

**THE FUTURE
OF
LETCHER COUNTY**

A COMMUNITY PLAY

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Dramatis Personae

Harlan – b. 1942. Steeped in the old ways of storytelling, music, church – liable to sneak a nip now and then. He was a coal miner for a decade, then bought a convenience store. He never married. He is Jane’s older brother.

Jane – b. 1952. Steeped in the old ways, but also familiar with and more sympathetic to modern ways than brother Harlan. She has children and grandchildren and is a community leader.

Elizabeth – b. 1979. The first in her family with a college degree, she is a student of Appalachian history, a scholar, and a mother.

Jason – b. 1995. Is single, a Christian, a musician, a hard worker, but not settled into a career. Wants to stay in the mountains, get married, and raise a family.

Andrew – b. 1997. Is openly gay and speaks his mind. Is immersed in his family’s history and the region, but sees himself as likely leaving the mountains.

Place and Time

Here and Now

Playwright’s Notes

The Future of Letcher County, by Donna Porterfield, was written from material gathered in 2016-’17 from story circles and interviews with Letcher County, Kentucky people of different ages and points of view. When writing the play, pieces of one person’s story were combined with pieces of another person’s story, resulting in a story all its own that is representative of the points of view expressed by County participants. The first act of the play is an assemblage of these stories. The second act is a conversation with the audience about their own stories brought to mind by the play.

The Future of Letcher County premiered June 3, 2017 at Appalshop’s annual Seedtime on the Cumberland Festival, where it was performed by Thomas Anderson, Nell Fields, Dustin Hall, Bill Meade, and Elizabeth Sanders, and where it was directed by Amy Brooks and Dudley Cocke.

Special thanks to the Letcher County Culture Hub, the communities and individuals who shared their stories, the Appalachian Media Institute (AMI) youth who conducted interviews, and Dustin Hall who served as project manager and artistic consultant.

ACT I

Performers enter from different places among the audience. Each proceeds to the stage as she or he speaks to the audience.

HARLAN

Howdy! My name is Harlan. I expect some of ya' already know me 'cause for the last 75 some years I've lived right over the mountain there (*gestures*), and up the creek a ways. (*to someone in the audience he recognizes*) Why hello Roy. I didn't know you was gonna be here . . . (*banters with audience*)

Now like I started to say, there's some other folks here today with me, and we're gonna talk about "The Future of Letcher County." The way I understand it is that somebody thought it was a good idea to pick out some people who most likely, for one reason or another, have different ways of lookin' at the future of our fine County. So you're likely to hear all kinds of talk, and . . .

JANE

. . . if I don't jump in here, he'll probably go on forever . . . I'm Jane, Harlan's baby sister. Harlan was born in 1942 and I was born in '52, so I grew up in the 60's. We were poor, and if you ever want to know what my childhood was like, go back and look at those old black and white pictures of little barefooted, stringy-haired Appalachian children that you saw in Life magazine at that time – and that was me. (*reflective*) But the surprising thing about being that child was that I never did know I was poor.

HARLAN

When he could get the work, our daddy was a coal miner. I reckon they's a number of you folks here who was, or is, coal miners. I was a coalminer too – fer a good while . . .

JANE

Then he bought himself one of those convenience stores.

HARLAN

Back then we just called it a store – wadn't much convenience to it.

ELIZABETH

I remember your store! When I was a child, I used to love going in there. I was fascinated by those old pictures you had on the wall of the logging camps that were around here in the early 1900's. There was one photo I never will forget – a huge tree stump – so wide that it had a man and his horse and wagon standing on it, with room to spare.

HARLAN *(to Elizabeth)*

Now that was wilderness, buddy! I remember you when you was a young'un. You was always eyeballin' the candy sticks and bubble gum . . .

ELIZABETH

I was trying to decide which ones I would spend my dime on!

You know Mr. Adams, by the time I moved back to the mountains – after college and getting married and having a couple of children – your store wasn't there anymore. *(to audience)* My name is Elizabeth, and I grew up in the 1980's.

