FROM THE GROUND UP
//
Developing Creative Community
Through Rural Arts Engagement

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FROM THE GROUND UP
// DEVELOPING CREATIVE COMMUNITY THROUGH RURAL ARTS ENGAGEMENT

By Rachel Melton

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Graphic Design in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful to my Committee Chair, Professor Lisa Mercer for her advice, organization, and mentoring during this project. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Laura Hetrick, Dr. Molly Briggs, and Pamela Schallhorn for their feedback, advice, and support of this work.

I would also like to thank to Herb Peterson at Marion Design Company, Professor Robert Thompson at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Julie Hill and Karen Campbell with Weakley Arts Can, and Professor Jason Stout and Brandy Gaul with the League of Striving Artists at the University of Tennessee at Martin for sharing their history as artists and designers working in rural places as well as their vision for the futures of their communities.

Thank you to the rural community members, including friends and family with whom I have lived and worked. You are the inspiration for this study.
ABSTRACT

Many rural places, defined as communities with less than 50,000 inhabitants, have a well-developed sense of place and identity and a strong sense of social connection, but simultaneously experience a lack of creative opportunities and programming. Involvement in the arts and in cultural and creative activities increases academic success and community engagement for individuals of all ages.

Research also shows that rural communities are nearly as likely as their urban counterparts to participate in artistic and creative initiatives when those initiatives are less formal than is traditionally expected. This study shows how rural communities can utilize connections with artists and designers to build a greater sense of social connection and place-based identity while capitalizing on the day-to-day benefits of arts involvement to develop stronger arts-based economies. Qualitative methods, including surveys, interviews, cultural probes, and case studies, yield data on the perception of identity, place, and the arts in Northwest Tennessee. By analyzing this data, themes are discovered surrounding perspectives, trends, and barriers to arts engagement in a rural context. Current examples are explored in which artists and designers in educational, professional and volunteer capacities engage with these themes and barriers to enhance support of the arts and creative industries in rural places.

This study shows how rural community engagement in the arts and design yields an increased sense of place and identity with mutually beneficial outcomes for individuals, organizations, and the community as a whole.

Keywords: Rural Identity, Community Development, Arts Engagement
Rural communities are woven into my life. For twenty-two years, I lived in Northwest Tennessee, where I grew up in a small community of just under 1,000 people. In rural communities, people know their neighbors, and mine was no exception. In many ways, I took for granted the day-to-day benefits of small-town living. In a small town, when you see someone you know, you stop to chat. Family histories, weekend adventures, future plans, and life updates are shared over community events, small town festivals, and in bank lobbies. In a rural community, neighbors know each other by name, and they often know things about each other beyond basic identifying information. This is not exclusive to rural areas, but it’s a commonality between my community and many others.

The idea of “community” holds varying degrees of value for individuals. While some may strongly value interpersonal connections within a community context, this may be less important for others. However, it can generally be agreed upon that “community” is a good thing. It is the network of connections that we utilize during our good times and during the bad. Community provides a support structure for the present, and a foundation for the future. It looks like saying hello to your neighbor at the post office, and like waiting patiently for senior citizens to complete their purchases. Community takes shape in the form of shared conversations over dinner, or running into a friend while out watching your favorite local sports team. Beyond these, community is found in the school board meetings and the events that children love and that parents love to watch them enjoy. It’s found between the college student working at the coffee shop and the local people that they meet and run into in public spaces. It’s the conversations about projects, hopes, goals, and visions for an enjoyable future. As conversation has become less common, it has become more important. Conversation builds community, and cross-generational, cross-educational, and cross-vocational interactions are the building blocks by which conversation and collaboration create the community structure. In many rural places, community is a way of life.
A common sentiment in rural communities is that young adults who seek creative jobs will be forced to move away because of a lack of demand or competitive salaries. However, rural communities are not without opportunities. During completion of my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design at the University of Tennessee at Martin, I volunteered for three and a half years with the League of Striving Artists, a student organization that works to provide undergraduate artists with experiences that develop their creative and interpersonal skills while encouraging community members to engage in arts-related projects and events central to their area. In this way, the organization provided a foundation for communities to connect with artists, for young community artists to be inspired by the work, and for the forging of strong future connections. Through studio art, educational programming, graphic design, face painting, art exhibitions, and public installations, students from both rural and urban areas connected and worked together to forge not only an appreciation for arts involvement in the community, but also an appreciation for the community in the students. During this time, LSA contributed over 5,000 hours of service by over 100 individuals to the Northwest Tennessee region, and the creative work undertaken by the students involved has resulted in public art projects, community partnerships, and multiple creative initiatives.

Recent studies note population decline in rural America, and indeed, “brain drain” remains a tangible issue (Artz, 2003). Young rural Americans leave their communities for college and often do not return to that community. As my experience, and I believe the experience of many other artists shows, rural spaces can sustain creative endeavors. However, if rural communities face challenges, they also hold generations of history, are satisfying homes to many Americans, and provide opportunities for a quality of life rooted in strong communities and interpersonal connections. Practicality is key to engagement in rural places, as rural economies can only sustain so many jobs and so many industries due to their size. Budgets are small, and resources are limited and must be used well. Artists and designers offer great value for rural communities and when that value is coordinated through collaborative work, possibilities abound for practical, imaginative, impactful, and creative community development.

Rural communities offer a fulfilling quality of life distinguished by strong social connections. This study is focused on the benefits, possibilities
The Arts // Defined as involvement in creative or cultural activities, including but not limited to the visual arts, visual design, theatre, dance, music, and literature.

Arts Engagement // Defined as the process of involving multiple individuals in the creation of, or advocacy for the arts and cultural opportunities.

and value of creative work in a rural environment. I began my research by stepping back and analyzing rural places broadly. It is important to me that the study be grounded in the perspectives of rural community members themselves and that any data or conclusions emerge from those perspectives. Rural communities have distinct assets, and it has been my goal to discover what those are and to develop an understanding of rural community structures and perspectives. Consistent attitudes of resourcefulness, determination, and vision have informed my perspective on rural communities. Additionally, rural arts supporters are not likely to see themselves as creative or artistic, even though they believe in the promotion of the arts in rural places. Through a survey of rural opinions on community strengths, weaknesses, quality of life, and perspectives on arts engagement, I gained a broader understanding of the challenges, perspectives, and implications of collaborative creative work in rural places.

In this study, I question how artists and designers might effectively navigate the unique strengths, challenges, and characteristics of rural communities in order to collaborate with these communities for greater arts engagement. To develop an understanding of these points, I analyze the Northwest Tennessee area with regard to rural perspectives and arts engagement, both informed by my own experiences and those of others. As the research progressed, it became evident through the data that there is an interest in arts support among rural community members in Northwest Tennessee. Through a study of arts engagement and self-perception among rural community members in Northwest Tennessee, connections are discovered between rural communities and artists and designers working therein. The connections are mapped to show the benefits, challenges, successes, and failures of this type of work, both in Northwest Tennessee and beyond.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Contextualization
The federal government defines “rural” in a multitude of ways. While rural places make up 19% of the United States population and occupy more than 90% of its land mass (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016), the general understanding is that “rural” is what is left over after urban areas have been counted. In addition to treating rural communities as “the other,” this makes definitions of rural places particularly tricky, as populations may range from community sizes of 2,500 to 50,000.

The United States Census Bureau defines an “urban area” as a place with greater than 50,000 inhabitants and an “urban cluster” as a place with more than 2,500 and less than 50,000 inhabitants (“Urban and Rural”, 2012). The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines “rural” as “any area other than (i) a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants; and (ii) any urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or town described in clause (i)” (7 U.S. Code § 1991, n.d.). The latter definition is preferable for the purposes of this work because it allows for the inclusion of small towns that may have more than 2,500 inhabitants but still far less than 50,000 and which are situated in areas that make them directly susceptible to rural challenges.

Rural areas are spread across the United States but rural populations are weighted in certain regions of the country. Over 60% of the rural population of the United States lives to the east of the Mississippi River and nearly half of the rural population lives in the southern region of the United States (“Rural America Story Map”, 2018). Over the past century, the percentage of Americans living in rural areas has declined from 54.4% in 1910 to 19.3% in 2010 (Ratcliffe, 2016). In 1953, 54 million Americans lived in rural places, making up 36% of the United States Population. “Twenty-three million of that 54 million (43 percent) lived on farms. The 1950 census was the first in which a majority of the rural population was not on farms” (“Fifty Years of Demographic Change” 2003). However, for the first time in a decade, there was a shift, and rural areas experienced an increase in population in 2016-2017 (Cromartie, 2018). Nearly 20% of the population of rural counties are 65 years old and older (“Rural America”, 2018). In 2016, the median age of Americans living in rural places was 43
Rural Americans are strongly attached to their communities with generations of history. According to the Pew Research Center’s report “What Divides Urban, Suburban, and Rural Areas,” only about one in five U.S. adults live in or near the community where they grew up. For many of those who do it is a desire to be near family and in social circles of familiarity that kept them close or brought them back. This is particularly relevant to rural communities, wherever 60% have lived in their communities for eleven years or longer (Parker, 2018). This number may be compared to 53% of suburban Americans and 45% of urban Americans. Even more telling, 41% of rural Americans have lived in their community for over 20 years (Parker, 2018). As the rural population was close to 60 million people in 2016, this roughly translates to 24.6 million rural people who have lived in their communities for eleven years or longer. The Pew Research center notes that “four-in-ten adults in rural communities say they know all or most of their neighbors, compared with 28% in the suburbs and 24% in urban areas” (p. 15). Rural residents have stronger ties and history with their communities due to this trend of “staying put.”

This research further investigates the idea of quality of life and how it relates to satisfaction and quality of place. The Pew report also notes that 26% of rural Americans claim to be satisfied with the quality of life in their communities, compared with 23% of Americans who live in urban areas and 31% of Americans who live in suburban areas (Parker, 2018). This work questions how “quality of place” may be understood in these rural areas and how quality of place and development of quality of life may impact the longevity of a community.

**Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)**

Needs-based community development focuses on identifying existing problems and finding solutions for those problems. Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham (2003) outline the principles of Asset-Based Community Development as a recipe for positive community change and development. Mathie and Cunningham describe Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) as an alternative to traditional methods of needs-based development. ABCD builds on existing social capital by prompting community members to inventory their community’s assets and then spearhead development efforts themselves, a ground-up approach.
opposed to a top-down approach (Mathie, 2003). ABCD is a form of “appreciative inquiry,” the practice of involving stakeholders in self-determined initiatives. These initiatives require recognizing the existing good in a given situation and building on that good rather than analyzing negatives from the start. ABCD is similar to participatory design, which involves stakeholders from the beginning of the process to create solutions that are designed for and in cooperation with the stakeholders.

Asset-Based Community Development “has the potential to encourage active citizenship in the sense of citizen-to-citizen ties, while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of people as citizens to claim their rights of access to assets on which they depend for their livelihood” (Mathie, 2003, p. 475). Mathie and Cunningham elaborate on ABCD by describing its value of social capital, a “latent asset” that “individuals can increase or deplete [...] depending on where they stand in the reciprocal exchange of social support and obligation” (Mathie, 2003, p. 479).

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Center for Sustainable Communities writes about ABCD in rural communities, specifically focusing on historic and cultural resources alongside existing contemporary economic and broader resources. They analyze Main Streets through a set of case studies that trace development in a variety of locations throughout the country. The analysis of Main Street initiatives is not new to ABCD; the National Trust for Historic Preservation developed a “Four-Point Approach” that is based on a strategy of “organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring.” (Read, 2013, p. 15) ICMA presents Silver City, NM and Lindsborg, KS as examples of rural communities that mapped their assets and creatively developed cultural districts, providing a boost in economic development and building an infrastructure of community centered activity. These cases worked because they were self-identified and developed from the ground up. This sense of community ownership and involvement is central to both Asset-Based Community Development and to human-centered design as a whole and is also notable in a project case study that focused on decreasing poverty through education, analysis, and utilization of assets in Elma, Iowa. Elma’s development included widespread community conversation and education, leadership building, program development, and implementation. Economic development is a result of but not a motivation for the Elma study. The authors note that development occurred because of the town’s willingness to self-identify
their own assets and invest in their own capabilities (Flora, 2016). The study shows that utilization of assets and willingness to recognize and self-invest is key to development in rural communities.

