entirely unique approach to creative leadership development that is specific to the collaboration, context, and cultural moment of Kentucky in the 21st century.

All Kentuckians have cultural and historical experiences that are representative of their place. RUX aids its members in recognizing how our regional identities are connected to other places in Kentucky. By revealing and emphasizing these connections, RUX members develop the trust and shared values necessary to advance long-term work.

We know that building a sense of place relies on immersive experiences, so we do our work in the community—considering the future of the coal transition on top of a reclaimed surface mine in Western Kentucky, teaching network strategy in the side yard of the African American Museum in Bowling Green, or mapping our regional futures on the steps of the Eastern Kentucky Social Club in Lynch.

As a two-year commitment, the RUX experience deepens members' relationships to one another and the places they visit. This approach to leadership development helps Kentuckians remember our roots, reclaim our sense of belonging, and connect Kentucky's people and places.



What's the impact of RUX?

Connections

So far, RUX has connected 240 Kentuckians from 42 counties in 10 host communities. When members describe RUX, they describe a heightened sense of belonging and confidence that they possess the skills and connections to affect change in their communities.



Collaboration

We started RUX because we knew that stronger relationships among Kentuckians with diverse backgrounds would catalyze new ways of addressing our shared opportunities and challenges. Since 2014, RUX members have developed partnerships, consultancies, and projects that touch every region of the state.



Economy

RUX Community Intensives contributed about \$30,000 into local Kentucky economies in 2019. Additionally, we have attracted \$145,000 in national and federal grants.

Culturally Competent Leadership

As a diverse Southern organization led by women, RUX is designed to skill members in working across difference. The future of our Commonwealth relies on leaders who value the diverse people, cultures, and regions of Kentucky, can build support across these diversities, and can collaborate to leverage these resources towards statewide prosperity.



Connecting the Threads: Building the RUX Model

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange launched in 2014 as a shared program of Art of the Rural and Appalshop, two nonprofit organizations whose missions align with the values of the Exchange.

In 2015, RUX founders invited a dozen emerging leaders from different sectors and regions of Kentucky to the RUX Steering Committee to guide the development of the program. The Steering Committee wrote the RUX mission and vision, and began to define the values that underpin the RUX framework. Through partnerships with the Kentucky Arts Council and other organizations, RUX expanded into a three-region mode — meaning, each year RUX members will visit one community in western Kentucky, one in eastern Kentucky, and one urban. The first RUX communities were Louisville and Whitesburg in 2014; Paducah was added in 2015.

That year was also our first attempt at sharing what we learned from the first few years of RUX. We shared program videos, gave national presentations, and were featured in Landscape Architecture Magazine in 2015.

In 2016, RUX graduated from our pilot phase and moved away from our first host communities of Louisville and Whitesburg. We launched a competitive application process, established the host community partnership model, and were hosted in Paducah, Lexington and Harlan County. Richard Young founded the Communications Committee and designed the RUX website. Several members of the Steering Committee hosted our first fall fair fundraiser, which raised \$7,000 to support the next year’s program budget. Co-founder Josh May transitioned from staffing RUX in 2016, and Ada Smith transitioned into Appalshop’s staffing role in the partnership. RUX staff presented the RUX model in six states and in Canada.



By 2017, RUX had grown to partner with more than 50 Kentucky businesses and organizations, and served 130 Kentuckians from 24 counties. Savannah Barrett wrote the first draft of the Currency of Connection framework, and Steering Committee members developed guides for distributed leadership roles. We also established the RUX member handbook, grew the programmatic budget to \$10,000, began working with the communities of Bowling Green and Horse Cave through partnership with the Kentucky Folklife Program at Western Kentucky University, and were featured in the Wall Street Journal and US News and World Report.



RUX achieved continued growth and accomplishments in 2018. That year, we were hosted in every region of Kentucky by partnering with Covington and Knott County, and served 200 Kentuckians from 42 counties. We recognized the model as role-based, non-hierarchical network leadership, and redistributed organizational leadership between staff and Steering Committee. As a component of this effort, we established Peer Helpers—a group of cohort members empowered to address personal and programmatic concerns among the group during Weekend Community Intensives—and began organizing the cohort into home room sub-groups, to help cohort members establish personal connections and conversations. In addition, Appalshop's administrative oversight helped us develop financial management and liability protocols.



The following is a series of personal reflections from RUX cohort members from the first five years of the program.

These members share insights about what being a part of RUX means to them, what they've learned through their participation, and how the partnerships they've formed and the lessons they've gleaned have impacted their personal and professional lives.

Through the RUX lens of People, Partnership, and Place, these stories show the true impact of RUX and why it is important to Kentucky's present and future.

People

Place

Partnership

People

RUX strives to be an open and compassionate space for people from different backgrounds and experiences to meet, learn more about each other's communities, engage in respectful dialogue, and move forward together.

This is most successful when members feel they belong to a community and have experiences that take place in a heart space, in addition to the head space engaged in civic or social issues. RUX is often described as a family, and members describe deeply impactful friendships and relationships within RUX.

We believe that leadership is a process of deepening connections to others. Throughout their time in RUX, we encourage participants to practice "creative listening." The effect of being listened to can be transformative, can greatly impact a person's confidence and self-determination, and cultivates empathy and connection to others.

That connection becomes the pipeline through which creativity and ideas can flow and coalesce into positive change.

People Case Studies

In the following case studies, RUX members talk about what they've learned about themselves and each other because of their time in the program.

Tanya Torp speaks about how building community with other Kentuckians from across the state has helped her feel like this place is her home.

In addition, Josh Givens and Travis Fugate share what it's meant to them to be able to find each other as fellow veterans and Kentuckians from 250 miles apart.

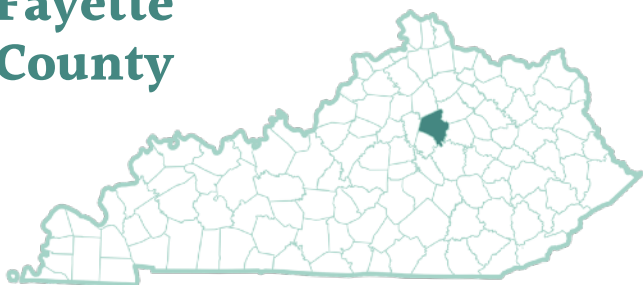


Tanya Torp, Fayette County

Tanya Torp, of Lexington, was a founding RUX Steering Committee member. She served from 2015 to 2017, after she reached out to RUX leadership about the lack of people of color in the Exchange.

In this reflection, Tanya shares how RUX has shaped her leadership style and helped her feel more connected to the state as a whole.

Fayette County



Tanya Torp RUX Steering Committee 2015–2017

Tanya Torp is the Executive Director of Step By Step, a nonprofit serving young single moms ages 12 to 24 and their children. As a Bi-Vocational Associate Pastor at Embrace Church in Lexington, she is able to partner with neighbors in community engagement. Tanya manages her consulting business as a keynote speaker and workshop facilitator in the following areas: strategic planning, equity & inclusion, volunteer management, community liaising, youth empowerment, & radical hospitality.

What does being part of RUX mean to you?

Tanya Torp: Being part of RUX has been like a big family reunion where you didn't know anyone yet, and all of a sudden you realize, "Oh, these are my people."

I'm meeting new people and I see this state in a way that I never would have been able. I'm seeing it from the eyes of people on the ground—not only the triumphs, but also the hard stuff about their communities. And as we do that, we find commonalities.

I'm a transplant to Kentucky. I don't have those Kentucky roots, because as an Air Force brat, I moved around. Through RUX, I have had the

opportunity to meet people that I would never have met because I'm not from here.

I didn't know until my experience with RUX what it felt like to call this place home because I've never had a place I call home. I didn't have a sense of home meaning *place*. So many people I've met in RUX have taught me what that means, and have made it tangible to be rooted in a place. And I'm not just rooted in Lexington. I'm rooted in all of Kentucky because of the experiences I've had.

"I'm rooted in all of Kentucky because of the experiences I've had."



What have you learned about your own community, or other communities, after being a part of RUX?

I've learned how rich Kentucky is. I don't mean resources in general, but resources of people. We're so wealthy with the knowledge and the culture that we have here. And I don't think I understood that as much until I entered into RUX.

One of my favorite things that we did in RUX was in Paducah. We stayed in a museum that used to be the Hotel Metropolitan and was on The Chitlin' Circuit [a collection of performance venues in the Eastern, Southern and Upper Midwest for African-American entertainers during the era of Jim Crow]. They allowed us to stay in the museum as guests, so we got this incredible, rich history, and we actually got to live it and see the city from the point of view of the people who live there. And it was one of the most holy experiences for me to be in that space.

While in that space, I met someone from Eastern Kentucky who is queer and an activist, and we sat on that porch and had coffee and talked about religion, love, and our spouses, and we just fell in love with one another. And to be someone from Eastern Kentucky, and someone who's a transplant from Lexington, from two different backgrounds, being able to sit down and have a cup of coffee and fall in love with one another and understand one another's communities better because of our love for one another is just so rich.



I got involved with RUX because I saw the promotional video and wanted to be a part of it and noticed that there were no people of color in the video. And I reached out to some friends that I knew who actually knew Savannah [Barrett, co-founder of RUX] who connected me with her. And to her credit she admitted RUX didn't have enough people of color, and she asked me to be a part of the Steering Committee. I was so used to people not inviting me in.

But she was like, "Come join us and help us make this better."

And that's the spirit of RUX. You want to know more, well, just join us; you want to be more, then let's do it together. I learned what true diversity means, too. It's definitely racial diversity and women being represented as leaders and those kinds of things, but it's also in the places, and whether or not they are accessible to all people.

“And that’s the spirit of RUX. You want to know more, well, just join us; you want to be more, then let's do it together.”

What projects have you developed from being a part of RUX?

[Fellow RUX member] Jenny Williams came to Lexington because of a nonprofit that I created for young girls ages 9 to 18, called Be Bold. She brought a bunch of girls to Be Bold, and we've talked about bringing it into Eastern Kentucky and about how to get it rooted in other places.