JASON

Howdy! My name is Jason, and I grew up in the 1990's. That store was just an empty shell – not even a roof over it – when I was coming up.

ANDREW

Well, going to the store, any store, is something I couldn't possibly forget – especially if it is Macy's Department Store . . .

JASON *(smiling at Andrew's comment)*

That's my buddy, Andrew. We went to school together. Andrew can't make up his mind about whether to leave, or whether to stay here in the mountains. I want him to stay. And I've made up my mind to stay . . . get married and raise a family. I know it might be hard, but I'm determined.

ANDREW

I grew up in town, if one could actually call Neon a town. My family's roots are in east Kentucky and southwest Virginia. I have traced those roots all the way back to English royalty . . .

HARLAN

Oh Lordy, here we go . . .

ANDREW

Of course, I like to study our very old family photos and other historic records. Apparently, we were wealthy at one time. *(to Harlan)* No doubt that's when we did all our shopping at Macy's . . .

HARLAN

Now, we're not here tonight to talk to these fine folks about no Macy's – nor any other store fer that matter. We're here to talk about THE FUTURE OF LETCHER COUNTY.

ANDREW

How novel – a future for Letcher . . . County.

JANE

Now, now. . .

ANDREW

I'd like to say that I have a love—hate relationship with the County. It can be a fabulous place to live, and it can be a scary place to live. We have some pretty bad hombres in these here hills. It can make a feller want to get out of town fast before the shootin' starts.

HARLAN

Now see . . . that's what we don't need in this county . . .

JANE *(interrupting)*

We all have our points of view, Harlan, and today we need to listen to what each other has to say. . .

Thinking about the future has put me in mind of Harlan's and my dad. Daddy was blinded in the mines – completely blinded. The coal company offered Mama compensation, but they wanted her to take one lump sum . . .

HARLAN

Mommy said, *(as mother)* “If I take it all at once’t what am I supposed to do when that money runs out?”

JANE

The coal company said . . .

HARLAN

“Welfare.”

JANE

And Mommy said . . .

HARLAN

“No sir, it ain’t gonna come to that.”

JANE

So Mommy started takin’ in peoples’ laundry. When her two-year old and her five-year old . . .

HARLAN

. . . that’s me

JANE

. . . got older, she left them at home with Dad, and she started cleanin’ houses for people.

HARLAN *(slightly embarrassed)*

It was different times – what with no indoor plumbin’ and all.

JANE *(nodding to Harlan)*

But we was well kept. We were going to school; we were involved in sports; we were in the marching band . . . We went to church ever’ Sunday. And ever’ Sunday you went to someone’s house, or they come to your house, to have dinner.

ANDREW

In my family, if we couldn’t make it to church, they brought the church to us . . .

HARLAN

Most families attended church. Some churches, like the Old Regular Baptists, would have church in one place one weekend and then at a different little community on other weekends. People used to come from miles around just to attend each community's church.

JANE

We didn't have much else to depend on except God – and each other.

JASON

Church is my anchor.

HARLAN

I appreciate that, Jason. I always love the singin' . . . Do you know "Almost Home"?

JASON

(lines it out for the audience to join)

*For many long years I've traveled this road
I'm weary and tired of carrying this load
So often I'm tempted with Satan to bow
But I'm too near Home to turn back now*

ELIZABETH

When I go away from the mountains, one of the things I miss the most is the way we sing here.

Now, it's worth noting that our churches were once also used for schools. They were an all-around gathering place – baptisms, funerals, weddings, big dinners on the grounds, reading, writing, and arithmetic! Then one room schools were built, and next came our little public schools.

The churches and schools were the heart of the community.

HARLAN

(to audience) Why we played ball on Saturdays and Sundays – I mean that field would be full of kids! Not only that, but on the school teams – let's say you carried nine or ten on the squad – you multiply that by the number of grade schools that used to be in the county and you had that many kids involved in basketball, baseball, you name it. Ever'body got to participate.

JASON

My school was consolidated. I would have liked to play sports, but I just didn't make the cut.