In addition to self-identification of assets, rural communities that demonstrate the ability to adapt to changing situations may boost their competitive advantage in attracting economic development. Jean Hardy, now a Professor in the Department of Media & Information at Michigan State University, spent several years researching rural communities in Michigan and Wisconsin and wrote a 2018 article for Bloomberg CityLab that illustrated some of the ways in which “Rural America is Saving Itself.” Hardy (2018) advocates for studying rural communities in terms of their positive impact on the economy and as ways to study the future. This approach, contrasting with opinions that rural communities lag behind their urban counterparts, is notable in that it allows for recognition of the fact that rural communities are different and have their own distinct resources and abilities. Those resources and abilities should be recognized and utilized for maximum benefit to those involved.

In Designing for Social Change (2012), Andrew Shea presents ten strategies for engaging with communities through Graphic Design. While his report focuses on graphic design, its principles apply to multiple areas of community engagement. Key strategies are: centering the community’s voice in the process and transferral of ownership and sustained engagement. Some of Shea’s guidelines align well with Human-Centered Design (HCD) as described by IDEO (Innovation Design Engineering Organization) in their design mindsets. IDEO’s key mindsets include: learning from failure, prototyping ideas, embracing ambiguity, iteration, maintaining confidence and developing empathy and optimism. (Mindsets, 2020). Maintaining confidence and building empathy and optimism are key to community engagement as described by the values inherent to Asset-Based Community Development.

**Arts Engagement**

The arts provide strong possibilities for community development. While the benefit of arts involvement is generally accepted, involvement in the arts and in cultural activities has been shown to increase the quality of life in individuals of all ages. Students of varied backgrounds benefit from increased academic skills after attendance at arts enrichment programming (Hanna, 2011). College students of low-income backgrounds
who participated in arts enrichment are more likely to academically succeed on levels equal to high-income students. The same students are also more likely to participate in public elections and in volunteer work. Older adults involved in choir experienced greater physical health than those not involved in artistic programming. (Hanna, 2011) The arts and cultural activities have been consistently shown to increase the quality of life and the wellbeing of those who participate in each, generating a greater quality of place and sense of belonging along the way.

Community engagement in the arts within rural populations often looks different from urban engagement, but rural communities are nearly as likely to participate when the parameters are broadened. The National Endowment for the Arts provides an in-depth analysis of urban vs. rural participation in the arts and arts related events in their study, “Come as You Are: Informal Arts Participation in Urban and Rural Communities.” This survey, which studied 18,444 individuals, discovered that arts participation “as measured by the percentage of adults attending art museums and certain types of performing arts events, is greater in urban areas” (“Come as You Are”, 2010, p. 2). However, the authors noted that when “informal arts” activities “including the personal creation of artwork and attendance at community arts venues” were considered, participation was distributed more evenly across urban and rural communities (“Come as You Are”, 2010, p. 3). Rural and urban Americans are equally likely to attend parks, historic sites, monuments, craft fairs and outdoor arts festivals and related events, but rural Americans are more likely than their urban counterparts to sing in choirs, weave and sew. Urban Americans are statistically more likely to participate in photography and videography (“Come as You Are”, 2010). As rural areas typically have less access to formal arts centers and events, the inclusion of informal arts and cultural activities is in line with the resources often available. However, the description of these types of engagement as informal should not be taken to imply that these activities are less valuable than formal types of engagement. These types of activities contribute to wellbeing and quality of life and fall well within the same category as their formal counterparts.

Creative placemaking is the practice of utilizing community assets to revitalize underused areas as gathering spaces which promote community engagement and creativity. This type of work is commonly used to increase exposure to the arts in communities of all sizes, urban and rural
alike. Creative placemaking includes, but is not limited to, projects such as public murals, gathering spaces, sculpture gardens, soundscapes, and arts fairs. Creative placemaking has gained popularity in recent years. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS), founded in 1975, is a non-profit organization built around the work of American urbanist, William H. Whyte (1917-1999), who studied people in communities and public spaces. Based on the principles of Asset-Based Development, PPS partners with local communities to create placemaking initiatives, and supports placemaking programs on a local and global scale.

Markusen and Gadwa (2010) present several case studies on creative placemaking in rural communities. One of these case studies demonstrates how the city of Arnaudville, LA reinvented itself from a community in decline into a thriving artistic community in just six years. This effort was initiated by a local artist who moved back into Arnaudville and founded an arts market in the community. This is a case of a community-supported project that worked exceptionally well. The market spawned a host of artist studios and small performing arts venues, leading to an influx of creative activity in the community. Over time, the project gained the support of the city council and board members as well as the designation of “Cultural District” by the state of Louisiana (Markusen, 2010). While not always the case, here the effort was spearheaded by a local artist—someone who had a history of involvement and engagement in the community. This history demonstrated the individual’s commitment to the community and shows that connections already in place may well facilitate such initiatives.

While rural and urban communities have many similarities, differences emerge when discussing the impact of grants and funding. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) designates 22.8% of its funding to benefit small metropolitan and rural areas. Organizations such as the Citizen’s Institute on Rural Design (CIRD) provide a number of resources including funded workshops for selected rural community initiatives. CIRD also offers grants and funding opportunities on a federal and state level for the development of arts and cultural initiatives and educational workshops. However, the distribution of grants and funding is not always proportional to rural populations. In 2010, the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service analyzed the total percentage of grants from large foundations that primarily benefit rural places. The study found that approximately 6.3% of grants primarily benefit rural
communities. As the rural population of the United States makes up close to 19% of the total U.S. population, or 60 million inhabitants, these communities are underserved by the foundation grants process.

Creative placemaking is one way to generate economic returns for communities. Writing about the economic impact of creative initiatives, Markusen and Gadwa note,

Arts and cultural investments help a locality capture a higher share of local expenditures from income. Instead of traveling elsewhere for entertainment and culture, or going to a big-box retailer or mall for shopping fun, residents spend more on local talent and venues, money that re-circulates at a higher rate in the local economy. By using vacant and underutilized land, buildings, and infrastructure, investments in creativity increase their contribution to the public good and private sector productivity (Markusen, 2010, p. 5).

Given the population decline and unemployment rate in rural communities, creative placemaking has the potential to play an important role in revitalization of underused areas. Creative placemaking is widely varied in execution and equally varied in outcomes, but as studies have shown, those outcomes are more often successful than not, leading to a greater sense of place in the towns and areas in which the practice is implemented. Placemaking initiatives also tend to boost community involvement, investment by local residents, and local and regional economic activity.

Creative placemaking is a useful tool for revitalization and economic growth, but in order for it to be successful, community interest and engagement is key. Successful creative placemaking generally involves wide public support and is often initiated by a passionate individual or group. Successful communities also tend to work with what they have, either in terms of capitalizing on unique history and stories, or in converting local landmarks, development, or other areas into useful placemaking opportunities. Local business sponsorships and investors are also useful backers for placemaking projects, helping to fill in gaps between grants and city, state, or federal funding. The artistic and cultural nature of many placemaking initiatives renders them a good fit for any private investors who may favor the arts. (Markusen, 2010)
Prince Edward County, Ontario, is an example of a rural community that optimized its assets for creative development. Prince Edward County is a definitively rural Canadian area with a population of around 25,000 individuals. Barley and dairy production, combined with a canning industry in the mid-twentieth century have contributed to a rich history in the area. In 2005, the county created an award winning cultural plan that mapped its resources and explored the identity of the area, recording stories, histories, and features that made the region unique. This plan included the creation of a committee made of local representatives, business owners, artists, and others from various cultural and economic sectors. The plan also established extensive goals and action steps that served to transform the county into a hub of cultural activity based on its history and existing resources. ("Leveraging Growth", 2005) This case relates to Asset-Based Community Development and demonstrates the power of community-driven creative thinking and cultural development.

The creative economy created by Prince Edward County resulted in over 200 million dollars in investment and sales in the county’s wine industry over a period of seven years. The county also experienced a 168% increase in tourism spending and an influx of investment and sales in multiple other areas. The county has branded itself as Canada’s First Creative Rural Economy and expressed interest in continuing a conversation about the power of a Creative Rural Economy towards building communities while boosting financial resources ("Leveraging Growth", 2005).

While placemaking and community development efforts contain the possibility of creating positive change and development, it is of key importance that any development and change should benefit the existing community structures without isolating or leaving behind any functional parts of the structure. Sociologist Ruth Glass of the University College in London coined the term “gentrification” in 1964 to explain major demographic shifts observed in areas of London. Glass noted that when renovations were undertaken in lower-income areas, the process of gentrification resulted in the displacement of the working class in favor of wealthier groups of people because groups of lower income could no longer afford the cost of living in a renovated area. Markusen and Gadwa present Paducah, KY as an example where placemaking resulted in the displacement of artists and creative practitioners due to rising costs of real estate. They note that to offset this issue, “land banking and
community land trust have been used in other locales to preserve arts and cultural renovations.” (Markusen, 2010)

Research has demonstrated that rural communities often have a well developed sense of place which may be capitalized on for economic potential and quality of life. Asset-based Community Development, as well as mindsets from Human Centered Design may prove to be especially useful in a rural setting, due to their ability to find existing resources and assets and to center community members in the design process. These mindsets, paired with the benefits of arts engagement, placemaking, and social connection, enable rural communities to become more economically self-sufficient and create stronger community ties.
INITIAL RESEARCH

Contextualization

Literature demonstrates that arts engagement can be used as a tool to create vibrant economies (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010, Hanna (2011), “Come as You Are” (2010). This may be particularly useful in rural places, where economies are smaller than their urban counterparts with less arts opportunities. This research began with a survey of 42 arts supporters in Northwest Tennessee, and analyzed rural perspectives in this region by asking how these communities are currently engaged in the arts and what the supporters see as benefits and challenges within their communities. Survey responses have been distilled into themes that represent the concerns, hopes, and motivations of participants. Specific examples of rural arts engagement in Tennessee and beyond demonstrate how these communities and others are working to solve some of the challenges identified by rural community members. Examples from the Midwest and Northeast are used to discover commonalities between rural communities and artists seeking successful engagement in these places.

This survey began with a larger focus. It was distributed to contacts, community members, arts advocates, and others, and recipients were asked to share the survey for greatest distribution. Survey results initially contained 64 responses. Of these, 42 responses came from rural Tennessee, 11 from rural Illinois, 1 from rural Missouri, and 1 each from urban North Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Texas, Illinois, and Louisiana. As a significant majority of rural responses were from participants living in Northwest Tennessee, the research focuses primarily on their responses as a way to study perspectives about the arts in the Northwest Tennessee region and reflect on how the benefits, challenges, and experience of arts engagement in this region may inform similar work in other locations. This also speaks to the interest in the arts within Northwest Tennessee. Multiple rural communities were asked to participate, but Northwest Tennessee contributed a significantly larger number of results.

The state of Tennessee is located near the top of the region known as the southern United States. The state is commonly divided into three geographical sections: West, Middle, and East. These sections each
West Tennessee is located in the West side of the state and covers the geographical area from the Kentucky border south to the Mississippi border. On the West, it is bordered by the Mississippi river, and on the East, it is divided from Middle Tennessee by the Tennessee River. Within West Tennessee, a grouping of nine counties in the upper left corner of the state makes up the region defined as “Northwest Tennessee.” This research focuses on the perspectives of community members within the Northwest Tennessee region to determine their successes and challenges with regard to arts involvement and distills insights that can be applied to other communities. A majority of respondents were from four counties within Northwest Tennessee: Weakley County, Gibson County, and Obion County, with one participant from McNairy County further south.

Throughout the research, lack of a job market and lack of community project funding and resources were commonly cited as rural community weaknesses. Unemployment and poverty are indeed prevalent in Northwest Tennessee, as in many areas across the state. In 2018, the United States median income was $63,179 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The Sycamore Institute, a public policy research center based in Nashville reported that from 2013-2017, the statewide average median income was $48,708. In comparison, Weakley, McNairy, Gibson and Obion counties, which are represented by the participants in this study, had lower incomes than the state average. Weakley, Gibson and Obion counties reported median household incomes of $35,000–45,000 for this same time period, and McNairy county reported a median income of less than $35,000. For the same time frame, the Tennessee average poverty rate was 16.7%. Weakley, McNairy and Obion County had poverty rates of 20-25%, while Gibson county had a poverty rate of 15-20%. By comparison, the United States poverty rate for the same five-year period was 14.6% (Bass, 2019).
The Northwest Tennessee region is greatly influenced by the presence of the University of Tennessee at Martin, the Northwest branch of the University of Tennessee. The University of Tennessee at Martin is located in Martin, TN, a city of approximately 10,500 people. Martin is located in Weakley County, and 28 participants in the initial survey listed Martin, TN as their primary place of residence. The University prides itself on a low faculty-to-student ratio, a beautiful campus, and quality education. As of November, 2019, over 7,000 students were enrolled at UT Martin ("Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollment", 2020) and 79% of UT Martin alumni resided within the state of Tennessee in 2019 ("Alumni By States, 2020). This context is important because a significant number of participants noted that educational opportunities including higher education are a strength for their community. UT Martin has outreach educational centers in Jackson, Parsons, Ripley, Selmer, and Somerville, TN. Participants noted that “access to education,” “strong community support for local businesses and education,” “university influence, university facilities,” “university people resources,” and “cultural facilities with UTM” were strengths of their community. One participant responded that their “rural community is anchored by a four year college." In the 2018-2019 academic year, UT Martin reported over 13,500 volunteer hours by its students. In relation to the arts specifically, UT Martin and the surrounding communities are home to several initiatives and organizations that work to promote arts advocacy within the Northwest Tennessee region. These undoubtedly have an impact on the area, and will be discussed in detail.