Also, [fellow RUX member] Ashley Smith and I have collaborated on Not The Only One In The Room, an organization for women of color in Lexington, and we've done some side projects together. It was really beneficial for us to grow closer and do some of the things that we're able to do as women of color in Lexington and surrounding areas. That kind of partnership forged a deeper friendship where we call on one another for different projects. I was able to call on her for a project that I was working on with Policy Link and ArtPlace, and was able to hire her and Black Soil to come to do part of the presentation.

What lessons are you taking away from your time with RUX?

I was one of the hosts for a Lexington Weekend Community Intensive. It was challenging because I had a bunch of people in my house that were different from one another. But it was also really beautiful, especially at breakfast. I sat down and I looked at people from all over the state, laughing, telling stories, connecting with one another, finding commonalities, but also sharing differences. And it was gorgeous. I'll always carry that with me.

And also, the same openness that Savannah has to say, "Come join me. Come and see. Come help me create something diverse and for everyone from Kentucky." I'll never forget that as a sign of true leadership. There are a lot of leadership programs all over the state that oftentimes do not show what true leadership actually is. Savannah being that open was leadership. Now I'm connected to people all over this state that are my comrades. We speak a common language now of Kentucky and pride of place.



Why do you think RUX is so important and what is the most important thing it brings to the table?

I didn't realize how much leadership on the ground was happening already all over the state. I got to experience something where the skills everyone in a community had were developed by being in the communities, serving their communities, and by learning and doing hands-on work in their communities. We got together in one space and by the nature of it, I learned leadership from them. And it's not this abstract idea of leadership. It is sitting down with people who care about their region, learning from one another, and creating a space for all of Kentucky to have that kind of leadership in it, and to have this kind of connection that is so powerful. RUX captured lightning in a bottle, and the way that it did that was to create space for people to showcase their leadership through relationship. And that is the "it" factor of RUX.

“It is sitting down with people who care about their region, learning from one another, and creating a space for all of Kentucky to have that kind of leadership in it, and to have this kind of connection that is so powerful. RUX captured lightning in a bottle, and the way that RUX did that was to create space for people to showcase their leadership through relationship.”

A dialogue with:

**Travis Fugate,
Knott County**

&

**Josh Givens,
Muhlenberg County**



Travis Fugate
RUX Cohort Member
2019–2020

Shortly after leaving the mountains of Eastern Kentucky for military service, Travis was severely wounded by a roadside bomb, losing his eyesight. Since then, Travis studied Computer Science in California, and acquired a mountain farm to produce foods for restaurants who wish to serve local sourced foods and to create awareness about what is absent in the regional food system.

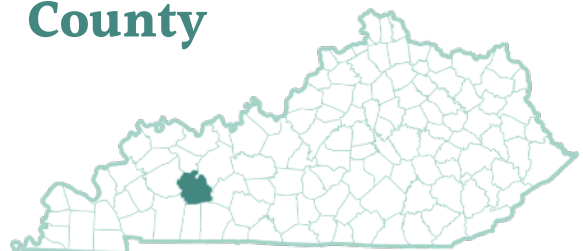
**Knott
County**



Josh Givens
RUX Cohort Member
2019–2020

C. Josh Givens is a journalist, photographer, and part-time actor living in Butler County, Ky. He has been a newspaper, radio, and television journalist for 25 years, and is currently the editor of the Leader-News in Muhlenberg County, Ky. Josh also serves as a director on the Board of the Kentucky Press Association. Josh is a U.S. Army veteran, serving as a tank crewman and military photographer.

**Muhlenberg
County**



What does being part of RUX mean to you?

Travis Fugate

RUX has meant so much for me. I've been looking for friends that I can learn from, and learn what's been going on in my state since I was out adventuring around the country in the military.

Josh Givens

As a journalist, I've traveled quite a bit around Kentucky. I've worked in a lot of different communities, and lived in various communities. But I wanted to have connections to those places and people that I maybe wasn't quite as familiar with, and that's something I'm taking away from this first year of RUX for certain.

What have you learned about your community or Kentucky as a whole by being a part of RUX?

Travis Fugate

I've learned that we really do share a common culture across the state. I've spent most of my life thinking that Eastern Kentucky was a separate thing from Kentucky. But we share a lot of culture across the state, whether it's in the urban areas—Lexington, Frankfort, Louisville—to out in the western part of the state and back here in the mountains.

Josh Givens

We had the Muhlenberg County Weekend Community Intensive, and because I work there, I have a great amount of knowledge of that community. Finding those common bonds that make us all Kentuckians no matter what region we live in has been very exciting for me. A lot of times I'm writing about politics, and oftentimes politicians talk about Kentucky like we're all in the same experience, but we're not all necessarily in the same experience. Kentucky is very diverse, geographically and socially. But at the end of the day, I've learned everyone in this group is a Kentuckian and we're very proud of it.

What partnerships or connections have you made by being part of RUX?

Josh Givens

One of the partnerships and connections that's most important to me is with Travis. The first Weekend Community Intensive in northern Kentucky, Travis walked into the room and I immediately identified him. The way he carried himself, his demeanor, his posture; I'm like, "that guy's a veteran." I'm a U.S. Army veteran as well, and I think that was our jumping off point for our relationship. Travis and I had a connection being veterans, and being Kentuckians, and it's built from there. I think we have similar values. I think we have similar backgrounds. Even though we live 250 miles apart, we've got those similar experiences. So, we built on that.

Travis Fugate

Being blind, walking into a group of 80 Kentuckians who I had never met before was kind of intimidating. Not knowing how I was going to find my way around and wondering how I was going to ask for assistance or refuse assistance if it's being pressed too hard on to me.

But when I ran into Josh and found our veteran connection, it allowed me immediately to relax in the environment and we've developed quite a strong relationship. Hopefully we'll be able to continue it across the 250 miles and support one another as veterans and as Kentuckians.

What lessons are you taking away from RUX, and how will you apply those in your everyday life?

Josh Givens

I've learned that maybe I'm a little bit more of an interesting person than I sometimes give myself credit for, and that's been very valuable. I hope I can continue to build on that and give myself credit for my experiences and my skills and what I have to offer people.

That's not always an easy thing for me even though I'm in a very public job, and I'm supposed to act like I have all this confidence in myself and go ask tough questions of powerful people. We're all human beings and I've learned that in sharing stories and experiences with folks that struggle with those same personal doubts is valuable. Some of the best relationships I've made are with people who have those same kind of feelings, and I think they're really interesting people. That's been valuable and I'm very thankful for it.

Travis Fugate

I feel confident now that people want to hear my concerns and my experiences. When I came back home, I realized I needed to spend a lot of time listening and not really talking. I need to just observe and learn my area and my people again. At RUX, I feel like people are interested in what I'm thinking and what I want to do for myself and for my community. I leave our RUX weekends with confidence to continue sharing what I'm thinking and that's helping me grow a lot.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience in RUX?

Josh Givens

I have made a lifelong friend in Travis, and I didn't expect that. Travis and I have developed a really close relationship, and part of it is based on that dark military sense of humor that only veterans get, and that you can probably only say around veterans. But also, he's inspired me.

He is inspiring to me.

He's already invited me to come visit him in his home. And I'm looking forward to that. I think I'm going to continue to learn from Travis and be inspired by him and his confidence in life despite events that took his sight. There's been many days that I've woken up and said, "Well, if Travis Fugate can do it, I think I can, too."

Travis Fugate

Just having a friend like Josh among the group has helped me navigate socially and physically. I think the group seeing Josh see me as a veteran and another guy as opposed to just the disabled kid in the group was really good for me in this environment.

I really appreciate that you just treat me like another dude.

Josh Givens

Well, I love you.

Travis Fugate

Thanks, man. I love you, man.

People

Place

Partnership

Place

The Community Weekend Intensives bring rural and urban people together in community settings that activate and inspire explorations of place through sampling of local food traditions, local arts and culture engagements, performances, community history, hiking trails and swimming holes, and intimate experiences in people's homes and gathering places.

Each weekend is designed and facilitated in partnership with Regional Partners and a local Host Committee, which includes representatives from cultural institutions who help make sure that the cohort can respectfully access and experience the diversity of each host community.

Local Communities in Local Terms

The act of exchange expands our thinking about communities and connections. The most essential expertise about places and issues comes from those with firsthand experience. RUX is designed so that our members and host communities have a variety of opportunities to contribute to our experience and expertise during, in between, and after the Community Weekend Intensives.

Representations of Kentucky, its People, and Cultures

We know that Kentucky is composed of many cultures with their own histories. Many of these cultures have experienced stereotyped portrayals in the media and cultural appropriation. By empowering Host Community members to tell the stories of their own communities, RUX strives to demonstrate an ethical representation of Kentucky's diverse cultures and history.

Place Case Studies

In the following case studies, RUX cohort members discuss the ways RUX has helped them find a deeper understanding of place: where they're from, where they live and work, and about other communities across Kentucky. By bringing cohort members into different communities, and spending time getting to know those communities, RUX helps increase members' shared commitment to the betterment of all Kentucky communities.



Stacie Sexton, Letcher County

Stacie Sexton, of Letcher County, was a RUX cohort member. She grew up in Eastern Kentucky and earned a BA in Gender and Sexuality Studies from the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

In this reflection, Stacie shares how the RUX framework helps Kentuckians explore deep, multi-faceted issues that impact communities across the Commonwealth.

Letcher County



Stacie Sexton RUX Cohort Member 2018–2020

Stacie Sexton is a reproductive justice activist and organizer from Whitesburg currently pursuing her MSW at UK. Stacie served as Project Director of Kentucky Health Justice Network’s All Access EKY, a pilot program to bring comprehensive birth control to all Eastern Kentuckians. She was a 2003 Artist in Residence at Appalshop, production assistant at WMMT FM, and intern with Appalachian Media Institute. She serves as Artistic Director of the Abortion Monologues of Lexington and created the Halfalchian storytelling project.

What does being part of RUX mean to you?

Stacie Sexton: As someone who spends a lot of time thinking about things like creative placemaking and organizing, it's been invaluable to share space with people who do the same work as me and have felt disempowered in their communities. But it's also energizing to exchange new and exciting ideas with people who work across different industries and regions.

