

## **We're Trying to Make It**

### **Production History**

*We're Trying to Make It* was written from the stories of Letcher County folk of multiple ages and points of view and is one part of the Roadside Theater/Appalshop Letcher County Youth Playmaking Project. Written by Donna Porterfield in collaboration with Dustin Hall and Devyn Creech, a staged reading of the play was performed as one part of the Performing Our Future Institute hosted by Imagining America and Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Attending the July 14-18 Institute were 13 intergenerational and interdisciplinary teams assembled and sponsored by Oregon State University, University of Florida, Wilfrid Laurier University (Ontario), Iowa State, Ohio State, Cornell, Virginia Tech, Syracuse University, Arizona State University, University of California Davis, and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development. The 45 participants arrived to think about and experience how arts and culture promote individual voice and collective agency, unbounding a community's imagination and ambition in order to create the conditions for equitable and sustainable economic development. After the play reading a discussion between the performers and audience was held.

### **Characters**

Amber – read by Callie Lee

Connie – read by Devyn Creech

Brian – read by Dustin Hall

### **Set**

A Bare Stage

*Readers enter and introduce themselves.*

Dustin – I've been working with Roadside Theater this summer, conducting story circles and interviews with people in my community. The play we're about to read is a sample of the work we've been doing that's part of the Letcher Co. Playmaking project. I play the part of Brian, who is in his sixties. I'm seventeen. *(laughter from audience)*

Devyn – I work with the Higher Ground Community Theater Project at Southeast Community College in neighboring Harlan County, Kentucky. We collect stories from our community and make them into musical theater in order to talk about local issues. I'm also a student at Southwest Community College. I play the part of Connie.

Callie Lee – I was born and raised in Letcher Co, and am a proud part of our County's local Cowan Creek Theater Group. Our intergenerational group recently created and performed a play, "Roots and Branches," from local stories. I'm very proud of our work, and want to see it grow. I play the part of Amber.

*Readers take their places on stage.*

**Amber**

I'm a kid of the eighties and nineties. I never felt like I was quite the same as everybody else, so I needed to figure out where I belonged and what I could do. TV was one way I learned. Mr Rogers, Pee-wee Herman, they were my heroes. As I got older it was MTV.

**Connie**

I grew up in the sixties. I'm sure we was poor, but I never remember thinkin' we was poor. We just come from a good strong community of people. We didn't have a big boom of money or anything, it's just we had a good upbringing'.

**Amber**

My parents were at work when I got home from school. My sister and I played outside a lot. I had a huge imagination so I would make up stories and we'd act them out. Back then you could just let your kids run up in the hills. The instructions were, "Be home by supper."

**Connie**

I remember we played out in the yard and out in the creek. You just was outdoor people back then.

**Amber**

My dad taught me how to be savvy in the woods and what to do if I saw animals or snakes. They just turned me loose. I feel bad for my daughters for not having that experience. I don't understand why things have evolved to where we want to keep our kids inside or in a yard, even though in reality there's no more danger to the kids here now than when I was growing up.

**Brian**

Our mom and dad married in 1952, then our brother was born in '53, our sister was born in '55, and in 1958 our dad was blinded in the coalmines – completely blinded. The coal company offered Mom compensation, but they wanted her to take it in one lump sum and she says,

**Connie**

"If I take it all at once't what am I supposed to do when that money runs out?"

**Brian**

And they said,

**Connie**

"Welfare."

**Brian**

And she said.

**Connie**

"No, it's not gonna come to that."

**Brian**

She started takin' in peoples' laundry. When her 2 year old and 5 year old got older she left them at home with Dad, and she started cleaning houses for people.

**Connie**

I'm sure it was a great struggle. I do remember not havin' indoor plumbing.

**Brian**

But we were well kept. We were going to school; we were involved in sports; we were involved in band . . .

**Connie**

We went to church ever' Sunday. And ever' Sunday you went to someone's house, or they come to your house, to have dinner.