JANE

I worked at one of our little schools for six years, and there was kids there until late at night. They felt good bein' there – safe you know.

ELIZABETH

Going to a big school after being at a small one can be stressful. My daughter was on the academic team at her little school, and when they moved all the kids to the consolidated high school she said, "I am not going to be on that team."

HARLAN

There you go!

ELIZABETH

And I said, "Well that's up to you," but before the year was over she was on the team because she got acquainted better with those people.

HARLAN

The point I'm tryin' to make is that them old schools BELONGED to us. At least we thought they did until they took 'em away from us.

ELIZABETH

Economists and developers have a term for that kind of thing. They call it creative destruction . . .

HARLAN

. . . say what?

ELIZABETH

. . . creative destruction. It's an economic concept based on the theory that capitalism destroys and reconfigures previous economic orders, ceaselessly devaluing existing wealth in order to clear the ground for the creation of new wealth.

HARLAN

Well I don't know nothin' about all that, but like I said before, I do know we lost a lot when we lost our schools.

JASON

My grade school was the only one that had any African American students. We all grew up together and then we get to High School and some kids there wore Confederate flag patches on their jackets and such, and they started picking on my Black friends. One day we were getting on the school bus and some of those kids put a poster on a pole right next to our bus. That poster had some terrible racist stuff on it. So I got off the bus and jerked it down.

ANDREW

After that he was threatened at school, every day.

JASON

One kid put a razor blade in my Black friend, Michael's, locker and then told the principal that they had seen him with a knife. So here they come with lock cutters, and my friend since grade school got kicked out of high school.

ANDREW

Now you know that's not right.

JASON

It was bad.

ANDREW

A person I know recently described his bad day as "worse than three nights in Neon." Well, being from Neon, I said, "Listen honey, I've had seventeen years of those nights."

When I was, I don't know, thirteen, fourteen, I knew I was a homosexual. I realized that there's a reason I like to go to Macy's . . .

HARLAN (*interrupting*)

Now these people didn't come here to listen to that kind of talk . . In my day . . .

JANE (*interrupting*)

Harlan, Harlan, Harlan

HARLAN

WHAT!! What he's bringin' into the conversation with these nice folks here ain't natural, nor moral neither. It's something we don't need to talk about at all . . .

JANE

Harlan, we were brought up to be more open minded than this.

HARLAN

Well, that ain't the way I remember it. Now, in the Bible it says . . .

JANE

Harlan, wait just a minute here. What about our cousin Billy?

HARLAN

What about him? Billy was a good boy. (*to the audience*) Him and his mommy lived way out in the county. . .

JANE

You know exactly what I'm talkin' about . . .

HARLAN

Nobody wants to hear about Billy.

ANDREW

Well, I'm on pins and needles! We all want to hear about charming cousin Billy.

HARLAN

I don't know what this has to do with no future of Letcher County – which, by the way, is what we're all here to talk about but . . . cousin Billy . . . well . . . well, the truth of the matter is Billy liked to wear his mommy's clothes.

ANDREW

Ohh. Did she shop at Macy's?

HARLAN

No he did not “shop at no Macy's,” because there weren't no Macy's in that day, and besides, if there was, he wouldn't have had a way to get there.

The truth of the matter is that Billy liked to wear his mommy's long gingham dresses with a' apron over it and a sun bonnet on his head.

JANE

And he talked his mommy into buyin' him some of those old timey cotton stockings and those heeled lace up shoes that women wore back in that day – since her shoes didn't fit him!

ANDREW

I almost wore a pair here myself.

HARLAN

Good Lord! How long are we gonna dwell on this?

JANE

So whenever you'd go up the holler to see Aunt Matty and Cousin Billy, there he'd be out in the field a-hoein' corn – all dressed up in his Mommy's clothes!

HARLAN *(to audience)*

Well it ain't like he went to town dressed like that. It was somethin' he just liked to do at home.

ANDREW

Now them was what I call the good old days!