I think the most important thing RUX participants discover is that while all communities have their own cultural touchstones, we are much more alike than we are different. We all have similar issues around community organizing, political participation,

and industry. Most folks who participate in this program would likely agree that it's important to first understand the roots of oppression so that we may find commonalities in different communities. This is so much different than looking for interventions, especially in the context of RUX. That first step is turned toward sparking a desire to dig deeper and learn more about our neighbors. The idea that we all share struggles tends to be the focus of many exchange programs, even if it isn't the original goal. In many ways, as I mentioned, this is important work. But RUX blatantly challenges the way we're asked to consider these struggles while simultaneously addressing problematic frameworks.

Perhaps more importantly, examining the other side of these issues highlights the successes and forward momentum present within these communities. Instead of positioning defeat against progress, RUX easily demonstrates how polarized conversations are a significant barrier to achieving a baseline of understanding and cooperation between regions in Kentucky. The implications of all these things are much broader, but for me, RUX has been a place where I was able to build a community and espouse the things I believe in. I've undoubtedly become a stronger leader and louder advocate for this work, because it is continually reshaping the way I communicate with folks across the state and the way I talk about them to others. To me, RUX is a model for progress. I'm grateful to have been a part of it.





“RUX is continually reshaping the way I communicate with folks across the state and the way I talk about them to others... it is a model for progress.”

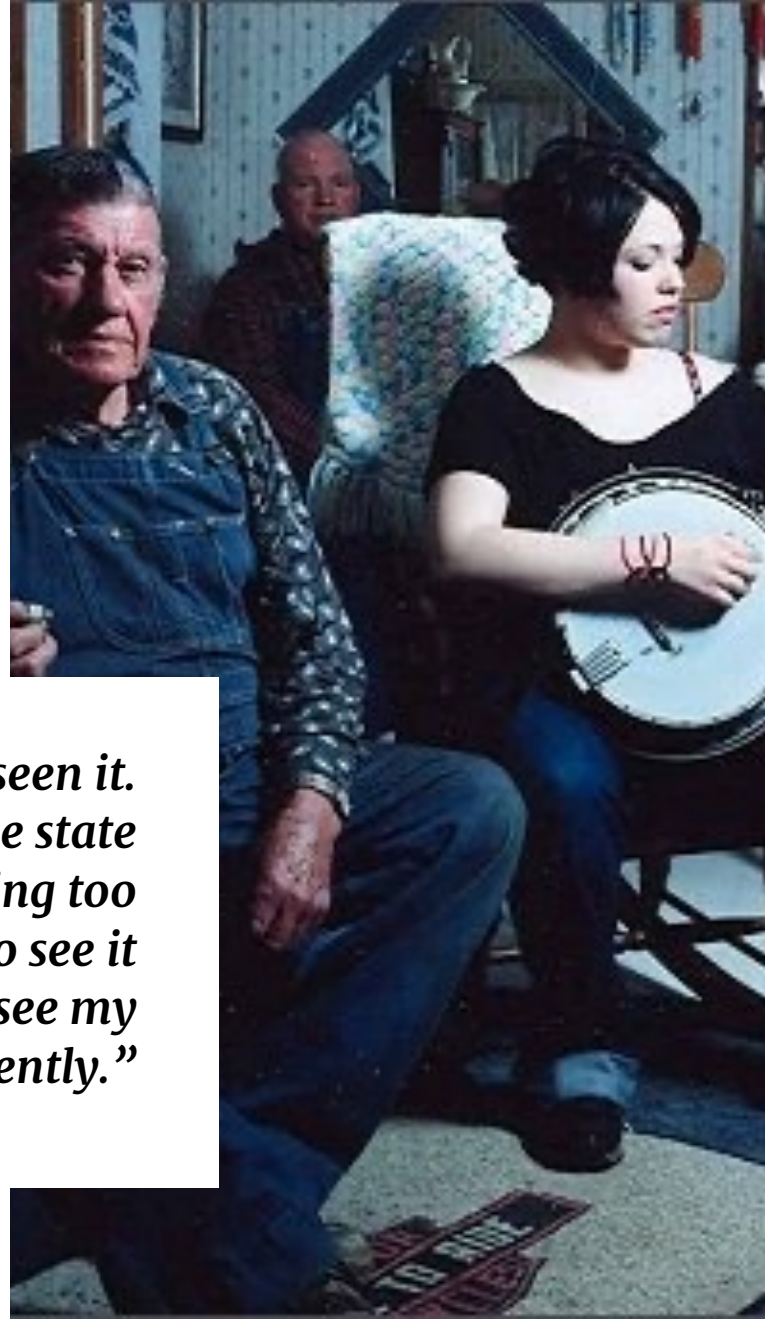
What have you learned about your community, other communities, or Kentucky as a whole by being a part of RUX?

I've had the privilege of living and working in many different places across Kentucky, and this has greatly shaped my perception of Kentucky over the years. I have a complex relationship with all of these places, but RUX gave me an opportunity to look at them and experience them much differently. For example, I haven't lived in Eastern Kentucky for 10 years, and while I travel there often for work and family, it's hard to stay connected to work that's being done. But we had the chance to visit Good For Your Heart, an organic farm located in Knott County. Even though I'm from Letcher County, I had no idea that such a wonderful thing had been built just up

the road from my hometown. It gave me pause, and made me wonder how many folks in the area knew about its existence. Given the state of the economy in the coalfields, this farm is a creative solution to reclaiming land and space from an industry that has been decimated by coal mining and mountaintop removal. I had many opportunities to chat with Travis, the owner of the farm, and he told me all about his history with the land and how he and his family decided to pursue it. It changed the way I think about industry insofar that I've focused a lot on the very real problem of a crumbling information infrastructure. But why not start a farm? Why

not look at other ways to address food insecurity and a stagnating economy?

It seems simple now that I've seen it. Solutions that work elsewhere in the state can work in Eastern Kentucky. Being too close to it hampered my ability to see it though. RUX gave me a chance to see my own home much differently.



“It seems simple now that I've seen it. Solutions that work elsewhere in the state can work in Eastern Kentucky. Being too close to it hampered my ability to see it though. RUX gave me a chance to see my own home much differently.”

Has RUX helped you personally and professionally?

Overall, I've grown relationships with quite a few people from my cohort who have become good friends in addition to supporting the work I do. That's the beauty of RUX—friends become co-conspirators and mentors! On a very personal note, my time in Muhlenberg County deeply affected me and was something like a spiritual

experience for me. I had never been there before, and hearing stories from those who have worked in the mining industry there gave me pause. I realized for the first time that Western Kentucky miners are overwhelmingly erased from narratives about the coal industry as a whole. We focus a lot of time and energy on Appalachia.

While this is not misplaced energy, it's not a holistic portrait of a state-wide industry. But the culture around it is different. Where Muhlenberg sees it as a job, Eastern Kentucky sees it as a way of life. This was a hard thing for me to unpack, and I spent a lot of time working through some complicated feelings about it.

But the point here is that I became a different person after my experience in RUX. I believe we should all be open to growth, especially when it comes from a place we didn't expect. Those are the lessons we should be quick to embrace. RUX quite literally helped me become a better and more complex person. Much of this has already affected my professional life. Instead of boxing myself into a space that continually deconstructs the Appalachian coalfields, I'm much better at community engagement by remembering that other places have done it differently. Not better or worse. Just different. I'm a better member of my communities and industry just for accepting that division is unnecessary and the biggest hurdle to success is often ourselves.

“We focus a lot of time and energy on Appalachia. While this is not misplaced energy, it's not a holistic portrait of a state-wide industry. Muhlenberg sees coal mining as a job, Eastern Kentucky sees it as a way of life. This was a hard thing for me to unpack, and I spent a lot of time working through some complicated feelings about it.”



Has RUX changed your perspective about Kentucky?

Continuing with what I said in the last question, I've had many experiences with living, working, and traveling freely across the state. But I've not always had opportunities to fully engage with the places I've been. It's very easy for all of us to state facts about places we've been that are drawn from knowledge and personal history, but it's much more difficult to speak faithfully on the significance of culture and heritage when it hasn't been deeply internalized.

To clarify this point, I can use my experience traveling to Covington with this year's cohort. Many years back, I spent two years living in Newport and attended community college in Covington. This is clearly a part of my life's narrative, so I was excited to share my knowledge about the Roebling bridge and tell folks about my favorite cafes and parks. It was fun to share things about my experiences, as part of RUX's mission is to foster deep personal connections. I felt it was important to tell them that the Roebling was designed and funded by a woman who never got credit for it. My comments definitely affected some discussions we had that weekend, and that's okay. It was a neat fact for us to consider. RUX is definitely not a spectator sport!

But it was important for me to recognize that the focus of the weekend was not on my brief time spent living in Northern Kentucky. It was about giving all of us a chance to lose ourselves in a place that we didn't really know. We were given a chance to fall in love with Kentucky in an entirely

new way. I deferred to those who have generations of history rooted along the banks of the Ohio River. I listened to indigenous folks, politicians, and community members speak with both tenderness and strength about the things that shaped Northern Kentucky into the place it is today. I saw Covington in an entirely new way just by listening to voices that were already speaking.

But all of this is necessary to say before I can begin to talk about how RUX has changed my perspective. I have spent a lot of time talking about why we should all invest in a more unified Kentucky. In fact, when I applied to the program, I drew on the fact that I've lived in different places as a point of inclusion. I felt like I might be uniquely positioned to foster and support conversations about different regions. I feel like I was actually successful in doing that in some ways. But RUX showed me how much further we have to go in building a holistic view of our state. It's hard to admit that I've always talked about Kentucky as if it's three big chunks of land that have been carelessly glued together. Despite this, I've always seen it as a whole, and I've openly problematized the way we've divided ourselves. But I failed to step back and examine the language we use when talking about the problem. The rhetoric itself is a problem. The conversations we typically have tend to support a greater divide. RUX challenged me to build an entirely new framework for talking about Kentucky. It's clear that we can't change the way we think about ourselves if we can't change the

way we talk about ourselves. I was given the opportunity to craft a lens for myself that will continue to refocus my approach to organizing and working with others across the state.