**Brian**

And if you couldn't get to church, they would have church in your home. I don't remember learning "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or any of that, but I do remember learning "Almost Home," a gospel song. That's the first song I ever remember learning.

**Connie**

We was rich, not money-wise, but we was rich family-wise.

**Amber**

My dad went to college but didn't finish because he came back home to marry my mom and work in the coal mines, because he could make just as much money in coal as being a school teacher.

**Brian**

There was no consideration in the 80's that coal would go away, but today there are less than 100 coal jobs in all of Letcher County.

**Amber**

We're in a bad way right now. You drive around and there are so many vacant houses that are falling apart, beautiful properties that can't be sold and people trying to find a way to get out of here -- especially people my age.

**Connie**

I feel like most of life has gone alright until here lately, and well it's not really lately; I guess it started when we brought all the clinics in.

**Brian**

Yeah, my granny would just maybe go to the doctor once a year.

**Connie**

Or the emergency room if she got a nail stuck in her foot or something like that ..

**Brian**

And now people are just continuously running to the doctor -- young and old. Those clinics can spew out the pills!

**Connie**

I don't know a single soul that hasn't been touched by either the parents or the children doin' the drugs – legal and otherwise.

**Brian**

In the 70's everybody tried something or another, but it didn't make you throw your children down. It didn't make you deceive your parents and just rob and steal . . .

**Connie**

It didn't take over. I learned some statistics that said there's 56% of grandparents that are raisin' their grandchildren now. I think that in the past we had hard times and bounce back times, but how are we gonna bounce back to good times with this mess goin' on?

**Amber**

I think there's a lonesomeness here. A desire to know our place and reconnect with it. To realize we've tried to become mainstream America, but we cannot and we are not. But we don't have anything to define our place other than what we see on TV, because our stories, our own stories, are fading away.

**Connie**

Money and jobs are not the whole issue. I can remember our boys shuttin' themselves in their rooms and all they wanted to do was play Nintendo. I didn't really know what Nintendo was. I really regret that I didn't pass things on to my children like they were passed on to me when I was a child. Technology is terrific, but technology gives and it takes away.

**Amber**

We've lost a lot of hope; some have lost the will to fight; and in many ways we had a much more tolerant culture in the past than we have now.

**Brian**

When you're in a county as small as ours, intolerance can amount to a kind of death wish.

**Amber**

I can say despite everything I've gone through as an Appalachian kid, an East Kentucky kid, growing up here was almost like growing up in a dream. I couldn't write a better story. I believe I've seen a demon with my own two eyes, alive and breathing, on my way to the school bus. I was taught that magical things can happen.

**Connie**

In the same breath as my family told me to fear God and accept Jesus, they taught me that ghosts was real. Growing up so close with nature, seeing how strong living things are, at the same time how fragile they are -- all that's magic.

**Brian**

Then when you learn science and it's like oh, that's how you explain the magic, it doesn't make it less magical; it makes it even more amazing.

**Amber**

When I was a little kid, my neighbors were two brothers who lived in campers with no electricity or running water. Us kids would go over there to play in their yard, but we had to steer clear of their poop piles.

Sometimes they'd fist fight and shoot at each other and we'd have to run home.

Then one day when my parents were at work, my sister accidentally stabbed a knife through her hand and one of the first people to her rescue was one of those brothers. He wrapped her hand in the shirt off his back.

**Brian**

She could've bled to death.

**Connie**

We come from different times and different backgrounds, but we have this common thing in where we're from. Because of that, we understand each other.

**Amber**

If I needed help, I'd trust those guys more than I would trust just about anybody. My childhood taught me to grow up less afraid than if I grew up somewhere else. I really find a lot of satisfaction in that we're strong people, that despite mental illness . . .

**Brian**

despite drugs

**Connie**

despite hard times

**All**

We're alive.

**Amber**

We're trying to make it. Some people are pushing. Some people are not. Some people are staying. Some people are not. If we make it, it will be because of place.

**Connie**

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

**Amber**

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 access 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 can't make things change here. It's all of us working together that will make things change.

If the people don't want it, they don't want it.