**Methodology**

This work is a study of communities and of the people which live and work in them. This study utilizes grounded theory as a framework for building data and understanding complex information “from the ground up.” After an initial study of the literature and survey of existing research, this study was organized to gather first-hand perspectives and work towards a more developed understanding of the context, communities, and perspectives of its participants. Grounded theory works together with principles of Human-Centered Design, an approach to problem-solving that centers the voices of participants and communities. For that reason, it is imperative that the voices of the individuals who are the subjects of the work remain a central focus of its outcomes. After gathering initial data, interviews were conducted with artists and designers in order to build a picture of a variety of organizational models.
in which artists and designers are partnering with rural communities. This highlights the ways in which these models address some of the challenges and benefits to rural living and arts engagement, and through this process notes key factors across all models for success.

**Survey Analysis**

The research survey was distributed via email and social media platforms. The survey was initially distributed to primary contacts, some of which are directly engaged in the arts, and some who are not. Contacts were asked to share the survey further and encourage community members to give their responses. As I am primarily involved in the arts and in design, and the survey began with contacts and associates in rural communities, participants tended to favor support of the arts. Many participants are likely familiar in some way with my work, or with the arts scene in Northwest Tennessee. The survey did not offer any compensation to the participants and was entirely voluntary. The survey was divided into roughly three sections. In the first section, participants were asked questions relating to their quality of life and experience living in a rural place. In the second section, they were asked questions about how they viewed both their own community and others. In the third section, participants were asked about their opinions on arts support and resources within their community.

Participants first answered questions about their opinion of the places in which they live. Each participant rated the quality of life in their community and selected words which they believed contributed to the quality of life. Next, participants wrote a short description of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of their community and noted whether they viewed rural and urban communities in a favorable, neutral, or unfavorable light. For the next stage of the survey, participants were asked to select up to ten words which in their opinion best described rural places. Each participant selected up to ten words out of a list of fifty options. Words included adjectives such as independent, creative, closed-minded, forward-thinking, progressive, conservative, resourceful, welcoming, traditional, and beautiful. After selecting the initial set of words which the participant would use to describe rural places, each participant was asked to select up to 10 words which they believed that
other people would use to describe rural places. Each participant was then asked the same set of questions in regard to urban communities. During the last section of the survey, participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their opinions on arts and creative endeavors in their community. Initially, each participant was asked whether they believed that the arts should be supported in their community. All participants from Tennessee responded that they believed the arts should be supported. Each participant then described why they believed that arts support was important. They went on to elaborate further the ways in which their community currently supports the arts as well as resources they hope to see in the future.

The definition of rural for this survey, officially used by the United States Department of Agriculture, notes that a rural place is any area with a population of less than 50,000 that is also not adjacent to a metropolitan area of 50,000 or greater. All participants for this survey are from a rural location. The largest community represented is Martin, located in Weakley County, with an estimated population of approximately 10,500. The second largest community represented is Union City, located in Obion County, with a population of approximately 10,400. All other communities represented have a population of less than 5,000. Weakley County is represented by 35 participants, Dyer County is represented by 2 participants, McNairy County is represented by 1 participant, and Obion County is represented by 4 participants. The community with the most representation was Martin, Tennessee with 29 participants responding with a Martin zip code as their primary place of residence.

Figure 3. Demographics of survey participants: 18-24 (9.5%), 25-34 (19%), 35-50 (35.7%), 50-64 (19%), and 70 and older (7.1%).
All participants have a high school education with 80.9% of participants noting that they have completed a Bachelor’s Degree or above. While this rate of education is much higher than the average in Northwest Tennessee, 95% of the participants have lived in rural places for five years or longer and have a significant amount of experience in rural communities and values.

A majority of participants rated the quality of life in their community as “satisfactory” or “very satisfactory.” Participants rated their quality of life in the following ways:

- 33% of participants rated the quality of life in their community as “somewhat satisfactory”
- 35.7% rated the quality of life in their community as “satisfactory”
- 26.2% of participants rated the quality of life in their community as “very satisfactory”

Two rural community members in Northwest Tennessee rated the quality of life in their communities as “Not at all satisfactory.” Both of these participants noted a lack of public transportation, urban cleanliness, and trade and services when asked to select factors that contributed to their quality of life. When asked to select the factors that positively contribute to the quality of life in the place where they live, 85.7% of participants chose “higher education facilities.” A majority also chose proximity to friends/family, community events/activities, housing quality & conditions, educational facilities, green spaces/programs, and recreation facilities. The least common factor chosen was public transportation, which was only selected by one participant. Only 8 participants rated trade and services and only 9 participants rated cultural facilities as positive factors in their quality of life.

In the second section of the survey, participants were asked to name the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the places in which they live. The format for these questions was open answer, and participants responded with varying degrees of detail. Participant #5, located in Martin, TN, noted that their community “is a safe environment where people can develop themselves to the degree that they wish to be improved. They
went on to say, “people can be educated and develop careers of their choosing. People can worship as they want and not be ridiculed for it” (Participant #5). Another participant from the same community stated, “I love all the green spaces we have. Lots of room to get outside, get some fresh air and be active. The people are nice too. This town feels more like a family than a town. There’s not a lot of us who are active in the community but those who are seem to be there for each other as much as we can be” (Participant #6).

When naming weaknesses of their communities, participants included factors such as a lack of public transit, lack of diversity, lack of interest in arts and cultural events, crime rates, low literacy and lack of economic options and services. One participant noted that weaknesses include no infrastructure for individuals to live a healthy lifestyle (no sidewalks, no green spaces, no rec facilities other than organized sports, no options in restaurants for vegans and almost nothing for vegetarians, grocery stores do not have quality fresh produce) (Participant #11).

Another rural participant noted that weaknesses include a “Lack of cultural diversity, lack of support for arts and arts events, lack of fresh produce and healthy food options, lack of fast speed internet, [and] lack of adequate emergency healthcare” (Participant #21). A third participant stated, “due to the fact that we’re so far away from larger cities [...] this is an easy town to get stuck in. If you don’t have enough money to move to the larger city you can’t take a job there” (Participant #6).

95.2% of participants noted at some point in their lives, they have lived in a rural community for five years or more, meaning that almost every participant has an established history and grounded perspective on life in rural communities. When participants were asked how they view rural communities in general:

- 72% of participants view rural communities favorably
- 26.2% have a neutral view of rural communities
- 2.4% of participants view rural communities unfavorably.

When asked about their views of
urban communities, 88% of participants noted that they view urban communities in a favorable or neutral light, with 12% noting that they view urban communities in an unfavorable light.

In a word sorting exercise, participants were asked to select up to ten words they felt best described rural places. The most common terms were family-friendly (71%), community-driven (74%), religious (66%), beautiful (60%), and politically conservative (62%). Only four participants chose “artistic” and only five participants chose “creative” to describe rural places. Participants were next asked to select terms which they felt that other people would use to describe rural places. Most commonly, participants believed that other people would describe rural places as boring (83%), politically conservative (75%), or closed minded (69%). The findings from this section of the survey are thought-provoking. A difference emerges that contrasts the way that rural community members see themselves with the way that they believe these places are seen by others. In an analysis of separate responses from a group of 10 urban participants, only 20% described rural places as “boring,” and only 20% described them as “closed-minded,” while 60% described them as “politically conservative.” 80% of urban participants described rural communities as community-driven, 70% described them as family friendly, and 60% described them as hard-working.

Figure 5. Self-perception of rural communities in a word sorting exercise showing a selection of most and least common words by percentage.
The self-perception of creativity among rural arts supporters is low. As mentioned previously, only 4 rural TN participants (9.5%) would choose “artistic” to describe their community and only 5 participants (11.9%) would choose creative to describe their community. Taking this further, only 1 participant (2.4%) described rural communities as cultured, 2 participants described them as intellectual (4.8%), and 1 participant (2.4%) described them as “literate.” None of the participants believed that other people would see them as artistic or creative, cultured, intellectual, or literate. Later in the survey, when rural Tennessee participants were asked about their opinion on arts support, all participants stated that they believed the arts should be supported in their community. This highlights the idea that many people (rural or otherwise), do not see rural communities as creative. In reality, while rural communities may lack resources or exposure to the arts, they are not inherently less creative than communities of other sizes. For progress to be made, rural communities should be seen as equally able to participate in creative endeavors and generate creative ideas.

The self-perception of rural communities continues to contrast with urban perspectives. While 80% of urban participants described rural communities as community-driven, only 16.7% of rural Tennessee participants believed they were seen in that way. 70% of urban participants described rural communities as family friendly, but only 33.3% of rural Tennessee participants believed this would be the case. While 60% of urban participants describe rural communities as hard-working, only 26.2% of rural Tennessee participants believed they would be seen this way. 52.4% of rural Tennessee participants believe that others would refer to them as lower-class, while only 16.7% of the same participants referred to their own communities in this way. Rural Tennessee participants describe urban communities as politically liberal (71.4%), cultured (69%), artistic (64.3%), hi-tech (66.7%), and forward thinking (52.4).

The dynamic between income and poverty levels compared with self-perception is an interesting outcome of the survey. While “lower class” does not imply “less than,” it is fair to say that it may contain a negative perception. However, as earlier noted, the Sycamore Institute reported a state-wide median income of just under $49,000 from 2013-2017, a full $14,000 lower than the U.S. median income for 2018. The rural Tennessee counties represented in this survey have less than a $45,000 median
annual income. So what does all this mean? It seems that while it is well recorded that areas of Northwest Tennessee are below the average median income for both the State of Tennessee and the United States as a whole, many rural community members do not view themselves in quite this light. It seems there are other variables which feed into the self-perception of class and quality of life for rural participants and those things are held in much greater value than income alone.

When asked whether they believe that the arts, creative industries and/or creative individuals should be supported in their community, all participants responded affirmatively. One rural participant reasoned that, “Creative expression is a means of escaping the ordinary, broadening our view of the world, and telling stories (especially of the oppressed)” (Participant #14). A second participant noted that, “Creative arts opportunities should be offered to everyone regardless of socio-economic background” (Participant #27).

Survey Themes
Open-ended responses from the survey were sorted into coded themes. The most common themes include a “sense of community,” “educational opportunities,” “community interest and involvement,” and “funding and affordability.” Each theme shows up commonly throughout the open-ended survey responses referring to strengths and weaknesses of rural communities as well as the participant’s opinions surrounding arts support.

A running theme throughout these responses on community strengths in Northwest Tennessee seems to be that community members feel connected to their neighbors, family and friends. One of the most common themes found throughout the survey was a “sense of community.” This theme occurred 27 times when respondents were asked about the strengths of their community. Participant #6 stated, “this town feels more like a family than a town.” Participant #9 noted, “living in a rural community with a small population provides more opportunities for locals to be involved and make a difference in their community. It is a great place to raise kids because it is safe and tranquil.” Participant #21 stated that a community strength is “strong community support for local businesses and education.” As rural community members are more grounded in their communities with longer histories (Parker, 2018), it is to be expected that a “sense of community” would be cited as a strength.
Out of 42 participants, 10 participants discussed the strengths of their community as including “community interest and involvement,” and 10 participants noted strengths tied to “safety and security.” Participant #9 stated that “living in a rural community with a small population provides more opportunities for locals to be involved and make a difference in their community. It is a great place to raise kids because it is safe and tranquil.” “Low crime” and “law enforcement” were directly cited as community strengths. Survey participants value a close-knit community of dependable people, and they pride themselves on being there for each other when needed. Multiple participants value public services and community support of programming and events. A “casual way of life” with “caring community members” seems to be the shared opinion on strengths of living in Northwest Tennessee.