Are you taking lessons away from your time with RUX, and how will you apply them to your everyday life?

We're all Kentuckians. You don't have to have a Friends of Coal bumper sticker on your car to be taken seriously and given a place at the table. It's the folks from Eastern Kentucky with coal dust in their lungs that deserve a chance to connect with miners in Muhlenberg County. It's professors and students at WKU that deserve a chance to talk with service industry workers from Knott County instead of relying on media representations of rural poverty. Future politicians from Lexington deserve a chance to see how policy is crafted at a local level in conversation with civil servants from Campbell County.

Some of those things have happened because of RUX.

All of these things can happen, and continue to happen, because of RUX.

We've all grown together and started erasing county lines in the name of kinship.

We're all valid, important, and real.

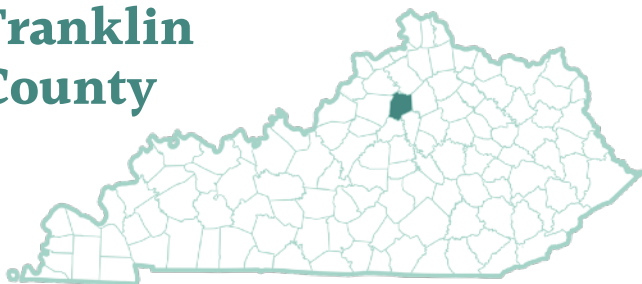


Gerry James, Franklin County

Gerry James connected with RUX through fellow member Sarah Schmitt. He was a Steering Committee member for 4 years, where he helped establish and lead RUX's Communications Committee.

In this interview, Gerry James touches on how his personal journey through RUX deepened his understanding of the connectedness of different Kentucky regions, and how that integrates with his professional work with The Explore Kentucky Initiative. Gerry also talks about how RUX helped highlight the history of people of color across Kentucky communities.

Franklin County



Gerry James RUX Steering Committee 2016–2019

Gerry is the Founder of The Explore Kentucky Initiative, whose mission is to uplift Kentucky's people by embracing environmentalism and outdoor recreation through events, media, and action campaigns that strive to preserve the natural resources of the Commonwealth's 120 counties. He is a storyteller who uses photography, cinematography, and journalism to tell stories about the landscapes and people he encounters in his travels across the Commonwealth and beyond.

What does being part of RUX mean to you?

Gerry James: It's meant the world to me. It's one of the coolest organizations I've ever been a part of. When I think about leadership and character and community development skills, there are essentially four institutions that have helped shape me in my life and career: parents, school, the Air Force, and RUX.

The nature of the work is very cross-disciplinary. The people who are a part of the cohort are from all across the state, so you're getting people from different backgrounds, ethnicity, gender identities, career fields, and learning to work with them towards certain outcomes. There are few entities in society where you can do that. In life in general, you typically interact with people of like mind. So, RUX forces you to get outside of that comfort zone and to work with other people, and also to learn about different geographic areas.

In college, one of my journalism classes used the book "Where the County Line Ends" to train us to be Kentucky journalists. The point was that when you're writing stories, you are writing for the county only. For a lot of Kentuckians, their life is centered on the county. RUX gets you out of that mindset. And then you're able to find commonalities.

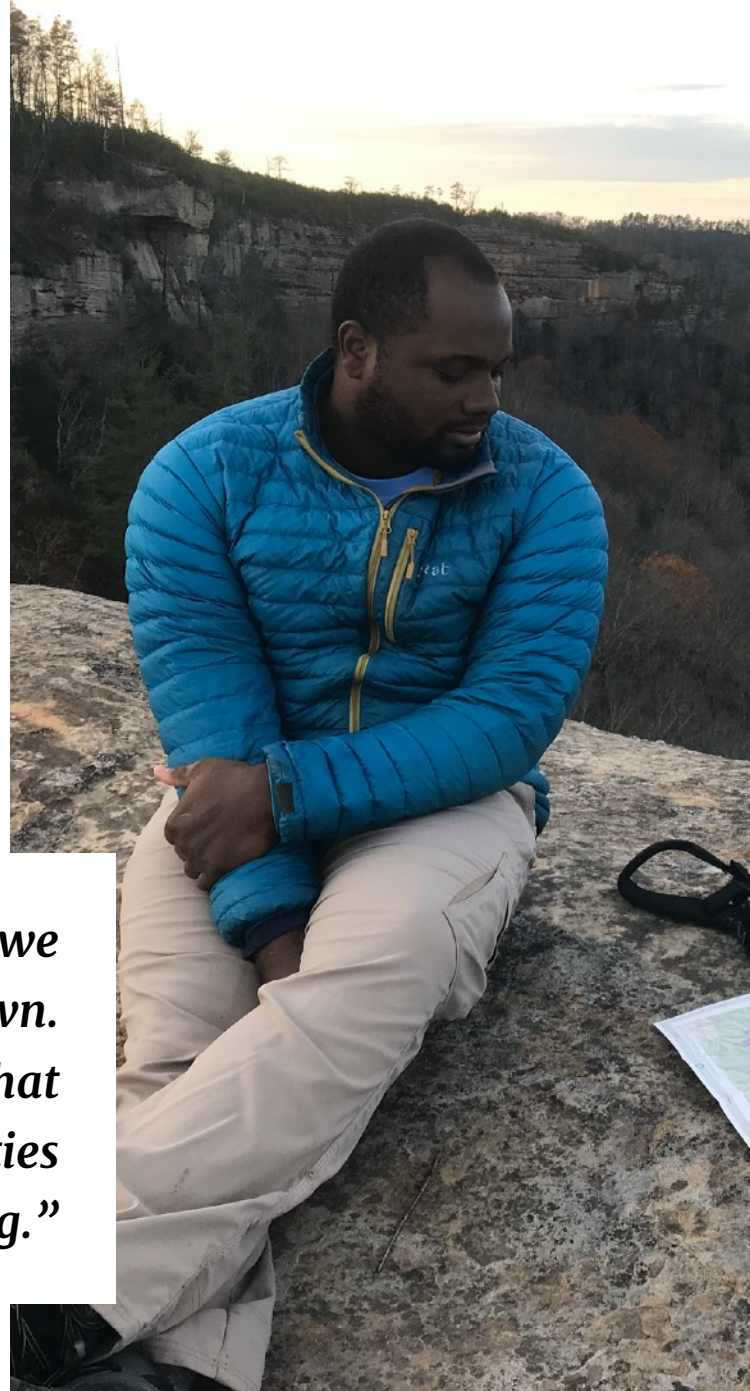
So that's why I put RUX up there in the top of my list of influential entities. You're learning how to overcome barriers together toward a common goal.



Why is finding commonalities so important in RUX?

I think as humans, sometimes we think our struggles are just our own. RUX forces you to understand that there are people and communities going through the same thing that you might see. Like Eastern Kentucky and West Kentucky. Muhlenberg County and Harlan have similar issues with the decline of the coal industry, and so they're both in this transition moment, and trying to figure out what's next. And so it makes it not just an East Kentucky struggle, but it also makes it a Western Kentucky struggle. But then you also find out that it's not just west-east, it's also rural communities in general that are having declines, and you notice that there are also other parts of the world that are having those issues as well. So then it becomes broader than these specific geographic areas.

“I think as humans, sometimes we think our struggles are just our own. RUX forces you to understand that there's people and communities going through the same thing.”





What did you learn about your community, or other communities, after being part of RUX?

I was a part of the Lyric Theater's Camp Lyric in 2017, which is for kids in the local Lexington area. Ashley Smith, who used to work at the Lyric and is a former RUX Member, approached me to be one of the teachers at the camp. My block was a project about adventure, so I was able to bring my friends and we did a bunch of activities with the kids. We helped serve several kids as part of that camp, and introduced them to our recreation, environmental issues, and water quality in the camp environment.

I also helped create a pen pal program through the City of Paducah with a woman named Carrie Bronner. We paired up people with Kentucky State Parks and Tourism, and they sent each other a letter and some items that represented their organization or entity. Then we all posted about it on social

media with the goal of trying to connect people and make real life relationships.

In my work, I try to invigorate different communities, and it was great for me to be involved in RUX. The events in the Waterman Series—an effort to promote paddlesports racing as an inclusive activity—are loosely based on a RUX model. With the Waterman series, RUX helped me refine how I schedule the Waterman weekends. So, with these events, I'm trying to encourage people to come and either float or race, and then do different cultural activities in the area. I see Waterman events as mini water-based RUX events.

Do you think RUX has shifted your own perspectives about Kentucky?