JASON

Well, I'll tell you, when I was in high school, people in my community were very homophobic – and I do mean afraid. My parents are Christians, and I'm a Christian, so I was very upset when I heard my parents say derogatory things about LGBTQ people.

HARLAN

What kind of people? TQ what?

ANDREW

Your cousin Billy's kind of people, Harlan.

I went to a Middle School that was full of closed minded people. There was a lot of bullying; a lot of very not nice people doing a lot of very not nice things to you. I used to dream of running away to a place where no one could beat me up – then the bell would ring, and I'd have to try and make it through the halls to my next class.

ELIZABETH

"People don't like what they don't understand." That's what the poet Marianne Moore once said.

ANDREW

Well, I could have told her that.

JASON

I remember a class discussion we had about Appalachian stereotypes. People were naming stereotypes about the region -- straw hats, banjos, trailer parks, drugs, a rifle in one hand – Bible in the other.

ANDREW

And I said to the teacher, "Surely they aren't talking about Letcher County! They must be thinking about those hillbillies over in Tennessee.

JASON

What made me feel a little better was seeing how tolerant a lot of people in Whitesburg are. I mean the fact that I can, in one evening, see people playing banjos, then come to a punk show . . .

ANDREW

Then go up the street and there's a drag show – pearls, feathers – I mean in what other small town with 1,534 people plus 2 grouches could you do all those things?

HARLAN

Can we please get back to what we come here for – jobs.

JASON

When my dad lost his mining job, we moved up to Washington D.C., and when we finally moved back to Kentucky I remember saying, "I can breathe again." My friends thought I meant I couldn't breathe in D.C. because of the air pollution!

JANE

When I go away from the mountains, I always miss the stars. They feel so close to you at night.

JASON

My dad taught me how to be savvy in the woods. They just turned me loose. I was free.

ELIZABETH

My parents were at work when we got home from school, so my little sister and I played up in the woods a lot. I would make up stories and we'd act them out. Of course I was the Queen and she was the serving girl. Back then everyone just let their kids run up in the hills. The instructions were, "Be home by supper."

I feel bad for my children for not having that experience. Why has it come to where we now want to keep our kids inside playing some electronic game, or penned up in a yard? There's no more danger out in the woods now than when I was growing up.

HARLAN

Amen, sister!

JANE

I'm sorry to say that the woods Harlan and I grewed up in is now a landfill, and the old homeplace is gone. I don't go up there because I try to remember it like it used to be – but memories can fade.

HARLAN

Well, maybe we ought to just do like the young'uns and get a picture of it tattooed on our rear ends.

JASON

We left Kentucky without any pictures of our old house . . . and when we came back from D.C. it was just a giant hole blasted out.

We hadn't been back long when my dad died. The community and the church really came together to help us through that time, but I had such a big hole in my heart that it just wasn't enough for me. We lived in a very isolated place at the head of the holler. We were on top of the mountain, but then there was a little valley, and then more mountains. So I guess you'd say that we lived in the upper valley. . . to this day, I know those ridgelines by heart.

When I was out in the woods, I felt closer to my dad. One day, just sitting out there, I heard a rustling up in the trees, and I could feel something comforting me – making me feel a little better. . . it's hard to describe, but I think it was God letting me know that my father was in a good place, and that I would be alright.

After that, I got baptized and religion has been a part of my life ever since.

HARLAN (*patting Jason on the shoulder*)

It's hard to lose everything that you knowed as your home and everything you knowed growin' up.

One thing you can count on in life is that things are always a-changin' – for better or worse, but always changin'. (*pause*)

Well now, I think it's about time that I tell these fine folks here (*gestures to audience*) about my experience with economic development.

ANDREW

Hold on to your sun bonnets, boys!

HARLAN

When I was a boy, there was a big ol' cliff goin' down to the river. And up on top of that cliff lived old man Combs who was a' raisin' chickens. Now one day one of them chickens of his fell off the cliff and into the river. Well, me and a friend of mine was a' playin' down at the river that day with a old rickety boat we found in the woods nearby, and we seen that chicken fall off that cliff.