After responding with answers regarding the strengths of their community, participants were asked to describe the greatest weaknesses of their community. Sixteen respondents (38%) noted that funding and affordability constituted a general weakness. Participant #4 cited the “demise of small town places of business” as a contributing factor to community weaknesses. Several noted a lack of industry in the area and one participant cited “limited services available (shopping, dining, etc.).” Participant #6 stated “I know people with master’s degrees working minimum wage retail jobs because that’s all they can find here.” “Community interest and involvement” was noted as a general weakness by 11 participants. One respondent noted that “the people are here, we just have to figure out how to get them to come to our events.” “Complacency” and a community “mindset not in favor of improvements and or progress” were noted by participants to be weaknesses. It seems to be the case that rural participants see their communities as tightly-knit, friendly groups of people, but in some instances participants have experienced apathy and a lack of interest as a factor which prevents progress.

After answering questions relating to community strengths and weaknesses, survey participants were asked about their opinions regarding support of the arts. All respondents consider themselves in favor of arts support, and they commonly cite several reasons for this. Participants note that “arts bring people together,” “enrich the community,” and foster “individualism and creativity.”
Participant #14 stated, “Creative outlets are intellectual and inspiring gathering places that foster thought and community.” Another stated the arts add “to quality of life via educational benefits and feelings of general well-being. Quality of life attracts industries which then provide opportunities to grow communities and add to artistic development.” That participant stated that this cycle “forms a positive reinforcing loop” (Participant #18).

Due to the presence of the University of Tennessee at Martin on the Northwest Tennessee scene, arts engagement has taken root in some local communities, with artists and designers working to collaborate with community members on a multitude of initiatives. While the presence of a higher education institution is an influence in Northwest Tennessee, it would not be an influence for many rural communities without access to a college or university. However, the value which higher education provides within Northwest Tennessee is considerable. One of the last questions in the survey asked participants to describe ways in which their community currently supports creative industries, the arts, and/or artists. Many participants cited UT Martin as a source of creative initiatives in their community, noting the arts gallery, theatre, classes, and educational programming as key resources. Community events including festivals and activities as well as craft markets were included, and freelance artists and designers were also cited as a resource. These responses provide insight to the initiatives which are working well in rural Northwest Tennessee, and which may provide principles for engagement in other rural locations with access to higher education facilities and programming.

When I created this survey, I had no idea what the responses would be. I assumed that lack of funding might be seen as a weakness and that community closeness would be seen as a strength, but beyond these basic assumptions, this survey was intended to gather information in a rural context and use that information as a building block for understanding Northwest Tennessee perspectives. The survey, coded into themes, has created a pathway for understanding some of the ways in which rural community members see themselves. It highlights that rural community members view themselves as independent, family and community oriented, and safe places to live. Responses also demonstrate that while arts supporters in Northwest Tennessee hope to advance creative initiatives in their communities, they do not readily see themselves as creative. It is apparent that survey respondents value
higher education institutions but also hope to see community funded and supported programming, which is evident in their responses regarding community arts events and organizations.

Several participants noted the involvement of the UT Martin student organization, The League of Striving Artists (LSA) as well as Weakley Arts Can (WAC) as resources for creative pursuits in the Northwest Tennessee area. LSA has worked within the Northwest Tennessee community since 2011, building a model for student engagement in a community context, and WAC came into the public eye in 2018. Artists and designers are currently working in rural communities all across the United States, and their work shows initiatives that address and build on the strengths and weaknesses self-identified by rural community members. By analyzing some examples of existing rural arts engagement, some principles are identified that may be replicated in other rural communities for successful engagement. I start with LSA and WAC, the two organizations mentioned in the survey, and from there expand into an overview of several other models of involvement in which artists and designers are working in rural spaces. Each of these organizations tackles community work in a different way with a different mission and purpose, but they all share a grounded sense of purpose in pursuing creative work in a rural setting. These examples serve as a study of the various ways in which artists and designers are working for progress with and in rural communities, and how they are collectively building creativity within their communities on a daily basis.
The League of Striving Artists

The League of Striving Artists (LSA) is a student-led art organization at the University of Tennessee at Martin. Located in Weakley County, the closest urban area is Jackson, TN, located 57 miles to the south with a population of 66,903. Memphis, TN is the next closest urban area, located 135.5 miles southwest of Martin with a population of 650,618. From 2015 to 2018, LSA contributed 4,950 hours of volunteer service on the UT Martin campus and in the local community. This outreach has spread to nearby communities of Dresden, Union City, Bradford, Greenfield, South Fulton, and Sharon.

A visual diagram of the League of Striving Artists as an organization shows that the group features a clear mission statement and works regularly to develop community, utilizing experiential learning and regular documentation of their work. They provide resources often, and often engage with multiple disciplines in their work. While their web presence may be more limited, they promote collaboration among members regularly and use a clearly defined student leadership structure.
This visual demonstrates that while LSA may not primarily address themes such as community funding or a developed web presence, their work focuses in other areas such as cross-disciplinary projects and experiential learning allows for a unique and powerful community impact.

LSA is made up primarily of students from Graphic Design, Art Education, and Studio Art. Formed in 2011, the primary mission of the League of Striving Artists is to “promote the development of art enthusiasts and artists in academics, community, service, leadership, and artistic development.” Membership and involvement with the organization is entirely voluntary. Out of just over 100 students in the Department of Visual and Theater arts, approximately 45% were members of LSA in Fall 2019 (Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollment Summary, 2020., Stout, 2020). Brandy Gaul, 2020-2021 LSA President, states that she joined the organization because of its sense of community and closeness. Gaul (2020) notes, “For the first time in my life I didn’t feel like an outsider looking in- I felt like I could very easily be a part of something. I knew that I had just entered a room where talking to people seemed effortless and the energy felt comfortable.”

Jason Stout, Professor of Art at the University of Tennessee at Martin, has served as the advisor for the League of Striving Artists since 2011. Stout received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from the University of Tennessee at Martin in 2001 and his Master of Fine Arts in Painting from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 2004. He returned to the University of Tennessee at Martin in 2005 where he began as Adjunct Faculty and was hired in a tenure-track position in 2009 where he progressed to his current position as Full Professor of Art.

The organization is supported by both the faculty advisor and an officer team of eight members, who organize, and lead LSA projects and events. The experience the advisor brings, in addition to a focus on student leadership, are key parts of the organization’s success. Stout notes, “To have members and to have officers within student leadership positions to be able to do this, you have to teach them basic leadership skills. You have to talk to them about accountability. You have to talk to them about communication skills and confidence” (Stout, 2020). When asked about her experience in student leadership, Brandy Gaul states, LSA has given me confidence. As simple as that sounds, it is anything but. Lack of confidence has negatively affected my
work, how I view my work, my personal relationships, my early life choices, potential friendships, and my overall self-worth. LSA has helped me believe in myself and it’s obvious to me that this has positively affected my relationship with my work in the sense that I know there is no limits to what I can accomplish. This allows me to think in a community mindset, because I now believe that I have something to offer people and be a contribution to my community to matter where I end up. (Gaul, 2020).

As a result of LSA’s focus in student leadership, the organization regularly contributes over 1,000 hours of service to the campus and Northwest Tennessee community every academic year. As LSA involves graphic designers, studio artists, and art education students, this work often involves projects that utilize cross-disciplinary collaboration through service-learning. In an interview about LSA’s work, Stout was asked about the ideal kind of project that LSA completes. Referencing collaboration and cross-disciplinary involvement, he noted,

Sometimes we get lucky and have a project that has multiple tiers to it. A couple of years ago we did a children’s illustration book. [...] We worked with our alumni group on campus and with the English Department who actually wrote the content for the book. Our responsibility was to then create handmade illustrations for the content of the book. So in that, we took our studio artists and our art ed people who also have strong studio skill sets, and they made the page by page illustrations for the book. Then [...] we had 8-10 graphic designers working to convert those illustrated images into consistent and congruent images that can flow together in a book. Because we had many different artists working on them, one thing that we needed is a cohesiveness between illustrations, so our graphic design students then took those illustrations and converted them into a series of cohesive singular illustrations [...] So in that case, we had a project that was able to engage all three disciplines of [...] our majors. (Stout, 2020)

While primarily focused in and around, Martin, TN, LSA’s work has extended to the surrounding communities of Dresden, Sharon, South Fulton, Union City, Greenfield, and Jackson. In 2016, LSA reported 28
service events in three distinct communities. These events included interactive lessons on graphic design and printmaking with Boy Scouts of America, face painting at community events, and temporary murals in support of Banned Book Week and Diversity Week. In the same year, LSA completed a multi-month project that involved design, planning, and painting of a two-wall mural at Wilson Park in Dresden, TN.

The Dresden Mural project was funded by a state grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission and was designed and painted by students in cooperation with the organization’s advisor. The mural was designed to show historical themes from Dresden and Tennessee history. Students attended town hall meetings, presented designs, developed color schemes, and organized painting sessions. Older and more experienced students worked alongside inexperienced students to share the process and teach both creative and organizational skills. The painting of the mural itself lasted for a week with volunteers working full days painting under the park pavilion. In total, this mural project involved 16+ members of the organization with a total of 240 volunteer hours. As a result, Wilson park featured a two-wall mural in public view, largely funded by a Tennessee State grant, and created by the work of local artists.

Collaboration is key to LSA’s mission and success in the community and occurs on multiple levels both inside and outside the organization. Stout notes the importance of collaboration in the work, stating that it is key for understanding the expectations of community partners. He further notes that when community members understand what the students are responsible for and capable of, collaboration between the community and students results in successful work (Stout, 2020).
LSA utilizes service learning as a key component of their process. Service learning is a type of experiential learning, which promotes the learning process as constantly in flux (Kolb, 1984). In this process, ideas are generated, evaluated, and refined through experience and experimentation. In the service-learning model, which is often employed in education, students work in settings that allow them to gain hands-on experience while applying their skills towards a real-world project. Stout notes, “Service builds a larger arts-based community, and a larger arts-based community actually creates more opportunity” (Stout, 2020). In LSA’s case, service learning has resulted in direct involvement with the community in a variety of ways. Members have volunteered as judges at community arts events, contributed skills to local festivals, collaborated with local businesses to feature artwork, and created multiple murals in surrounding communities, at the request of community members. In 2017-2018, previous mural work paved the way for LSA to create a mural in the office at Dresden Middle School. The piece featured the school logo as well as a scene depicting students engaged in creative work across a landscape of activity. This piece also highlighted the Fine Arts Club at the school, directly pulling students into the theme by engaging with them in their own experiences. While social connections can be formed in many ways, service-learning generates a wide range of real-world skills and allows students to collaborate and connect with local communities. The rural community setting provides easy access to hands-on experiences and reflection in the service-learning process.

Figure 9. Student paints text on a banner as part of the Dresden Middle School mural project. Photo courtesy of the League of Striving Artists.
Service learning allows for a collaborative, impactful, and community-driven method of learning in all types of art and design. This type of learning may be especially impactful in rural places, which often lack ready access to art and design opportunities, but are not less creatively capable than their urban counterparts. Stout (2020) notes that in a rural context, “service learning is a process of “trying to grow a creative culture in a place where there’s not one that exists.” Arts-based service-learning at the high-school level has been shown to engage students, community members, and teachers in the creation of work for a community purpose, with the important condition that all individuals involved work as a team with shared interest and ownership in the selection, design, and execution of the project (Molnar 2010). In service learning, documentation and reflection are essential to demonstrate its impact (Kay, 2000). This process of documentation and reflection allows for self-evaluation of the experience which informs future work.

In the case of LSA, every project involves the type of problem solving found in a classroom, but also incorporate a real-world application and a real-world client. One key example of this real-world application is found in LSA’s annual partnership with the UT Martin Office of Alumni Relations to develop official homecoming logo and merchandise artwork. Each year, students have created designs which represent school spirit along with the homecoming theme and work with the Alumni office to develop those designs toward final products. With this project and all others, LSA documents the event and its participants through extensive photography. Over seven years show documentation of everything from the planning process to planning meetings, execution, installation, and community reception. This documentation allows students to see themselves in the visual picture of what LSA does, and it also allows for reflection on the work by both members and the community as a whole. LSA’s outreach has developed a culture where people understand the organization’s contributions to the community and how they might contribute to new initiatives (Stout, 2020).

Rural community members have identified weaknesses in their communities that include a lack of community interest and involvement as well as limitations on resources. While rural communities may not have many existing arts and cultural opportunities, LSA is an example of an organization working to build exactly that. In 2018, LSA started an annual scholarship fund for students with at least 45 earned hours, majoring
in either Graphic Design, Studio Art, or Art Education at UT Martin. This scholarship is a $500 award that is based on academics, professional exhibitions, and leadership. The organization is working to develop the fund into an endowment so that the scholarship becomes self-sustaining. Without a variety of pre-existing non-profits or organizations for arts development, opportunities abound for artists and communities to develop the culture that they want to see.