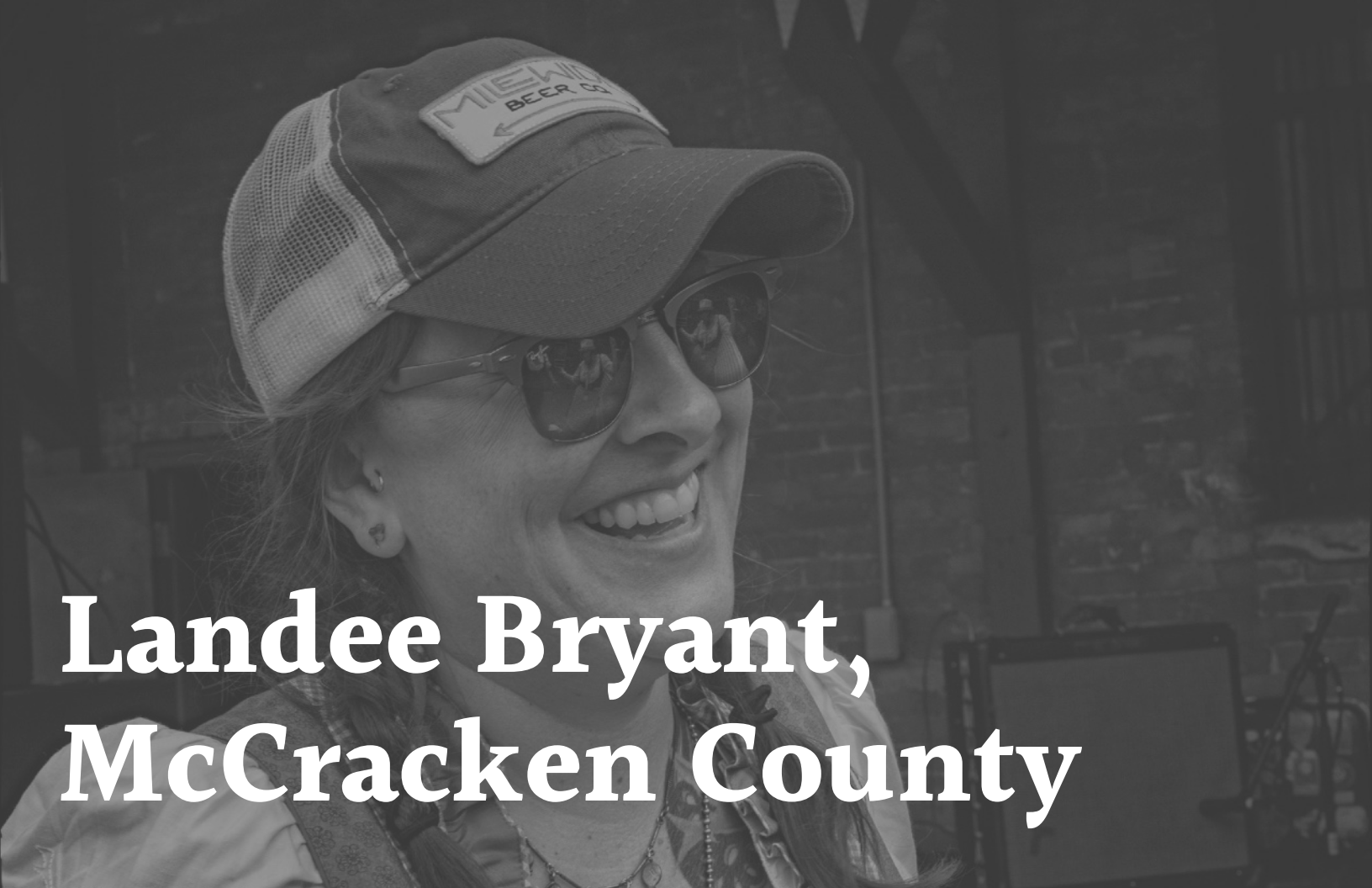
I hadn't thought about Black people working in the coal mines before. And I never really knew about Lynch, in Harlan County. I didn't know about these Kentucky social clubs for African-Americans. Before RUX, the only way that I interacted with Eastern Kentucky was coming up there for hiking.

It was also great for me to see an African-American person that was leading historical preservation, like Miss Betty in Paducah with the restoration of the Hotel Metropolitan. That was powerful to me because I've been involved with historic preservation most of my life just as a volunteer and I love it.

RUX has helped change my perspective because I was in this rut of folks of color are so hidden in our state. RUX has helped shine light on all that.



“...I was in this rut of folks of color are so hidden in our state. RUX has helped shine light on all that.”



Landee Bryant, McCracken County

Landee Bryant’s love of people and creating a sense of place drives her to stay active in her surroundings, whether that’s offering a location for people to acquire items made by local and regional artists, or running a cinematic art house.

Born in Cadiz, Kentucky, she now lives in Paducah, where she enjoys playing an active role in making the place she lives a place she wants to be. This work led her to the Rural-Urban Exchange, where she served as a founding member of the RUX Steering Committee.

McCracken County



Landee Bryant RUX Steering Committee 2015 – 2017

Landee Bryant is the co-founder/owner of Bricolage Art Collective, a space for art consignment, events and workshops. She is also the founder and managing director of 11 Year Itch, which brings musicians to the region for live events in non-traditional venues. She was also the Executive Director of Maiden Alley Cinema for 11 years where she oversaw the region's only nonprofit cinematic art house, founded Maiden Alley Oktoberfest and started a live music series.



What does being part of RUX mean to you?

Landee Bryant: The relationships I've made in RUX are invaluable, as is the knowledge that in other parts of the state, folks are just as passionate about different facets of Kentucky as I am.

I think immersing myself even deeper into the fabric of my community has been a welcomed side effect of my time planning RUX excursions in Western Kentucky. For me, Paducah has to come first—I feel committed to the relationship in this part of the state. But, knowing and engaging in other parts of the state and with people from all across the Bluegrass as enabled me to look at our little piece of Kentucky from a different perspective.

Seeing your little spot in the world through other people's eyes is of great value on so many levels.

Where are you from? What's your experience with your place and community? How does where you're from influence your work?

I was born and raised in Cadiz, KY, in Trigg County, and take great pride in being a small town gal. My parents are both creatives, as was my brother. They are all the biggest part of me and always will be.

Honestly, making my mark or making my family proud took on more of an importance in my life after losing my brother, Lee Bryant. He was on the path to do BIG things in the graphic design world and had such an amazing viewpoint that was unapologetic and totally unique. Staying busy and doing cool shit is a testament to him and hopefully partially filling the massive creative void in this world because he is not here.



What have you learned about your own community, or other communities, after being part of RUX?

First of all I am embarrassed to say that I wasn't quite aware that if I took off driving east I could go for 8 hours and still be in Kentucky. Sure, I'm aware of other portions of the state and but I didn't realize the expansive nature of Kentucky. I have learned that people are doing amazing things all over our beautiful state and that we should not be pigeonholed in any particular industry or stereotype. There is so much culture here and exciting things happening across county lines.



How has RUX changed your perspective about Kentucky?

As a Kentucky gal all my life, I always thought I would end up somewhere different, it is such a welcomed thing to understand different contemporaries across the state. It is important to address my own misconceptions and learn from others in any manner I am able. But as a super small town gal, I used to believe that the only way I would find my dreams and culture would be to leave Kentucky in my rear view as soon as possible. But RUX aided in my understanding of the rich history and growth Kentucky has experienced and continues to experience.

A dialogue with:

**Jess Stevens,
Estill County**

&

**Michael George,
Jefferson County**



Jess Stevens
RUX Cohort Member
2018–2020

Jess Stevens is the owner of Alight Marketing and the Operations Assistant of the Estill Development Alliance. She has a passion for working with small businesses, rural communities, and in the tourism sector. As a graduate from the University of Kentucky with degrees in Arts Administration and Integrated Strategic Communication, she has sought out ways to use her career to help others and be an enthusiastic supporter of the Commonwealth.

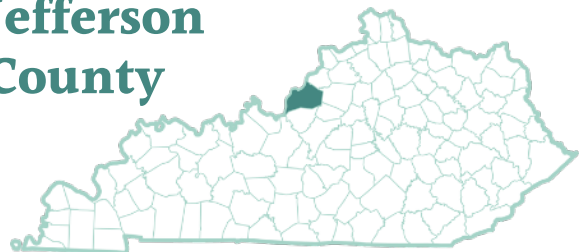
Estill County



Michael George
RUX Cohort Member
2018 – 2020

Michael is a passionate person. He strives to leave the world better than he found it. He is an empath, psychic, and aspiring chef. He is an Aquarius and can be a leader, but can also be very shy.

Jefferson County



What does it mean to you all to be part of RUX?

Michael George

It's changed a lot of my thinking. I was thinking about how yesterday we did a genderless square dance, and at one point, my partner was male. And I don't know a place or time that that would have been okay otherwise. With 75 people, it would have been a big thing and we probably would have stopped. But it was just like, "all right, let's do this!"

I feel like I haven't been able to feel a part of the alphabet [editor's note: the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc., or LGBTQIA, is often referred to as 'the alphabet'] being my description. Even though I'm not in the queer community, but those letters usually define people. RUX takes that away.

Jess Stevens

Yeah, RUX is incredibly inclusive in a way that I really appreciate. I love it. Every facet of RUX is very carefully crafted to provide that space. Even the way things are worded is to make sure you take care of yourself and don't assume things. I think that's really special.

I love Kentucky. I've always loved Kentucky. I've lived in multiple parts of state, but getting to really dive in to these communities is super cool. And it's made me think a lot more about my own place and think about what part of Kentucky's story do people not know? In RUX, we seek out untold scenarios and things that people don't know about. And it's made me really think about how can I find that in my own community.

What are some things you've learned about your own community, or other communities, or Kentucky as a whole, from your time in RUX?

Michael George

I am figuring out that we are really all the same. My community might have the same lack of resources as the host community, and everybody's trying to figure out how to get the resources. I feel like everybody struggles the same. I come from Louisville, and I never would have gone to Hindman or Hazard. But I'm seeing that Louisville is Hindman, and seeing that other people trying to do the same stuff that I'm trying to do to make my community better.

Jess Stevens

RUX offers the perspective that we're all not that different. I have been very fortunate to live in so many places. But most people don't. I've heard people say things like, "Oh, well, that is just x, y, z town's problem. That's such a Louisville thing, or that's such a Hopkinsville thing." And that's everywhere and everyone thinks it's just them. It's very reaffirming to be able to say, "yes, these are issues, but here's how some other people have overcome them. Here are some ideas."

And we see in our RUX small groups that it's rapid fire connections like, "check with this person who has done this, which is very similar to what you're talking about. And here's a resource." We're all going through similar things and we all just want to make our places better.

I feel a lot of appreciation for things; we have so much here, it's just crazy. I was already crazy about Kentucky, but RUX has really deepened that. We have such a wealth and breadth of assets and places and people.

How has RUX changed your perspective of Kentucky?

Michael George

I was afraid to explore Kentucky. There are a lot of places that I have read about that I felt uncomfortable going to. I would have never come to Muhlenberg County or Hazard or any place like that before. It just didn't really interest me, but I think after RUX, I'm more comfortable now.

Jess Stevens

We have such intense discussions about some pretty vulnerable stuff in a way that not enough people do. I'm an idiot optimist. I live in blissful ignorance. I assume the best, and that's not always good or safe. Some of these hard conversations have really helped me appreciate and understand other people's experiences, and how I can help or how I need to get out of the way. I don't necessarily need to help; it's not my place or my job. RUX has kind of opened my eyes to these issues.