And I said, "Oh lordie, Jim, there's one of old man Comb'es chickens just committed suicide off the cliff!"

And Jim said, "Get in the boat! Maybe it ain't dead yet."

So we get in the boat, which was leakin' pretty bad, and row over to the cliff, and sure enough that chicken was just a floppin' around in the water. Jim grabbed a-holt of it and pulled it out of the river . . .

ANDREW

And gave it mouth to beak resuscitation, I suppose.

HARLAN

Well, Andrew, that's exactly what he did! Then we rowed back to the river bank and decided to take that chicken back to old man Combs.

We went back up the road to the house, said, "Mr. Combs, sir, one of your chickens done committed suicide off that cliff out there, and we saved it fer ya."

And he said, "Oh, lord boys. Thank ya. Thank ya. I've been a wonderin' where my chickens has got to. Here's a dime fer bringin' it back."

Well, you never seen two happier young'uns than we was to get that dime. So me and my buddy, we got our minds a'goin', and we go back down to the river

and start a pickin' up rocks and puttin' 'em in the boat. We get in and row up the river to the cliff and start a' throwing rocks at them chickens. We knocked two of 'em off, and they go straight up in the air, and straight down in the river.

We take 'em back to old man Combs, "We saved two more!"

"Oh lordy, thank ya boys. If ya get anymore bring 'em back. Here's two dimes fer your trouble."

Now that right there, ladies and gents, is what ya' call your entrepreneurial – economic - development!

ANDREW

Fabulous! Let me see if I understand your business model: You knock down the chickens and then sell their recovery? *(to audience)* Sound familiar?

ELIZABETH

More creative destruction.

At one time we thought coal was everything around here. My dad went to college but didn't finish. He came back home to marry my mom and work in the coal mines – because he could make more money in coal than being a school teacher.

JASON

For a while, my dad and his friends thought coal would go on forever, but today there are less than 100 coal jobs in all of Letcher County.

ELIZABETH

You drive around and there are so many vacant houses that are falling apart, beautiful properties that can't be sold, because people are trying to find a way to get out of here -- especially young people.

JASON

My dad would get laid off from the mines and do carpentry and odd jobs. Then another mine would hire him and he'd work for six months, then the same thing would happen and he'd be back to odd jobs. My parents learned that coal wasn't gonna last forever.

ANDREW

I don't know why people are so surprised that we've lost coal jobs. You don't just wait for the next crop of coal to grow up. It isn't a renewable resource.

HARLAN

Now wait a minute here young feller coal built this country . . .

ELIZABETH

That it did, Harlan. It's part of why we defeated Japan and Hitler in World War II. And go to New York City if you want to see what coal built – and then lit up.

ANDREW

New York – which, incidentally, is the headquarters of Macy's . . .

HARLAN

. . . and we can't live without that can we?

ANDREW

I haven't been able to.

ELIZABETH

Now World War II revived the coal industry. And as the United Mine Workers of America grew stronger, many miners had higher wages and better benefits than in the past. But, it didn't last. Mechanization was a factor. Coal has always been an up and down economic experience.

JANE

When my kids got in school I thought, I don't wanna sit around and do nothin' for the rest of my life. If something happened to my husband, like it did to my Dad, I wanted to be able to provide for myself and my children. So I went back to school. Then a few years later my husband got unemployed due to the coal business cutting down . . . you get yourself used to a certain standard and you don't want to go back to being that poor child again. It always haunts you.

JASON

It was real hard on my dad during the times he was layed off from the mines, and my mom had to go to work. She liked working, and Dad was proud of her, but at

the same time he seemed kind of lost – like he didn't know who he was without working a job . . .

I want Letcher County to realize we're not going to have coal business like we did. We're not going to be starting out at 50 or 70 thousand dollars a year again.

ELIZABETH

A lot of people are working at being farmers now. If they work hard at it, they might make it.

JASON

We have to reinvent ourselves . . .

ANDREW

. . . and it's hard.

HARLAN

Well boo hoo son. Coal ain't dead yet. There's more coal – like that what left Letcher County to build your Macy's in New York City – and it's still under the ground. If we can just get the politicians to do right, we'll have coal jobs again.