LSA works to generate community involvement in their projects through development of programming that integrates community input from the ground up. This input creates a sense of ownership and over and over again, communities are receptive to this work because of the ground-up approach which it entails. Gaul (2020) notes, “If you have a whole group of you people feeling empowered, they are going to go out and change the world around them. That starts on campus, and then to the NW Tennessee community- and I don’t think it stops there”

**Weakley Arts Can**

Another organization within the Northwest Tennessee community builds its focus around arts advocacy, both in K-12 education and beyond. Founded by a group of artists, musicians, and educators, Weakley Arts Can advocates for art education within Weakley County. The group promotes the inclusion of the arts in school programming, sponsors community events, and connects local school grant writers with funding opportunities. Hill notes that it took some time for the group to find their identity, and that they are currently focused on “helping people find the resources they need to help themselves.” Weakley Arts Can has been in operation since 2018 and defines itself as primarily an arts advocacy group.

In 2019, Weakley Arts Can was highlighted by Christopher Dye as a model of rural arts advocacy in the Tennessee Musician magazine. The article notes key advocacy principles employed by Weakley Arts Can. These include the ideas of asking for help when needed, operation on principles that include all of the stakeholders, thorough research of sources of funding, and collaborative work across multiple spheres of influence. Other principles include advocating for arts involvement from multiple perspectives in order to connect with the most people, as well as sharing personal stories of success within the arts (Dye, 2019).
A visual diagram of Weakley Arts Can demonstrates that the group regularly promotes multi-disciplinary collaboration, combined with a clear mission and social media presence. They address themes of community, funding, and resources often, and while experiential learning is not a large factor for the organization, they work to engage community members regularly. WAC places a priority on addressing funding and providing resources as well as engaging community members.

Weakley Arts Can has collaborated with the local community on a range of events. The group sponsored performances and other events at Magical Martin Day, an event held as part of the annual Tennessee Soybean Festival. The group also worked with the festival to establish an art competition and exhibition of mini murals along the Brian Brown Greenway, a community walking trail. The group organized a county-wide art exhibition and has organized a variety of recent activities in the light of COVID-19 closures and restrictions. Karen Campbell, a leader in the organization notes, “Education, hospitals, and quality of life are the three prongs to successful economic development. You’re going to attract business when you have those things, and to me there is no better indicator of quality of life than a thriving arts community” (Campbell, 2020).
The group offers membership and volunteer work as a way for community members to become involved. Individuals are also encouraged to work with their local school board and legislators as well as include arts events in their schedules and support local artists through patronage of their work.

A key aspect of Weakley Arts Can is advocacy for arts education in Weakley County Schools. WAC has advocated for creation of a county-wide public school music teacher position and in 2018, the group presented a 10-year plan to the local school board, noting action points for progression toward arts inclusion. This plan has since been adapted and the group has worked with the board and community members to revise their approach for solutions that work best across the county. WAC now advocates for a magnet school approach and hopes to connect the county schools with resources that can be concentrated in specific areas for those interested. Dr. Julie Hill, Professor of Percussion and Chair in the Department of Music at the University of Tennessee at Martin is a founding member of WAC. Hill notes that stronger programs can be built which allow students to learn more at a higher quality, rather than learn a little about many areas across which teachers and resources are spread thinly. The group spent some time defining their identity and purpose, and Dye (2019) notes that the organization was transitioning to a sustainable model. Weakley Arts Can is “continuing to build on their initial successes while ensuring that their message stays present in the community and that local policymakers continue to be aware of the need for improved arts access for all of Weakley County’s students” (Dye, 2019).

Working in rural communities brings both benefits and challenges. Campbell notes,

There are some challenges to an organization formed the way that Weakley Arts Can is created, but the size of the local school community gives all children a chance to “taste, feel, and breathe [art] in a way that they wouldn’t get in a larger school system (Campbell, 2020).

Students experience more visibility due to smaller rates of enrollment in many rural communities. Artists also have ample opportunity to develop new projects. However, limitations are commonly experienced. Rural participants in the primary survey for this study noted the prioritization...
of funding and attention for athletics and other forms of study over the arts. Within Weakley County, Campbell (2020) notes that some teens feel invisible because they do not belong to the more celebrated groups and areas of study. When the celebration of talent and creativity are included through arts programming, those individuals and others find opportunity to be seen and heard (Campbell, 2020). The process of celebrating creativity through arts programming in rural places is a monumental challenge, one that is approached a step at a time, “Even though WAC is short-handed too often, there are some brilliant, caring, hard-working, and passionate people in this area and they seem to be able to find one another and team up for common causes” (Hill, 2020).

Campbell compares advocacy to a form of mapmaking, where arts advocates provide road maps and guides for involved community members to gather and build their resources and plans. She notes, “If people have a map, they tend to be able to get somewhere. But you don’t have a whole lot of mapmakers […] around and that’s what you’ve got to have [in order to] really pull off something like we’re talking about.” With advocates focused on elementary, middle and high school, WAC provides a sort of mapmaking service that they hope the community will follow (Campbell, 2020).
BEYOND NORTHWEST TENNESSEE: SIMILARITIES + DIFFERENCES

Illinois Survey Perspectives
While this study analyzed primarily the results from Northwest Tennessee due to the volume of these responses, the responses from Illinois fall in line with much of the perspectives from Tennessee. The communities represented are of generally similar sizes. A key difference is that while a higher education institution is involved in arts programming and community events within the Northwest Tennessee region, higher education institutions are less of a factor within the Illinois responses.

For participants from rural Illinois, a “sense of community” was commonly cited as a community strength, with 82% of participants affirming this theme. “Funding and Resources” was cited as a community weakness by 55% of rural Illinois participants. Ten of the eleven participants from rural Illinois stated that they believed the arts should be supported in their community. Participant #50 was against arts support, citing a lack of funds as their reason; they stated that “funds would have to be diverted from essential resources.” When asked about further opinions on the arts within rural places, this participant stated that “the arts are inherently individualistic.” While this participant opposes arts support, many of the other participants are vocally in favor of arts opportunities within their community. Participant #44 noted that “art leads to creative thinking and problem solving. Supporting the arts also supports the type of people who will lead and improve a community.” Participant #51 stated, “I would love to see more support of creative industries in our area. This would open up many possibilities for young people to stay and work here after high school and may even encourage others to return.” Overall, responses from rural Illinois share many similarities with responses from rural Tennessee, sharing common themes such as “sense of community,” “funding and resources,” and the general opinion that the arts should be included and supported in rural areas.
Service Learning in the Classroom

Many undergraduate design courses build art and design skills through a series of projects that increase in difficulty and complexity. While service-learning is often found in higher education, relatively few classes are built solely for the purpose of learning through experience (Krensky, 2008). An undergraduate typography course may cover the anatomy of type, discuss the relationship between type and image, and study the structures of paragraphs and pages using student-generated content. An illustration course may introduce students to top software programs and engage them in creating artistic projects around their identity or around social issues that pique their interest. While all of these structures have their place and have definite value, it may be asked whether the projects in a classroom setting could be structured to hold more long-lasting and widespread value, both for students and for those outside of the classroom.

There are demonstrated parallels between service and community engagement. In particular, community service has been shown to maintain and enhance self-perceived citizenship levels of college students (Smist, 2006). Involvement in community service during the undergraduate experience correlates strongly to community involvement and service by alumni, with students involved in service-learning courses showing more tendencies to become involved in community work as alumni (Maynard, 2011).

In the spring of 2020, twenty students experienced service learning in a rural context when they took a brand management course by Robert Thompson, Associate Director of Student Engagement, through the College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh. Thompson is a graphic designer and educator with experience in community engagement, service learning, and design thinking. Thompson has long incorporated service learning in his work, exposing students to real world clients and projects as they complete design related projects in his classroom. In an interview, Thompson noted that designers often only learn the real-world aspects of their jobs after graduation. With this insight, Thompson integrates experiential learning into his classroom process by building curriculum around serviceable projects for community impact. In his practice and teaching, Thompson collaborates with rural community members to create products that invest the community in the process. He notes that when working in a community, “we put
out advertisements for focus groups and we ask questions. We put out surveys. We try to collect as much information as humanly possible, and then synthesize all of that, analyze it, and develop a creative brief out of that.” This type of collaboration leads to greater ownership in the project and community interest in its results.

A visual diagram maps this process of experiential learning at the University of Pittsburgh, demonstrating some of the areas where the class puts its focus. While a social media/web presence is not as prevalent for this group, due to the fact that it is a method of teaching instead of an established organization, they regularly work to circumvent issues of funding, as well as provide resources and engage the community in a transparent way.

Thompson’s class structure involves collaboration on multiple levels. Students often assume roles that range from Director to Research to Creative Support. They work on teams of 2-3 and also collaborate with community members to reach their goals and to develop visual work. During the Spring 2020 semester, students partnered with the rural community of Hermitage, PA and were divided into five teams. Each team developed a marketing and communications strategy with key messages, research, and findings and then used this research to develop basic logo...
concepts. The final reports for Hermitage were not limited to logo design and visual work. Each of the reports included details such as brand history, management guidelines, and budget proposals and could easily be used by the community as a guidebook for development of a city brand. Thompson notes some of the benefits to doing this type of work in rural communities, stating,

In some rural communities, there’s a lot of opportunity to create progress, not political progress, but just thinking progress, cultural progress. Some of that manifests through design, and not just graphic design, but design thinking, design strategy, creative placemaking. Adding a splash of color to the light posts in your small Main Street could add an entirely new dimension and personality to a place. So design has some very deliberate and precise abilities to change people and the places that they live and thrive in. I found that most of the communities that I’ve worked in are very accepting of design as an agent for change, especially in rural areas that don’t see change frequently, if at all. They’re very much interested in that. (Thompson, 2020)

Marion Design Company

While it may seem obvious that students and artists can volunteer on a pro-bono basis in the cases of educational and volunteer settings, it is less clear that such a model would work in the professional sector. A case study of Marion Design Company, located in Marion, Indiana, clearly shows an example of rural collaboration for professional designers in the industry.

Marion, Indiana is a city located in Central Indiana. Marion is located 85 miles northeast of Indianapolis and features a population of just over 28,000. Marion Design Company (MDC) has a mission to “revive, empower, and propel community forward by creating sustainable design solutions developed through education and collaboration with local students and community.” In this collaboration, MDC defines itself as a “community-based creative studio run by a team of both volunteer and professional designers.” Herb Peterson, Creative Director and Co-Founder at MDC, notes that “it’s okay for the community to define [our work] as it needs. [That] openness allows us to flex, adapt and pivot.”
Structurally, Marion Design Company utilizes a well developed website and social media presence. They strive to build community, address funding issues, and provide resources for the community in their work. Service learning is often utilized in the projects which the company undertakes. Marion Design company regularly integrates multidisciplinary collaboration into its work. Peterson notes that the designers and creatives who come to work with Marion are from varied backgrounds, and that this enables them to take on multiple projects at a time. This diversity of talent also inspires students and affects projects in a positive way. Peterson notes that while the process is “and there’s an application procedure, we get to […] ask big questions about the “why” behind your motives and what pushes you, what keeps you up at night, those kinds of ways of thinking.”

In 1930, Marion was the site of the last two public lynchings in the state of Indiana. The deaths of J. Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith inspired the poem, Strange Fruit, by Abel Meeropol, now well known as a song performed by Billie Holiday. With such a tragic event headlining community history, it is no surprise that the community faces some amount of generational trauma. Marion Design Company spent two years using design research and design thinking to re-visualizing the city’s brand. Therapists were also brought on board for design projects so that
designers working on the project could debrief and allow themselves to work through the research effectively. This project demonstrates the complexity and duality of life in a community like Marion. During this research, the company interviewed one-third of the local population and gathered information to allow them to tell their stories about the local community. “Home” was the most common word used to describe the community and the second most common word was “cursed.”