There's a group called the Country Queers, and people think that doesn't exist. People think that's a city thing, like you can't be gay in the country. That's not true and it's a different experience. I find all those conversations really valuable, and more people need to tap into that and realize we're all just people. We all have these things that impact our experience and we need to work together to support everyone the way they need.

What kind of partnerships and connections have you built by being a part of RUX?

Michael George

I've made a really strong connection with a fellow RUX member: Taylor Killough. She did almost a year-long podcast where she followed my group of middle schoolers as we built an aquaponics system for an after-school project. She followed us and taped us, and then at the end of the year, she did a podcast that featured the group of kids and I had.

Another RUX member, Fran Everage—she is a therapist in Hazard, Kentucky—and I brought 15 kids to Hazard Middle School and we built an aquaponics system for them. And we have adopted that school as our sister school.

Jess Stevens

I've learned more about people in my region. Obviously I learned about people from other places, but I also learned about people that I didn't realize were so close. We're all wanting to do some stuff and make sure we don't lose contact and lose the network that we've built through RUX. I try to document when I talk to somebody in RUX and they describe a project or a resource. For example, I've talked to a lot of people who want to do some sort of agriculture project. And I'm like, "Oh, you should talk to Michael because he did this aquaponics project!"

How has RUX helped you personally and/or professionally?

Jess Stevens

Actually, it's both; they mirror each other. I expected to come to RUX to talk about work—which, we do—but there's so much more on the personal side, approaching the work from how you treat yourself and view your life. I had a lot of really intense conversations about self-talk and habits and things like that, and how those can

impact your feelings and your work. I've had some people sit me down, especially professionally and be like, “you're under charging, or you need to make sure you're protecting this aspect of your company,” and just be straightforward. We need to talk about these things because people aren't as upfront with how to run a business. So we're all a resource for each other.

Michael George

I have learned a little bit more empathy with different communities that I didn't really have experience with. And I'm a little less shy. I didn't like cameras. RUX makes you stretch and it makes you grow. And I think I've stretched and grown.

Jess Stevens

I think a cool thing about RUX is it's perfectly acceptable to just walk up to a conversation, and just stay in there for a second and then participate. It's just a very welcoming place that you can be like, “Oh, I want to talk about that, too,” and jump in.

What lessons are you taking away from RUX?

Jess Stevens

I think I've learned a lot about very explicitly offering opportunities for people to be open and vulnerable. I think that creates a lot of opportunity for growth that, in general in society, people don't realize they even need or deserved or how important it is. And I think the whole structure of RUX reinforces that in a really valuable way.

Michael George

I think a lesson that I've learned and I'm taking away is to look past the veil. Dig a little deeper into your community and into yourself, because there's more to the story than just what's on the outside. You know, we come here and you see this rural, one stoplight, or even the one stop sign city or county, and you wouldn't know that they had the number one dyslexia tutoring facility in the state. Like, who would know that just driving through? And so, I think that digging a little deeper, looking past the veil, and getting the real story is something I'm taking away from RUX.

Jess Stevens

You don't have to wait for permission or for some program to be structured to do something to make an impact. So many people in RUX have ideas, and they just do them. [Fellow RUX member] Gail learned there were kids who didn't have beds. And instead of searching out organizations, she just mobilized and was like, "okay, you're a woodworker. Can you build bed frames? And you have a contact that can bulk supply mattresses. How can we get that sponsored?" So, the lesson is if you want to make a change or an impact, you can. I think people can be scared to just go do something, but not the people in RUX.

People

Place

Partnership

Partnership

Partnership collaborations generally come about in one of two ways during RUX:

1. A small, self-organizing team responds to an opportunity or issue.
2. Host Committees or other committees address a specific issue or opportunity in a RUX community.

In these informal collaborations, exchange members work together to self-define their roles and objectives. While there is time set aside during the final Weekend Community Intensive for partnership exploration and sharing, many collaborations develop between members outside the RUX framework and Weekend Community Intensives.

Regardless of how partnerships form, the strength of RUX comes, in part, from the fact that partnership projects are not a formal part of the overall RUX structure. Projects are organic, and devoted to creating social value for people and communities. They take the best form to serve their true purpose. Since projects are initiated out of opportunity, when the need or opportunity has been met, projects can be celebrated and shared.

Partnership Case Studies

In the following case studies, RUX members discuss how the Partnership aspect of the Currency of Connection facilitates collaboration and projects with fellow RUX members. The projects discussed here are aimed at youth engagement and education across rural and urban communities, downtown revitalization in the Eastern Kentucky coalfields, and development of a business focused on reconnecting urban African-Americans to agriculture.



Jenny Williams, Perry County

In 2015, RUX member Jenny Williams of Perry County partnered with fellow RUX member Cheyenne Mize of Jefferson County to create a mini-exchange program that brought high school students from Louisville and Hazard together. Exchange participants spent weekends in both communities exploring cultural practices and finding commonalities.

Jenny discusses how her RUX experience led to the creation of this mini-exchange, and how RUX's partnership methodology influenced her work.

Perry County



Jenny Williams
RUX Cohort Member
2014 – 2016

Jenny is the former Chair of Pathfinders of Perry County, a non-profit citizens' action group that promotes community well-being, engagement, outdoor recreation and education. Jenny grew up in Hazard, Kentucky and is deeply rooted in the community and region of Eastern Kentucky. She has taught writing and reading at Hazard Community and Technical College since 1992.

What has being part of RUX meant to you?

Jenny Williams: RUX has helped me build a model of leadership for myself. I've learned a lot of lessons from the leadership styles I saw in RUX, especially about when to sit down, be quiet, and let other people take the lead.

I think Hazard Community Technical College (HCTC), for instance, can really learn some lessons from RUX. I think that probably a lot of the nonprofit organizations with which I'm involved could learn some lessons from the way the Steering Committee is set up and make decisions. And more than any of that, from the way that the Weekend Community Intensives happen. They are really intense and really inspiring.

Since the beginning, RUX has been the most diverse across any organization I've ever been involved with.

Often I feel like diversity is at the end and we're just checking off boxes. But I know RUX has been intentional in representing a lot of different Kentuckians. It's also happened more naturally than I've seen it happen in other places. And that's part of what I've really been inspired by.

I tend to be pretty locked in place. I tend to really identify with my place. And I'm generally often happy not to leave it, and I'm generally happy to focus on what's going on there. It hurts my feelings when people move away from Eastern Kentucky. And I know that's ridiculous and silly, but I'm very provincial when it comes to that.

Being in RUX has really helped me to see Kentucky as a state, as my state, and to feel that it's not just Central Appalachia that is my place. Kentucky is my place.



“Being in RUX has really helped me to see Kentucky as a state, as my state, and to feel that it’s not just Central Appalachia as my place. Kentucky is my place.”

Tell us about the mini-exchange you and Cheyenne organized.

I had a group of students that have been in Pathfinders, and when we hired our director of diversity at HCTC, Danielle King, she got some funding to do something a little more organized, which I had never really been able to do before.

I had been trying to reach out to various people before RUX because I really wanted to be able to connect Hazard kids with kids from the city. I had been half-heartedly trying to do that and just really not having any luck. And so when I met Cheyenne in RUX, we came up with the idea for a mini-exchange with younger kids. Our brainchild was that we would get together and they would bring a group of kids from Louisville down to Eastern Kentucky, and vice versa.

We got together for the first time at Robinson Forest, a large tract of forest land owned by the University of Kentucky on the border of Perry County. We tried to focus the weekend on foodways and the similarities between the two groups of kids from Louisville and Perry County.

For them to find common ground was really meaningful.

We followed that up with another trip in the spring. We took the same group of kids to Louisville, and we did a workshop that day talking about how to solve food insecurity and they got to come up with different ideas.

Then we hung out at IdeasX Lab, and Cheyenne brought down all her percussion instruments and they had a little drum circle. It was fun for them to see Louisville in a different way than they had seen it before—to see it through the eyes of the people who live there, and not just visiting. It seems obvious, but everybody's place is their place, and it's really important! There are so many stories in all these places that we need to hear.



“It seems obvious, but everybody's place is their place, and it's really important! There are so many stories in all these places that we need to hear.”

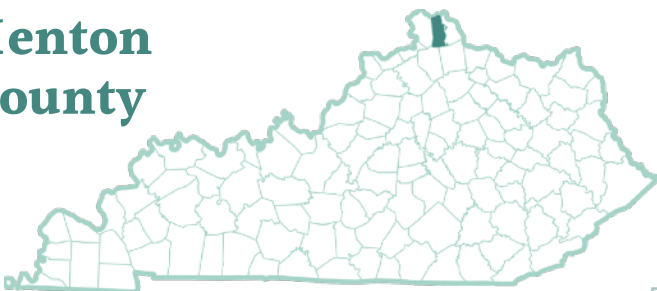


Jim Guthrie, Kenton County

Jim Guthrie of Covington, a Cohort Member and then Steering Committee member since 2015, connected with RUX Cohort Member Robert Gipe and RUX Steering Committee Member Alexia Ault. Their partnership grew around the visioning and renovation of the historic Belk Building in downtown Harlan.

In this reflection, Jim shares his insights about how partnerships develop and how RUX has helped him grow.

Kenton County



Jim Guthrie Steering Committee Member 2015 – 2020

Jim Guthrie is the third owner of Hub + Weber since its founding in 1973. Hub + Weber is a small group of design professionals and architects. Notable projects include Hotel Covington – an award-winning hotel renovation in Covington, Kentucky, Florence Freedom Baseball Stadium in Florence, Kentucky, and MidFirst Credit Union in Trenton, Ohio.