ANDREW

Lord and Taylor! What Kool Aid have you been drinking?

HARLAN

Ya' see . . . it's people like you who are hurtin' our chances of gettin' real jobs back in here – like the prison . . .

ANDREW

Well think about this -- over time, people who've had the opportunity and the means to get out of here have left. That leaves the people without the means to get out of here to pay the taxes – 65% of the people don't pay taxes because they're on fixed incomes. Do the math – that leaves 35% of the people carrying the load. Is the prison going to fix that?

HARLAN

It might not fix everything, but it'll give jobs to a lot more people now. And, that'll expand your tax base and attract more investors to the County!

ANDREW

If only, Harlan, if only.

JASON

I know it's a hard thing to confront because people need to make a living. But we cannot build our future on prisons, on the suffering of other people, and it makes no sense to put all our hopes in one basket again.

ELIZABETH

Some say our 100-year coal mono-economy has now become our un-doing. We need to find a way to use the abandoned mines and restore stripped lands. I've talked to people who want to grow mushrooms in the deep mines. And the strip jobs -- maybe we can grow hemp on them, build chicken farms, cultivate fresh water prawns and shrimp. There are people who think we can do that.

HARLAN

Hemp? Prawns and shrimp? You think that's gonna make a pay day? You're just wishin' in one hand and . . .

JANE

Whoa there old mule -- we don't need to resort to obscenities. I heard a local official say, "I'm working on a mystery -- the mystery of how we're going to create jobs because no one thing's going to do it. It may be 10 or 12 different things.

HARLAN

Them politicians are their own mystery they're a' workin' on.

ANDREW

I had this dream that I won the Powerball millions, and I heard about a little town in Texas that's jumping 24-7 because they have a river that people can inner tube on. So, I used the money to clean up the Kentucky River so people could actually use it without getting cancer. Think of it -- Whitesburg -- the Riviera of the East -- East Kentucky. *(to Harlan)* Maybe you could open up a bikini shop downtown.

HARLAN

And I reckon you'd be my first customer.

ANDREW

You certainly have an eye.

JASON

We need to stop the local arguments 'cause they're not helping anyone or anything. That's the only way I can see a bright future. What matters is the place we live, our children live, our grandchildren will live. I want to get married and raise a family here. I want to stay here! This conversation is SERIOUS. We need to build relationships with the good, the bad, and the contrary. We may not agree all the time, but there's no reason we can't work together.

ELIZABETH

I think part of our problem is we don't have anything to define ourselves other than what we see on TV. Our own stories are going away. I see this disconnect from our heritage, from ourselves, leading to self-harm.

The other day I ran into a girl I went to high school with – a beautiful person who was at the top of our class – and now she looks like she is 85 years old -- not a tooth in her head. Meth.

JANE

I hate to think of what her children are going through.

HARLAN

We never thought about drugs when I was young, because there weren't no drugs. On the other hand, there was certainly some sots who cared more about their bottle than their children. Many's the night when some kid would just come and spend the night at our house because their house weren't safe. We didn't think nothin' about it. Back then you never had to call nobody's parents to see if they could stay with you because there weren't no phone.

JANE

I can remember when I graduated from high school in the spring of 1969. I didn't know what drugs was.

JASON and ANDREW

Really?

ELIZABETH

I had my wisdom teeth cut out, and the dentist gave me a prescription for pain killers. When I filled it, there was a girl waiting right outside the drug store, in broad daylight, wanting to buy my pills.

HARLAN

I think it all started when we brought in all the clinics. Now-a-days people are just continuously goin' to the doctor, young and old -- and the clinics just a spewin' out them drugs.

ANDREW

I almost died on three separate occasions from anorexia when I was in high school. My mother started giving me diet pills before I was out of 8th grade. I finally got help, but even after I was better, my mother was still on me. Like, I had worked for a really long time and I had bought a beautiful shirt with the money I earned. I thought, "Well, my life's good. I look great." And my mother says to me, "Oh, that's a lovely shirt, and it would look even nicer if you lost weight." I just walked out of the room.