Peterson (2020) has an optimistic outlook for the possibilities of work in rural communities. Describing some of Marion’s early design work, he states,

One of the more interesting design thinking sessions we conducted was within our first year. We brought all the administration from the university down, along with the city of Marion mayor, his council, etc., and then a substantially large number of local leaders into our space for our design thinking session. And I don’t know how that even happened, still to this day, how you could get that many people available on one day for four hours. But it happened. And because of that, for the very first time, the university started talking with the leadership of the community, which they had not done forever. And so it allowed dreaming to start to take place. And just that alone is what allowed others that have maybe creative impulses or abilities that have been lying dormant to kind of step in and kind of take a certain role. That’s been really great to watch. (Peterson, 2020)

He goes on to note that part of Marion’s purpose is to “get to the heart” of community issues, and the organization’s history clearly shows a community impact. Now in its fifth year, MDC has contributed over 1.5 million dollars of design work to the local community with over fifty projects ranging from creative initiatives to re-branding, website development, and fashion events. MDC functions as an outstanding example of professional artists and designers as well as volunteers collaborating with a rural community for successful creative outcomes.
Practical Application
Contrary to the popular image of rural places as communities in decline, areas such as Northwest Tennessee and others are proving on a daily basis that rural places are capable of collaboration, advocacy, and investment in the arts. These attributes may take many forms. A community that is limited in financial resources may well invest time and energy into creative initiatives, and these alternative methods work well in rural places.

In the primary research for this study, it became apparent that many rural community members support the arts, but while they hope to see more artistic events and creative programming, they do not identify their communities as "creative." If rural community members hope to see more arts support, yet do not see their own communities as creative, who will generate this arts support? Lasting arts engagement and change does not happen when someone else is seen as the provider of artistic opportunity, nor does it happen when rural community members see themselves and one another as lacking in creativity or imagination. This type of change happens when rural individuals believe in themselves, identify their assets and generate new initiatives that advance their goals.

As Campbell noted, sometimes a "mapmaker" is key to charting a course that community members can follow, and when artists and communities engage with the mapmakers, change is possible. If rural communities self-identify their assets in the face of population decline and changing economic structures, including the arts in this identification is a useful tool for economic success. As studies such as Prince Edward County, Arnaudville, and many others demonstrate, the arts are not a luxury indulgence that may be employed when all else goes well in a community. Rather, they are a powerful tool that can be deployed to increase community involvement, build a thriving economy, and promote quality of life in communities of all sizes.

Likewise, rural communities themselves offer a host of benefits to artists and designers seeking to work therein. Without the existing
complex urban structures of cultural and artistic programming, rural communities serve as ready building grounds for arts advancement and creative opportunities. With the growing popularity of remote jobs as well as fiber internet access, rural communities may soon be not the outliers of productivity, but part of a network of decentralized points of productivity and creativity, each on a small community scale. The possibilities for arts engagement in rural spaces are monumental, given the right amount of time and energy.

**Limitations**

The term “rural” eludes singular definition at the federal level. As previously discussed, close to twenty different definitions were found at the beginning of this research. Although I settled on one definition for the purposes of this work, my sources may have easily settled on another definition for their own work. For this reason, it is important to consider that overall, “rural” may encompass a variety of population sizes. Some authors may refer to “rural” communities as places with much smaller populations than 50,000. However, all of these definitions of “rural” are generally under the threshold of 50,000.

Throughout the analysis of primary research, participant feedback is noted both in written form and in percentage points. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number for maximum legibility and clarity.

The survey results are not presented as though randomly selected participants were overwhelmingly in favor of arts support, but rather that arts supporters in rural places shared their opinions on the strengths, weaknesses, and cultural involvement of their communities. The primary research survey was distributed by the research team to networks of my own contacts primarily based in Tennessee and Illinois. As I have a background in art and design, it was apparent that many of the initial contacts for the survey would be arts supporters. While it was the intent of the study to include some urban participants for additional perspectives, the goal was that the majority of participants be from a rural place.

While a significant majority of survey participants have a bachelor’s degree or higher, this is not representative of rural populations as a whole. In Tennessee, 28.7% of the population holds a bachelor’s degree.
or higher ("Policy Brief," 2020). Regardless of their education levels, most of the rural participants in this study have lived in their community for more than five years, and have established histories in rural living.

After the survey themes were analyzed, contact was made with artists and designers working in rural places to take note of how their work functions in a rural context. Artists and designers working in volunteer, educational, and professional capacities were contacted. This part of the research served as the foundation for each of the case studies featured. Some of these case studies were conducted with individuals with whom the researchers have previous experience and others are completely new.

As someone with a background in Northwest Tennessee, I was personally involved with the League of Striving Artists as an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee at Martin. From 2015-2018, I worked as a member and as an officer of the organization. Therefore, when my research took this direction of arts in rural places, a study of LSA’s work in rural communities came to mind as useful and impactful. My work with the organization served to deepen my understanding of the impact that they, as well as other groups, have in a rural context.

Document and content analysis were methods used to understand the sections on examples of artists and designers working in rural communities. The documents that were shared are not public and are the property of their respective owners in each organization. For this reason, information gathered from these documents is not directly cited in these sections.

This research found its beginnings in Spring, 2019 and much of the primary survey was completed by the Spring of 2020. Shortly afterwards, COVID-19 affected the world, and by extension, it affected the development of some of this work. A majority of the interviews for this work were conducted remotely either via email or Zoom, and while this denied participants the ability to meet in person, it did allow for inclusion of participants not local to either Tennessee or Illinois, and for that, and their insights and contributions, the work is much stronger.

**Recommendations & Resources**

In each of these community examples, a collection of heuristics shows attributes that work well to contribute to the organizational mission
Collaboration is a key factor in creating successful community initiatives. It is apparent that while rural community members may support and value the arts, they do not necessarily see themselves as creative. This dynamic may be understood through the positioning of “resources” against “perceived agency.” When an individual or organization’s resources increase, the possibility for creative initiatives and collaboration increases. Likewise, as an individual or organization’s perceived agency increases, so too does their potential for collaboration and creative initiatives. This visual model provides a framework for understanding these dynamics and fostering more effective community engagement through the arts.
(the skills and ability that they believe themselves to have) increases, so does the potential for collaboration and creative initiatives.

For collaboration to be the most successful, community members should have some availability of resources, paired with a greater perceived agency, so that they have the ability to get work done and believe in their ability to do it. If an individual or organization does not have both resources and perceived agency, the collaboration between quadrants A and D will allow those with some resources to partner with those with a perceived agency for creative results. As examples such as the League of Striving Artists, Marion Design Company, and others have shown, collaboration across groups of individuals is not dependent on resources or agency alone. Their success in creating community initiatives demonstrates that with the right mindset and work ethic, individuals with either resources, agency or both can collaborate for successful results in rural communities.

In the development of this study, some resources have been discovered which can be particularly useful for artists and designers and for rural communities. One such resource is the Creative Exchange by Springboard for the Arts. The exchange, located at www.springboardexchange.org
features a host of toolkits for artists, designers, creatives, and community members which may be used for a variety of arts-related purposes from business development to mural creation, workshops, and collaboration.

Another useful resource is the Citizens’ Institute for Rural Design, an initiative created by the National Endowment for the Arts. It is located online at www.rural-design.org. This group features online resources as well as workshops throughout the country which work to improve quality of life, economics, and creativity in rural places.
CONCLUSION

It is apparent that arts supporters in rural communities are enthusiastic about the possibility of arts and cultural development in rural places, as well as cautious about the amount of community support that may be found for such initiatives. The viewpoints that rural community members take in regard to their abilities and skills are of great importance. It is imperative that individuals in rural communities see themselves as capable of creativity in order for them to embark on a journey of arts advancement and programming that is self-directed. It is for these reasons that cases such as the Marion Design Company, the League of Striving Artists, and students working in service learning are especially helpful because they bridge the perceived gap between rural communities and creativity. The organizations work to utilize factors such as community engagement, multidisciplinary work, collaboration, experiential learning, and transparency to create effective work.

This bridge is not simply a link from one thing to another, but is a two-way passage of communication and ideas in which artists and designers engage in communities. All work done on a community level can provide artists and designers with a better understanding of their world and the world around them, and rural places are no exception. This bridge also gives rural community members the ability to work with artists and designers who may help to develop their vision for community arts initiatives into lasting work. This bridge serves as a mode of communication that transcends barriers of funding which otherwise might render these initiatives implausible. These organizations and their work show some key factors which contribute to the success of initiatives in rural communities. They are as follows:

**Build Collaboratively**
Building collaboratively means taking their values, aesthetics, preferences, and goals into account and working with them through the process so that they are invested in the process and the outcome. This method leads to a greater sense of ownership which means that outcomes are held in greater value because they were generated out of a community effort instead of the sole vision of a few artists. Ownership is a vital part of sustainability for the arts in rural places, and in order for
Ownership to be felt, rural community members must be included in the process. This does not mean that community members need to paint a mural or build a sculpture themselves, but it does mean that they should be included throughout the design process and that their ideas should be valued and integrated into the work.

**Have patience.**
As many of the organizations in this work show, trust and productivity are built over not weeks, but years of time. Project after project, and collaboration after collaboration builds trust, which generates future projects and involvement. Working in rural communities is not a “once and done” situation. It’s an investment that takes time, energy, and patience. And with those, it can generate some wonderful rewards.

**Use funding creatively.**
Many organizations have success working in rural communities when they work from a volunteer perspective, eliminating the need for large amounts of funding. However, if a volunteer structure is not feasible, work can still be accomplished in rural places. Federal and state grants, as well as city funding, are possible avenues for resources, although the process will likely take longer in such scenarios. Projects funded in such ways may not be able to sustain artists and designers working full time, but they can certainly support part time engagement and work. When monetary funding runs short, in-kind donations including time, materials and space may serve as generous and valuable replacements, allowing for collaboration where funding could not.

**Engage in dialogue + active listening.**
Engagement in the arts often requires thinking outside of the box. And when this integrates design as well, the possibilities for creativity are both endless and daunting. Open conversation, dialogue, education, and discussion serve to build networks of communication and lead to ideas and new possibilities. Thompson (2020) states, “Approach is everything. You have to talk the talk, walk the walk, and what you say is just as important as how you say it. And what’s really most important is that: if you seem to be listening, if it looks like you’re listening, you actually need to be listening. If you placate or condescend, it’s done.” These conversations may be as simple as definitions of what work entails and may be as large as planning multidisciplinary events, but they are key to successful outcomes.
**Mindset is key.**

Rural communities are not a way to settle for less than urban communities have to offer. They are unique, with their own challenges and benefits. However, if work begins with the idea that it will not be as good as it could be elsewhere, anyone involved is fighting an uphill battle. Earlier in this study, I pointed out that rural community members supported the arts, but that they did not see themselves or their communities as “artistic” or “creative.” This mindset must change for anything to happen. Rural communities are just as capable of creativity and arts programming as urban centers, and they have the added bonus of being open to more possibilities because of a lack of existing opportunities. This is a benefit, not a handicap.

Artists and community members who engage in collaborative work emerge with new networks of connections, new ideas, and new foundations on which to advance the arts and personal enrichment. Rural communities are wide open for creative opportunities, and with the advancement of remote work and fiber internet connection, the feasibility of living in rural communities long term will only grow. By building on existing assets, working to develop community strengths, and capitalizing on the sense of community that already exists, rural communities have monumental potential to develop creative opportunities, demonstrating that people are capable of creative endeavors, no matter where they live.
APPENDIX A: BIBLIOGRAPHY


**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**

*Conversations with artists and designers working in a rural context are transcribed here. Some content has been edited out, but any editing is minor. The transcripts are the words of the individuals noted. In two instances, profanity has been removed.*

*Interview with Professor Jason Stout, LSA Faculty Advisor*

*Interviewer: Rachel Melton*

*July 30, 2020*

*Martin, Tennessee*

*Acronyms: JS: Jason Stout, RM: Rachel Melton*

[00:07]

**RM** What is your role in facilitating the arts within your community?

[00:14]

**JS** Well I have multiple roles. The first would be that I’m a Professor of Art at the University of Tennessee at Martin. So that includes teaching courses in 2-D Design, Drawing I, Drawing II, Painting I, Painting II, both the figure drawing courses, and a Using Color course. So I’m an expert in my field in the area of visual art. I’m also living and working in this community as a practicing and showing artist so I make my work here and although I don’t necessarily show my work here, I’m in a community where this is the place where I create the art. I also work with the student art group, the League of Striving Artists and we do a lot of service-based art projects and service based learning which means that we’re doing projects in the community and on campus that are involved with the creation or facilitation of artwork with everything from murals to graphic design to illustration work. Some of these projects are there for the betterment and development of student portfolios and some if it is to develop a skill set outside of the classroom that is not available in the classes we teach. So it’s an extra way of facilitation and furthering arts education with our students here.