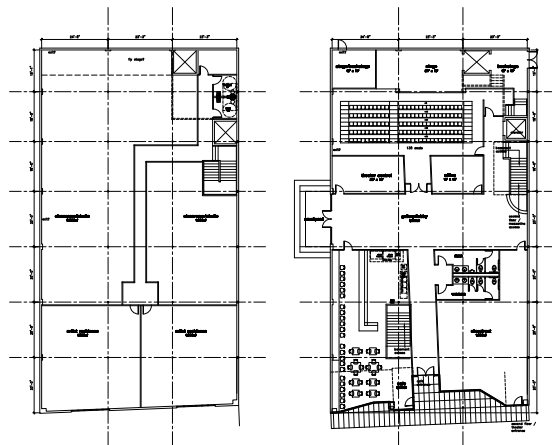
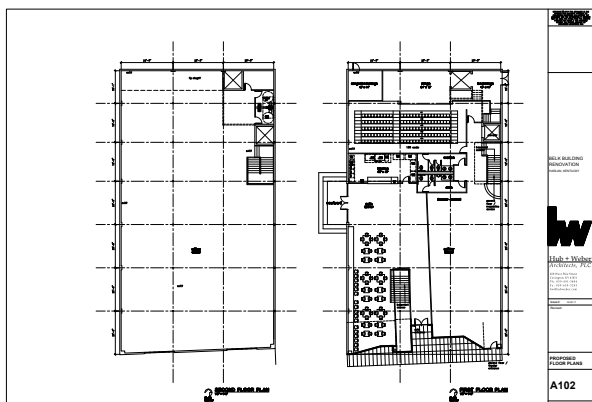
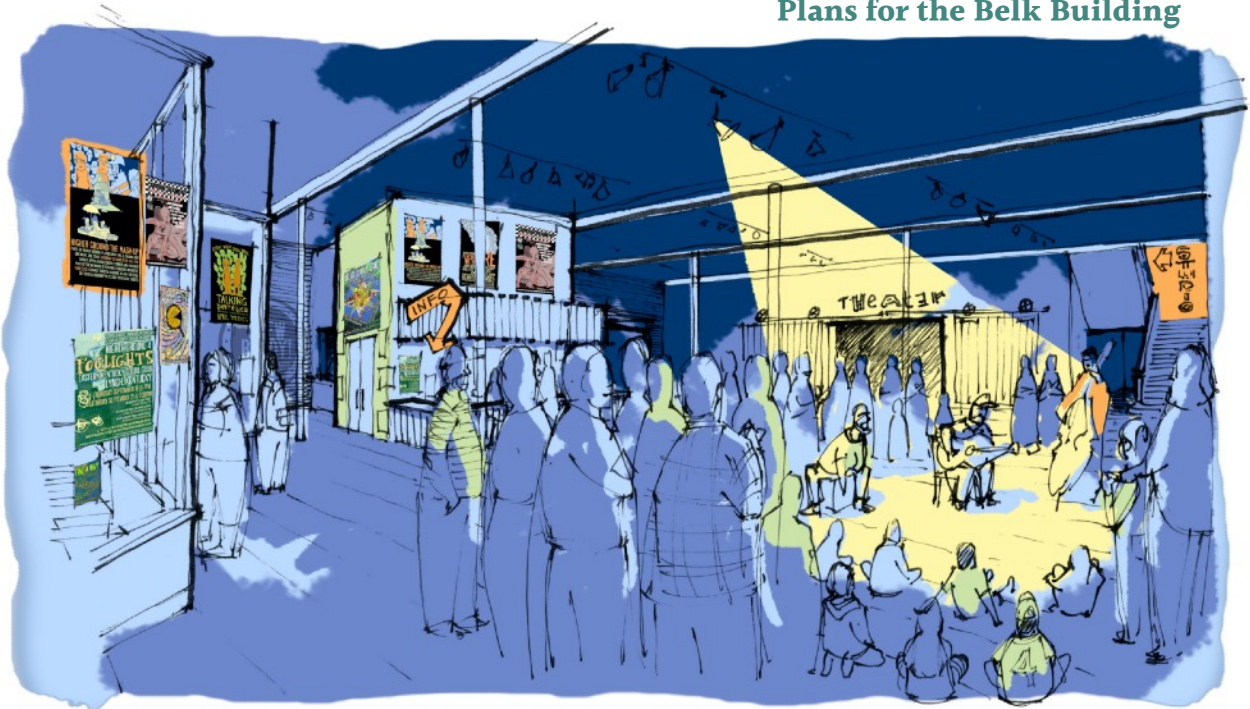
What has being part of RUX meant to you?

Jim Guthrie: In general, it's given me a greater awareness of my identity associated with the state I live in. I didn't have that identity before. That's something new. My parents weren't from Kentucky. I grew up in Lexington, but I didn't have a sense of state culture.

I went to school in Cincinnati and have lived in the area since. Northern Kentucky is kind of isolated from the rest of the state, so I think just having a broader awareness of the state's culture

and identity has been beneficial. Thinking beyond the stereotypes, too. I was subjected to the same stereotypes of Kentucky as everybody else who grew up and lived in urban areas. RUX has given me an understanding, and helped me create a sense of patience and grace, which I didn't always have. It's made me more aware and allowed me to open myself up to broader perspectives.

Plans for the Belk Building



What have you learned about your own community, or other communities, after being a part of RUX?

I do still feel like Northern Kentucky is pretty isolated in terms of state identity. I think RUX is beginning to address that through our efforts to attract more people from Northern Kentucky to the organization. We've had two cohorts here for Weekend Community Intensives, and that's helped quite a bit.

When people think of the culture of the state broadly, they think more of the stereotypical culture. But, when I think of a state culture, I think of the eastern and western parts of the state I've visited and learned about. I think about the food and musical traditions that are very authentic. Exploring other parts of the state has given me a broader and more authentic awareness of the people and the culture, from the musical perspective and a little bit of geography, too, but the food and musical heritage and culture of the state is unique.



"I still feel like Northern Kentucky is pretty isolated in terms of state identity. I think RUX is beginning to address that."

What partnerships have you developed through RUX?

I worked with Robert Gipe in Harlan on a couple of buildings that they were trying to get some grants to restore and stabilize and develop.

I helped him apply for an art grant and figure out what programs offered in the Belk Building—a former department store in downtown Harlan—could be, and what the architecture could be. As a smaller subset of that, we did some renderings of the space and layouts for how floors might be developed, and some roof and skylight plans to help them restore or stabilize the building’s bad roof. I continued to work with Alexia Ault and other folks in Harlan who are still developing that program. They want it to be a workforce training program and use the building as a way to educate and train folks in architecture and more progressive building technologies and energy efficient building practices.



The original Belk Building (left) and renderings for new Belk Building (right).



How has RUX helped you personally and professionally?

I feel like I'm at a much different place than most people in the group, which I think is good. From a diversity standpoint, I think it's important to get everybody's perspective.

I'm much older than other RUX folks, and in a different place in my career. I own an architecture firm and manage 10 people in the office and work on developing projects. I think I find sometimes that professionally, I feel a little bit outside the conversations because I'm in such a different place than everybody else. And I think being aware of that, and recognizing where I am, is helping to bring myself into the conversation.

Personally, I think I've learned patience and grace. I'm not a very patient person. And I don't always extend the social graces, and this is something I picked up from RUX.

In RUX, every conversation begins with a "thank you for your perspective," and every conversation ends with a "thank you for your perspective."

There's stuff in between that happens, but there's always this kind of beginning and ending to a conversation. It's very graceful and social and friendly. And I think that's the biggest thing I've learned personally. And I think for me, making that pause has been pretty healthy.

What lessons are you taking away from RUX?

Patience and tolerance, and acceptance in that tolerance.

I think having tolerance of other people in general and trying to be more accepting is something I'm working on as well. Trying to be gracious in hosting and asking questions that allows me to host them more equitably.

There are parts of the state that I've gone to—Paducah and Western Kentucky, and then Eastern Kentucky—that I don't think I would have ever gone to without RUX. And I think that's been really eye opening for me. I think most people will agree that getting to the outer reaches of the state, and just seeing geography, has been hugely beneficial. You're making notes to go back and visit.

I think in terms of continuing conversations about partnerships, there are folks from RUX that have reached out to me for help with renovating a historically Black community building, others who reached out to get some help with a proposal to do creative placemaking on their campus in Paducah. There continue to be those kinds of seeds that are being planted, and hopefully, I'm helpful to them, too.

“There are parts of the state that I've gone to—Paducah, Western Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky—that I don't think I would have ever gone to without RUX. And I think that's been really eye opening for me.”

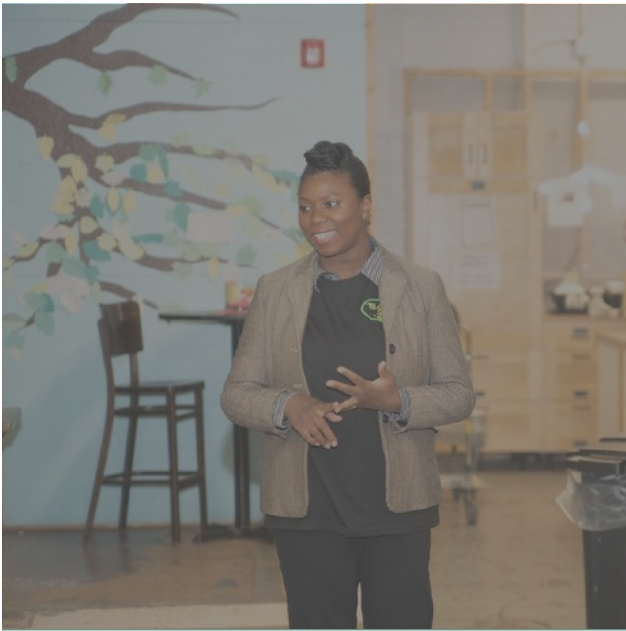


A dialogue with:

**Ashley Smith,
Fayette County**

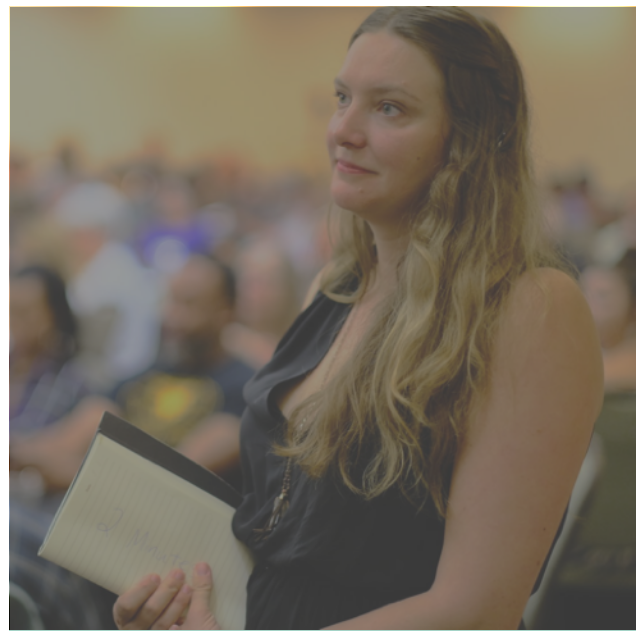
&

**Savannah Barrett,
Jefferson County**



Ashley Smith
Former RUX Field Manager

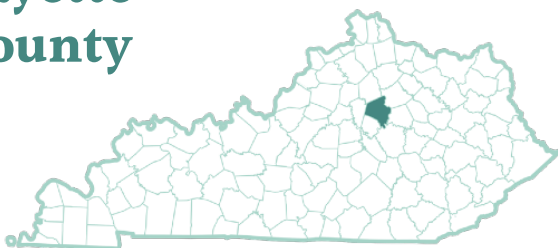
Ashley Smith is the co-founder of Black Soil. She graduated from the University of Kentucky in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. She has worked with Fayette Alliance, KentuckyOne Health, Community Ventures, Smiley Pete Publishing, and The Lyric Theatre & Cultural Arts Center. She was an Ethical Redevelopment Salon member under the leadership of Theaster Gates and Secretary for Kentucky State University's Extension and Research Advisory Council.