JANE

There are so many children now who live with their grandparents because their parents got on the drugs and lost interest in raising them, or they've died, or they're in prison.

ELIZABETH

When there's a whole generation that's been affected by no jobs and drugs and poor support from family and community members, it sends people over the hill and leads to mental illness. I know from experience with my own family that a number of people suffering from mental illness are self-medicating with illegal drugs, because they don't have access to mental health care.

JANE

I reckon there's always been mental illness, but in my day we didn't name it that way. We'd just say, "Grandma's taken to her bed again and won't get up."

JASON

I have friends who have mental issues, but they won't go see a doctor, because they're scared somebody will find out.

ELIZABETH

Stigma.

JASON

. . . It's a lot easier for them to get drugs than to get help.

ELIZABETH

Out of my graduating class a lot of my good friends, people with brilliant minds that could have offered our community wonderful things, are so strung out on drugs that they have nothing to offer.

ANDREW

Or they're dead – O.D.'ed

JASON

Andrew and I have been seeing this from the time we went to kindergarten.

ANDREW

Like these mountains, it's now just a part of our landscape.

JANE

Sometimes we seem to not have enough hope to do better . . .

ELIZABETH

But in a lot of ways we don't have a choice. Like food. What costs less in the grocery store, a honey bun or fresh vegetables? What're you going buy if you have to feed a whole pack of kids?

When I was a kid, both my parents had to work. When they got home they were worn out, so they didn't share stories with us anymore. Our stories started coming from the television.

JASON

That's a lonesome feeling, because you want to know your place and reconnect with it . . . We've tried to become mainstream America, but we aren't . . .

ELIZABETH

. . . and we shouldn't try to.

When I was a little kid, my neighbors were two grown-up adult brothers who lived in a camper with no electricity, no running water, and no outhouse. Us kids would go over there to play in their yard, but we'd have to make sure to dodge their poop piles. Then sometimes those brothers would fist fight and shoot at each other, and we'd have to run home. One day when my parents were at work, I accidentally stabbed a knife through my hand and the first person to my rescue was one of those brothers. He wrapped my hand in the shirt off his back, carried me to his four wheeler, and sped down the road to the doctor.

JANE

Honey, you could have bled to death.

HARLAN

There was many a time I watched my mother pour my little sister's last bottle of milk from our cow into half a bottle. Then she'd get me to take the other half to the neighbor who didn't have no cow and whose baby didn't have no milk a'tall . .

ELIZABETH

We're strong people and every one of us has something to offer. Despite hard times . . .

JASON

despite drugs

ANDREW

despite mental illness

JANE

We're still alive and kickin'.

ANDREW (*looking at Harlan*)

Well, some of us are still kickin'.

HARLAN

I'm glad you finally recognize it, son.

JANE

Some people are pushing.

ELIZABETH

Some people are not.

JANE

Some people are staying.

ANDREW

Some people are leaving.

JASON

If we make it, it will be because of our mountains.

HARLAN

These mountains – this place – that's who we are.

ELIZABETH

At the same time, if my children get to high school age and I'm not seeing things changing, or they aren't able to get the opportunities they need to nurture their gifts, then I'll take them somewhere else. And as sad as that makes me, I know I alone can't make things change here. All of us working together – that's our only hope.

JASON

If the people don't want it . . .

ANDREW

. . . they don't want it.

JANE

My mother used to say, “You cannot determine what kind of parents a soul is gonna be born to, but you can determine what kind of community a child will be raised up in.

(one by one, the cast steps forward speaking to a different part of the audience)

ELIZABETH

What do you think?

JASON

What do you think?

ANDREW

What do you think?

HARLAN

What do we think?

JANE

Thank you all for listening. Now we want to listen to you.

ACT II

STORY CIRCLES WITH THE AUDIENCE

See Roadside Theater’s Story Circle Guide at:

<https://roadside.org/asset/story-circle-guidelines?unit=117>