[01:35]

**RM** Does the work that LSA does involve collaboration, either between students and community members or otherwise, and if so, how?
The work that we do involves several levels of collaboration. First, just as a student organization, there’s a collaboration between me as a faculty person and the students volunteering and engaging with the organization and giving their time to build and facilitate it. Another form of cooperation then is us as an organization working with a community partner either on campus or in the community. So if we’re doing a project with a group on campus, understanding what their expectations are and then having that community partner understand what our students are responsible for and what their skill set is, so that we can bring community partner’s needs together with the talents that our student group possesses and shares. You’re constantly working on different levels of cooperation and understanding between somebody that is needing the arts facilitated, whether it’s a project or a teaching thing. Also too, I’m working internally within the organization, cooperating with them, trying to get the best skill sets out of the kids that they possess and putting them in play to facilitate a need for the community for some form of arts activation.

How does that idea of collaboration and cooperation work when you have students from all of these different majors? How do they come to work together on a project?

Part of the thing that I do as the advisor is I manage the officer team, which represents the organization. One of our goals every year is to take on enough diversity of projects that will then actively engage all of our members. In our major for the degree at UTM, we have Graphic Design, we have Art Education, we have Art Studio. So every year when we’re taking on projects and partnering with the community, both on campus and in the city or the town, what I’m trying to do is find projects that will engage everybody’s skill set. And sometimes we get lucky and we have a project that has multiple tier to it. A couple of years ago, we did a children’s illustration book. This is where we worked with our alumni book on campus and with the English department, who actually wrote the content for the book. Our responsibility was to create handmade illustrations for the content of the book. In that, we took our studio artists, and our art ed people who also have strong studio skill sets and they made the page-by-page illustration for the book. Then all
that material has to be taken and put into book form and that happens on the computer so then we had 8-10 graphic designers working to convert those illustrated images into consistent and congruent images that can flow together in a book because we had so many different artists working on them, one thing that we needed was a cohesiveness between the illustrations. So our graphic design students then took those illustrations and converted them into a series of cohesive singular illustrations that really brought the book together. So in that case, we had a project that was able to engage all three parts, or all three disciplines of what our majors are here at UTM.

[05:29]

RM How does experience-based learning, or service-learning work with LSA and in the art department?

[05:39]

JS I think the best way that it works is in the classroom students come in with this expectation of they’re going to do an array of projects that a professor gives them to strengthen skills that they either somewhat possess or don’t possess yet. They’re very much seen as projects. In our service-based learning, I think the thing that’s outside the project that makes it exciting for the students is - it’s still a project. Every art-making thing you have is really some sort of problem solving - but at the other end of that visual problem is some kind of entity or client or person that we’re creating this project for. And behind the wish or idea or need of what that client has, that’s the thing that can actually inspire or enrich what that student does. So if we’re working in an after-school program, teaching illustration to a group of 12-year olds that want to learn it to enter a national illustration competition, which is something that we did this last year, it’s not just that they’re excited that they’re teaching drawing and illustration, it’s the fact that they get to teach it to a bunch of kids who really appreciate them spending their time, and also they’re enabling them to take this skill set and enter this national competition. I think it’s the partnering with the other entity or group to where they’re using their skill set to build community and I think that’s really what it’s all about. It’s using something that they’re appreciated for and getting to connect with another group of people that they didn’t know before the project and getting to use that talent to build a larger sense of community. I think that’s the feel-good part of it that keeps people doing it.
Is there a project that stands out that has been the ideal kind of successful project?

Well, I’ve got to be honest, the book illustration project we did, I think was really fantastic. And we’ve had a lot of fantastic projects. But when we got the content for that book, we really had a quick deadline with it. We had to get all of this put together basically in two months. So the content was there. But the physical representation, what the story was going to be, was completely in our hands and under our responsibility.

And so I think one of the things that made it so exciting, too, is the amount of students that we had. We probably had over 22 to 25 students that worked on this project from concept drawings to converting those concept drawings to illustrations. From our graphic designers, then taking these illustrations and converting them into a cohesive format and then also to the hand color and designing and the final touches that went on these illustrations and then bringing the initial artists back in to look at that and make sure that we were doing their designs, their drawings or illustrations justice, but also looking at it from a distance to make sure that the continuity was there between all the pages in the book.

Part of the great thing about that, too, is that this book is going to be given to the children of alumni for several years to come every time they reach a certain age milestone. I think it’s somewhere between three and five years. They knew that they did this project. They did it with members of the organization. They knew that it was under really, really stressful conditions where there was a small amount of time and that they really had to harness the best of their talent because this was going to be a published thing that was going to be out in the public.

So it was definitely something that they wanted to visually be proud of and creatively be proud of, and that they had to work together as a team in a very tight knit, organized way to be able to get this done and exceed expectations or at least hit expectations, and I think they did a really great job in doing it. And the book exists and now it’s doing what it does,
it’s being given out to people. So I think we had to use almost everything that we do well as an organization to get that project done. There was planning, there was communication. There was a wide array of talents that contributed to the completion of this. And there was really trust in both parts, both with our graphic designers and our illustrators and our concept artists to handle each part of the stage and be responsible for their part of the stage before it was handed or given off to the next entity that was going to develop it further. And I think that’s what it’s all about.

[10:54]

RM So before LSA, it was Visual Art Society, but it was re-imagined as LSA, and I’ve asked you this a million times, in 2011, right?

[11:03]

JS Yes. 10 or 11, somewhere around there.

[11:09]

RM And you taught before that. So you have experience with students seeing how students operated and community work and what they were doing before and after that. So what are some of the key differences that you’ve seen between students going to class, maybe being minorly involved in student organization work in other ways, and students that are heavily involved? What do those outcomes look like now?

[11:34]

JS Are you asking, are there more students involved now than there was, or is it “what is the result of being involved versus not being involved?”

[11:41]

RM That one.

[11:43]

JS Okay, well, here’s the thing. We have some really talented students that will come through our program that aren’t involved at all. And one of the things that involvement does for you is it really gets you understanding the context of a larger community and how art works within that community and especially where we’re located in a rural community. I think artists that go through and that aren’t involved in this and don’t have those experiences really kind of put their self on an island to where
they’re expecting their opportunities and their chances and their career moments just to kind of hop up and come to them. And I think students that have been involved in service and activities and community giving and partnerships like that, what they’ve learned is that these experiences and these opportunities are things that you really develop, that you really create. I can’t tell you how many opportunities we’ve had, whether it’s been an internship or a follow up opportunity from something we’ve done well that’s come out of our community service projects and work.

[12:43]

JS

And part of the thing is that the kids see that they did great on something and it developed three more opportunities for someone else because other people in the community are now aware that this person did this for them or this person exists with this kind of skill set and they want to work more with them or they want to work more with that type of creativity or that type of art. Whereas people that aren’t involved, they don’t understand that. They don’t understand the organic nature of how service builds a larger arts-based community and how a larger arts-based community actually creates more opportunity. And so I think, you know, the kids that we have that are involved are more complete majors and more competent artists because they really understand how community building interaction and communication works. And that’s that’s a distinct advantage that they have over somebody that doesn’t.

[13:47]

RM

So what would you say are some of the key benefits? And then, we can look at the same thing about barriers or things that pop up that are problems, but what are some of the key benefits to doing work that LSA does in a rural area?

[14:06]

JS

Well, I think part of the thing of living in a rural area is that you don’t have access to all the things that you have in a city. You know, you don’t have the type of funding, non-profits, or things that develop and give and create arts for various parts of the community. You don’t have access to things like museums and galleries and alternative spaces that actually present the idea of a visual art or visual art culture. And if you do, it’s very little.
So basically what you’re doing with service learning then is you’re trying to grow a creative culture in a place where there’s not one that exists. Now because there’s not one that exists, doesn’t mean that there can’t be one or there’s not, you know, the desire to have one. It just means that either the talent or resources before you got there weren’t present. It doesn’t mean that you can’t change it and make it a little bit better before you leave. And what I found is that through LSA and the work we’ve done, we’ve actually created a culture of people getting used to and understanding, you know, what we’ve contributed, what we can do, what we’re capable of doing.

And, you know, we’re on the other end now, where we’re having to pick and choose opportunities rather than go out and hope that somebody thinks of us to do something every calendar year. I mean, there’s at least 10-15 times that I have to say, “no, we just can’t get to that” or “it’s not the right thing to develop our members.” But we are now at the point where we have created a creative culture in a rural area that didn’t exist before, based solely on the continuity of our work, service, and generosity with giving our talents to try to build that.

That’s one of the great things, though, about being in a rural place. Because it doesn’t exist yet, it is easier to create it and get it started because you’re not having to compete or go against anything, because nobody knows how anything else kind of exists. Whereas if you’re in an urban area and there’s already, you know, several major large arts-based institutions or places or nonprofits or things like that, you’re going to have to fight to get any kind of opportunity or exposure because it’s already developed at a very, very high level or high platform. Working in a rural area, you don’t have that, but you do have the freedom to create what you can do based on who you are and what talents and skills you bring to the table. And I just found that to be the challenge and the most exciting part about doing it.

What are some of the goals that you see LSA hitting, like five years from now, what does their work with Martin, with the community or otherwise, look like at that point, ideally?
I think when we’re talking about how skill sets transcend to something greater for the person or the member that’s involved in the organization, you know, one of the things that I’m extremely proud of that we’ve started a couple of years ago was the LSA Award Scholarship, which is a 500 dollar annual scholarship that’s given to one of our members. A big deficiency that we had coming in just as a program here at UTM was trying to create or facilitate more arts scholarship. LSA through its fundraising and donation through service projects we’ve done with community partners who have been really, really generous and good to us as we’ve been to them, we were able to raise a certain amount of money to get this this endowment going or working towards an endowment for the scholarship. And I really think hopefully in the next five years that we’ll hit that amount to where it becomes an endowment, which means it will just renew itself. So every year, regardless of what money we’re able to contribute as an organization, some student in LSA will get a 500 dollar scholarship.

Now I think it’d be great if we get to where we can give out two of those. The other thing, too, is that the breadth of extra experience and opportunities that our members have developed here is that we have a lot of students that are applying to graduate programs and graduate schools. And I mean, you talk about strengthening, and shoring up an application, a lot of activities we’ve done in LSA, I think really broaden and expand our students’ grad school applications. When they’re applying, you know, they don’t just have a bachelor’s degree and 15-20 images, but they also have 15-20 experiences that the next applicant might not have, of working on a children’s book, helping in a collaboration with a group of 10 other people in a business, doing a 15 foot mural, working with a variety of different community partners from your campus to different rural entities where you brought art or an art based experience where there wasn’t before. And I think that’s something we’re going to keep expanding upon and growing too as we just keep creating more opportunities for ourselves.

Okay. Is there anything else that you want to add about working in rural places or about working with LSA that I haven’t asked?
I don’t know, I feel like that’s pretty comprehensive.

Okay. Yeah, I would agree.

Is there something you want me to talk about that you think would be good?

No, I think it’s pretty comprehensive, but sometimes I leave things out. That was good.

Oh, let me talk about this. Because it’s important and you’re interviewing me so I can talk about it.

One of the things too that kids get out of it that isn’t necessarily an art thing is: “What are basic leadership skills, and how do you teach this skill set to creative people that aren’t normally the most social?” One of the great things about running an organization is that I’ve always said, “an organization is not a club.” A club is a group of enthusiasts that have enthusiasm for this thing, that show up and express their enthusiasm and love for it. And they’re not trying to do something. An organization is a group of people that have love or enthusiasm for a thing, but run a very set organization that has goals and plans to do and accomplish certain things within a year. Now, to have members and to have officers and student leadership positions to be able to do this, you have to teach them basic student leadership skills. You have to talk to them about accountability and being the person on the project that everybody can count on. You have to talk to them about communication skills and confidence, your ability to talk to different people from different backgrounds, different races, different genders, and how you can share your appreciation and love for what you do with them. And hopefully in turn that they share that back, because these are the same people that you’re going to be asking to work with you in the completion of a big project.
How do you organize skill sets and manpower to accomplish and tackle a goal? How do you use people’s strengths in a way in which will benefit them the most to accomplish a goal? And how do you do it in a way that’s personalized to where you feel like you’re sharing the experience with them and you’re not just moving them around like chess pieces. How then too, with other entities within the community, do you have the confidence to talk about what you do and why it’s important? And how can you kind of sell yourself and the idea of the organization, to other people that maybe aren’t ready for that experience are really not willing to hear what you want to say? I would say one thing that we do great in the year is that with our student leaders, and hopefully it trickles down to the members, is that we teach basic leadership skills like this.