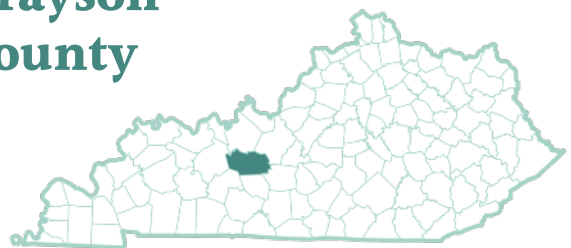
Savannah Barrett
RUX Co-Founder

Savannah Barrett is the Exchange Director for Art of the Rural. She is a member of the board of the Center for Performance and Civic Practice, the Robert Gard Foundation, and The Art of Community: Rural S.C. initiative, and has served on the review panel for the National Endowment for the Arts' Citizen's Institute on Rural Design. She has widely published essays and interviews and presented her work at conferences internationally.

**Fayette
County**



**Grayson
County**



What does being part of RUX mean to you?

Ashley Smith

Being part of RUX has been life changing.

When I came into the cohort in 2016, I didn't know what to expect. I was trying to find my place professionally, and RUX really offered a library of opportunities. Fast forward to a few years later, and RUX has inspired me to start a business that looks at improving Kentucky's local food systems.

I think what it means to me is that life is what you make it. RUX works if you work it, and it's a beautiful collection of so many different people coming together, looking for inspiration and finding a place within RUX to make a difference.

Savannah Barrett

The word that comes to mind for me is “manifesting.” That word doesn't relate to everyone, but it's kind of the same idea as pulling yourself up.

That phrase that is sometimes politicized to say, “everyone should be able to achieve the same level of prosperity.” Instead, I think that everyone should have access to the tools and the resources they need to enact their own solutions and their own ideas. RUX has become a really beautiful way to level the playing field for so many.

RUX has folks who are coming from a lot of access and some folks are coming from a little bit of access. Through our work, they can meet one another and share what they have. They can inspire each other to believe in the visions that they have for our shared places.

What we bring is enough. I feel like I learn that lesson every day with all of you and that's really the biggest gift.

What are some things you've learned about your own community, other communities, or Kentucky as a whole, from your time in RUX?

Ashley Smith

I love the intention of RUX going into different communities and seeking out the hidden figures who are really making that community, city, or town thrive. And as always, it's the folks really at the margins operating in less than what they actually need and doing incredible things with that.

Being able to travel throughout Kentucky has exposed me to the commonalities and shared values. I've been able to glean a lot of new skill sets that I learned from my cohort members and folks living within those communities.

Savannah Barrett

When I think about my community in the context of RUX, I think about the whole state of Kentucky.

One of the biggest things I've learned is that our community doesn't have to have a geographic boundary of our neighborhood. It doesn't have to be a single place. It can be something as broad as the whole state, and we can see our futures as intertwined.

We've been to 10 communities around the state, and we've learned a lot along the way. We've learned a lot with all of you, and one of the things that I think we've learned a lot about is what it takes to build a movement right now, in Kentucky, with Kentuckians.

Some of the most important learning from that is that something can't be directive *and* sustainable. We can't be telling people what to do and expect them to keep showing up to do it. They have to be finding themselves in this process. They have to be finding their voice and their community, and people who will sustain them and keep them in place.

How has RUX changed your perspective on Kentucky?

Ashley Smith

I'm a lifelong resident and native of Kentucky. I really didn't feel a connection to the state until I started traveling outside of Lexington, to places like Lynch in Harlan County, and Bowling Green and Paducah, that allowed me to enter into these communities and see the day-to-day, the passion, and the investment.

It's been about really embracing a real, full, balanced representation of Kentucky.

RUX really pushed me outside of my comfort zone, especially with the identity piece of the lifelong connectedness to Kentucky, and wondering, what does the future in Kentucky look like?

I've wanted to move away so many times, and I just never was able to. Now I know I'm here for a reason. RUX helped define that for me by helping me analyze what I have to offer and what I have to learn.

My parents are from Western Kentucky. When we went to Paducah, I got to stay with my aunt, and so many beautiful childhood memories came from spending summers down there with my grandparents going to Lake Barkley. I've been trying to place myself within the larger human experience of this state, with a backdrop so gorgeous.

When I worked at the Lyric Theater [a historically Black theater in Lexington], we were in an urban neighborhood. When I went to rural East Kentucky and saw so many of the similarities, that's when I felt interconnectedness. That's when I started to say, "okay, there may be something here for me as a Black woman in Kentucky; there's a space for me to carve out and make things right."

“I've wanted to move away so many times, and I just never was able to get away, and now I know I'm here for a reason.”

Savannah Barrett

I think when we started RUX, we were starting from a reactive place.

The narrative about this state has always been that we are behind, that we are not inclusive, that there's nothing here, there's nothing worth investing in from the outside.

But what we've learned over time is to flip that script to go from reacting to what we've been told about ourselves, to going out into the world and saying, “now y'all don't even understand how good we have it—how many beautiful, exciting, rich, deep cultural, natural economic opportunities we have. I wish that you had as many opportunities in New York City to make your future as we do here because we have each other and we get to build on 10, 12, 15 generations of people in place.”

Ashley Smith

Yes, owning the narrative, rewriting it, showcasing it—I think it's always surprising when people come here. It's refreshing.

Savannah Barrett

But place is not enough, because so many people can still be left out of a narrative of place. What I think has made the difference in RUX is this very stubborn sense of loving that we've been able to create with one another. I think we continue to come across some really intense hurdles and conversations that are hard to have.

We have to understand that my survival is connected to yours, and vice versa, and find a way through. We continue to choose to do that in a way that is based on the friendship, respect, and accountability we have with one another.

“I wish you had as many opportunities in New York City to make your future as we do here because we have each other.”

Case Study Conclusions

People

These case studies demonstrate that an important aspect of the power of RUX is the deep connections cohort members make. The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange and its Currency of Connection framework create space for people to get to know one another through deliberate engagement.

RUX prioritizes diversity among its leadership and members. Each member of the Exchange brings their grounding in the specific cultures and histories that are representative of the places they're from. In turn, each Community Intensive weekend is designed to encourage safe and vulnerable conversations so members have opportunities to see themselves and their experiences reflected in one another.

RUX works with experienced artists and cultural organizers to produce programming that draws on best practices for leadership development that is intentionally rooted in regional cultures and histories. These personal connections are what hold members together during and after their time with RUX. When members become accountable to each other as people, they also become invested in each other's future survival.

Place

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange and its Currency of Connection framework creates opportunities for members to discover other communities, and their own community, in ways that establish lasting connections and accountability. RUX relies on immersive, in-person experiences as the core of its approach to the Place component of the framework.

Gerry James found roots in Kentucky after traveling the state and seeing for himself what individual communities had to offer. Eastern Kentuckian Stacie Sexton found connection with the Western Kentucky coalfields, and now knows the two regions have much to learn from one another. Louisvillian Michael George learned that his community in Kentucky's largest city has a lot in common with some of Kentucky's least populous rural towns in Knott and Perry Counties. And Jess Stevens found that she can learn from other Kentuckians in other places who are working to better their own communities.

By bringing members into other communities across the state in intentional ways, we help deepen their connection and commitment to those places. With this increased commitment, RUX Members begin to realize that their community's future is linked to

every other Kentucky community, and that in order to move forward, we must first build relationships across county lines.

Host Committees report that their experiences planning and producing RUX Community Intensive Weekends also pay social dividends on a local scale. The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange creates opportunities for local leaders to step forward into a structure that is fundamentally collaborative. Forming a Host Committee, applying to host RUX, and working together to produce a weekend establishes new local leadership networks and expands existing networks in a place.

Partnership

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange believes that leadership is a process of deepening connections to others. These connections are the pipeline through which big ideas flow. We believe that positive change coalesces when people, place and projects intersect. RUX creates the environment where these essential factors come together.

RUX is successful when members of the Exchange are inspired to contribute to the civic and social issues facing their communities. The Partnership aspect of the RUX Currency of Connection framework helps members turn ideas and passion about collaboration with fellow members into tangible projects.

RUX has pollinated and helped nurture positive change and the creation of social value in every region of Kentucky since 2014. These partnerships and projects have demonstrated the power of the Currency of Connection framework and urgent need for programming, like the Exchange itself. In years to come, the positive effects of the Exchange and its work will continue to help Kentuckians manifest partnerships and positive change in ways that are yet to be seen.

The Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange is proud of the environment we've created in the program's first five years. We've been successful in ways already seen, and in ways yet to be seen. Connections of People, Place and Partnership among cohort members will continue to help people and communities grow and thrive in immeasurable ways, furthering the program's impact on our Commonwealth for years to come.



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