[22:00]
So outside of just being an artist and being somebody that’s involved in arts-based activities, you do arts-based activities through the guise of doing great leadership. And I don’t think any of our experiences that we’ve done would be great if we didn’t have the leaders in place to do it. And I don’t think if we hadn’t spent time on leadership, we would have been able to accomplish any of these things with talking or dealing with any of this stuff that I just mentioned. Meaning if our student leaders hadn’t learned this skill set within the year, we couldn’t have accomplished all this. And that’s part of it. That’s just a human thing that I think the organization does that’s really important. Creative people for the most part, they’re introverts. They’re coming from backgrounds and high schools and places where especially in rural Tennessee, where maybe their creativity sets them apart. It makes them a little bit different. It’s not the most widely accepted thing, it’s not sports or athletics. And so they’ve never really had leadership opportunities to work with other people.

[23:05]
It’s a very kind of isolated, solipsistic kind of existence with that. And here you have an organization with 40-50 very unique individuals. And how did those individuals that aren’t maybe that social, how did they come together to accomplish something? So it’s the ability to gain and acquire those leadership skills and transition that and transfer your creativity through that and be able to do both things. And that’s something I think we’ve done a great job of.
Interview with Brandy Gaul, 2020-2021 LSA President

Interviewer: Rachel Melton
October 24, 2020
Conducted via Email

Acronyms: BG: Brandy Gaul, RM: Rachel Melton

RM Can you introduce yourself and share a bit of your history, including where you’re from, how you came to be in West Tennessee, and a little about what you are doing now?

BG My name is Brandy Gaul. My pronouns are she/her. I’m from Peoria, Illinois. I’m 26 years old and I’m a junior at UTM where I’m currently enrolled to obtain my BFA in Studio Arts. I’ve been passionate about art since I was a child. I’ve pretty much always known that I wanted to pursue art as a career. In 2016 I moved to Lafayette, Louisiana and started a new life for myself. I wanted to become the person I dreamt of being in my mind. So, I decided to follow my dreams and develop my artistic abilities. In 2017 I began attending South Louisiana Community College - I hadn’t been to school in seven years (I didn’t go to high school I have a GED) so I was really terrified but super excited! I enjoyed my time there and planned to transfer to UL, but life had different plans. My boyfriends’ job (oil field) needed us to move closer north. It was up to me to find a school that I liked and decide where we would move. I was thinking Tennessee or Arkansas. I started looking for affordable universities in northern Tennessee. UT Martin was the first school I researched. At the time there wasn’t much information about the fine arts programs or facilities on their website, so I called to speak to someone in the fine arts dept. I was put in contact with [name removed] at the time, the dept. chair. He assured me that the program was good and that’s really all I needed to hear hahah. We moved to Martin TN a month later (one week before school started) and I began my first semester in Spring of 2019. […]

RM What is your current role with LSA, and why do you choose to be a part of the organization?

BG Currently I am the President of the League of Striving Artists. I chose to be a part of the organization because I didn’t have anything like that at my community college. At SLCC there weren’t many art majors and so all the artists I was looking to befriend weren’t there. Most of the people
in my art classes were just taking it for the credit. I truly didn’t have a lot of friends or the sense of community that I wanted to experience in college. When I began attending UTM Professor Stout didn’t waste any time telling me about LSA. I went to the first meeting and I saw nearly 50 students in the room that day who were all there with a common goal: to come together and just do exciting art stuff on campus. It was as simple as that. At this point I didn’t know the badass machine that LSA was or even what LSA really did- I just knew that somehow, I just gained 50 friends. For the first time in my life I didn’t feel like an outsider looking in - I felt like I could very easily be a part of something. I knew that I had just entered a room where talking to people seemed effortless and the energy felt comfortable.

RM What was your first semester with LSA like? How did you adjust to being involved, connect with other students, etc.?

BG My first semester with LSA was great! I started at UTM only taking 4 courses, so I had plenty of time for extracurriculars and developing friendships. Every meeting I would find a random open seat in the crowd and I would ask other people questions about LSA. I quickly found my central group of pals in my classes, who just so happened to all be LSA members. They were in their second semester with LSA, so it was nice to have them show me around too. Three of these individuals are on my officer team now, so it’s funny how LSA grows a family like that.

Professor Stout, LSA’s faculty advisor also has such a way with bringing students together and getting you involved with conversations. The LSA officers at the time were so invested in creating community as well. [...] At the end of my first semester a couple of my friends (who are now all second-year officers) and myself were approached privately by Professor Stout while we were having a late-night session in the drawing studio. Stout told us that he thinks we should all run for positions in the upcoming election for the LSA officer team. [...] I was honestly shocked. I felt like people saw something in me that I did not see in myself at the time - the ability to be a leader. For the next week, Stout and I discussed what position I would run for - the entire time he assured me every step of the way that I was the right choice and that I had the ability to lead others. In fact, he acted like he had no worry or concern at all that I wouldn’t be able to do it. For the first time in my life I started believing I was capable of so much more than I set out to accomplish. This played a huge part in changing the way I felt about myself. I ran for and was elected LSA Treasurer.
How much time would you say you spend on LSA-related activities in a week?

15-30 hours, depending on if we have extra events. Sometimes more. And that’s in a pandemic when we can’t do our usual LSA things.

What is the most impactful project that you have been involved with, and why do you value it?

The most impactful project I have worked on is homecoming banner 2020. During the pandemic, student organizations haven’t been allowed to meet like usual. Homecoming was canceled, and overall things just aren’t the same. We are grasping onto as much normalcy as possible. Events are either prohibited or limited to a small number of attendees. Our focus this semester has been to keep LSA together and thriving during a time where most student organizations will become inactive completely. I understand, that makes my role as President during the pandemic very important, as I lead my team and help lead the organization. With that being said, I couldn’t help but feel at the beginning of the semester as if I was missing out on the “president experience” that I was so excited for. I wasn’t going to get to hold the trophies in the quad after we win homecoming competitions, I couldn’t lead our general meetings in person every Tuesday, I couldn’t lead our members during big projects. Then, [we] were given word that [the] homecoming banner competition was still going to happen and the team (including myself) was so excited! We quickly created designs and got the process rolling. Through it all though I was stressed. I became obsessed with winning the competition (even though we have won seven years straight). I over managed the design process and didn’t have faith we would win- I just felt that with everything taken away from us this year- we NEEDED this win. Once the design process happened and we began to paint, work mode turns on. Getting to work side by side the LSA members and officers in a sort of fluid mechanism is the LSA magic. It reminds me of working in kitchens, you need every part of the back of house and front of house to be working properly for the restaurant to work. Some hours later you look up and realize you are creating this amazing banner with such talented and well-rounded people surrounding you. You have all put hard work into this painted banner and watching it slowly come together is truly special. By the end of the week prior to homecoming I had worked on the banner a total of 21 hours. With the
bulk of those hours being on the last night with just Professor Stout, Myself, and [LSA officer (name removed)]. After that 10-hour day I went home, and I thought about the banner and how well it turned out and how hard we had worked on it and I realized- I got that president experience. The whole time I was worried about winning like that would have made me feel better about all the things I’m missing out on as president because of COVID but then it all hit me... I got to feel the hard work and heavy responsibility and community that night and those days painting and that’s truly what it’s all about especially as my time with LSA grows closer to ending. [...] This experience was so valuable to me because it taught me that whatever I am going through, I can trust the process, and that being this best version of myself is winning, I don’t need a trophy to tell me that. The League of Striving Artists won judges choice for homecoming banner competition 2020.

**RM** Has LSA affected how you view your work as an artist and/or as a community member?

**BG** LSA has given me confidence. As simple as that sounds, it is anything but. Lack of confidence has negatively affected my work, how I view my work, my personal relationships, my early life choices, potential friendships, and my overall self-worth. LSA has helped me believe in myself and it’s obvious to me that this has positively affected my relationship with my work in the sense that I know there is no limits to what I can accomplish. This allows me to think in a community mindset, because I now believe that I have something to offer people and be a contribution to my community to matter where I end up.

**RM** What are the biggest challenges you have faced in arts-based work in a rural community?

**BG** Perhaps I’m viewing things through rose-colored glasses- but I have to say that I don’t see many major challenges that LSA hasn’t been able to overcome or change in some way. Whereas I feel the obvious answers would be things like “lack of exhibition opportunities” or “lack of diversity” or “underappreciation for the arts”, Professor Stout has helped mold LSA into an avenue that Creates opportunities for its members, despite the small town vibe. I feel that art is appreciated by our community because of the big things that LSA produces and accomplishes.
What are some of the biggest benefits to doing arts-based work in a rural community?

I feel it may be more rewarding, because the community work that we do is highlighted more and appreciated more. We’re making change and promoting art in a small community where there isn’t much to see and do—so we make a big splash. I feel that in a big city the art community is so big and saturated—if you’re to put up a mural it may be one of 20 that are in the city and people aren’t taking their time to stop and enjoy it on the way to their 9-5’s. I come from a big city and there is an art community there—but I don’t read about them much in the PJStar or see them on the Channel-25 news.

Did you have experience with service-learning before joining LSA? How does the service-learning experience compare to what you learn in classes on campus?

None at all. The service-learning experience is great, it helps me be more confident in my other classes. I would say it’s hard to compare the two. With being out of school for so long and coming back to school with this new mindset—I am like a sponge absorbing every bit of information I can, and I truly enjoy learning and love my university. I enjoy what I learn in class on campus, but service-learning through LSA has definitely enriched my experience and gives me more skills to apply to real life than my other classes might (besides my studio courses and other classes related to my degree which are very beneficial).

Have you seen any community changes (positive or negative) as a result of the work that you have done with LSA? What do those look like?

In my time with LSA we have created art (murals, and painted book-benches) for the community to enjoy. I think this gives people something new and visually pleasing to experience in their day-to-day. The community must enjoy it because we are asked time and time again to help Martin and UTM campus be more beautiful by creating art.

LSA works to “promote the development of students through academics, community, service learning, and leadership while modeling involvement in their department, on campus, and in the local community.” Why is this important for each of the three levels: departmental, campus-wide, and in the Northwest Tennessee area?
Because developing students in such a way helps them create a better surrounding. Take for example my answers above, I’ve stated how LSA has given me confidence in myself and my work therefore I feel that I have much to offer my community. If you have a whole group of you people feeling empowered, they are going to go out and change the world around them. That starts on campus, and then to the NW Tennessee community- and I don’t think it stops there. I know that the skills I have that LSA has helped shape are going to benefit me when I graduate and move back to Louisiana and must insert myself into a new arts community and make a name for myself.

What do you hope LSA looks like in five years?

I hope that LSA is thriving, that the officers are feeling that same magic that I feel every time I’m surrounded by my team or working behind the scenes. [...] I hope that an alumni chapter of LSA has been established so that the family we are can gather for big LSA events and continue to support the current officer teams. So that former LSA officers and members can invest and help grow something we all care about so dearly. Lastly, if somehow, some way, we could teach other universities to have their own LSA. It’s so surreal sometimes to think how big of an impact LSA makes on an individual and community level, and how hard the officer team works, how much we accomplish in one semester, yet nobody truly knows what we do. If I were to explain LSA to people at a different university- they couldn’t begin to understand the impact the organization really has. Every school needs their own LSA, because I wish all college student artists could experience this.
Interview with Karen Campbell & Dr. Julie Hill from Weakley Arts Can
October 7, 2020
Interviewer: Rachel Melton
Conducted via Zoom
Acronyms: JH: Julie Hill, KC: Karen Campbell, RM: Rachel Melton

Karen Campbell describing her background in arts-related work in Weakley County

KC
[00:14]
So when I first got back, one of the things I did was I walked Weakley County. I walked from each library to each library each Saturday in the month of March, a couple of years ago. And I did it in support of journalism, local local news matters, and with [names removed] and the local libraries. I did it because I felt like Weakley County was really missing out, in that we could be... If not a destination location, tourism wise, at least an "on your way to a destination" location. We don’t necessarily have any... at the time, I didn’t even know about Garrett Lake, I mean, nobody told me about Garrett Lake.

RM
[01:06]
It’s hidden, right?

KC
[01:08]
I know, nobody mentioned it. And I’m going around talking tourism. I mean, I went and talked to [names removed], because I really believed that with Discovery Park so nearby, and all the agri-tourism we already have the potential of here, that if we just play up a few more of our natural elements, we would have something. So [name removed] and I from the Weakley County Government, started working on a thing called “Walk Weakley” and we wanted to do an app. The app would be a map of back roads that you could walk or bike or drive or whatever... roam. Then the app would ding you about arts, agriculture and history that maybe you didn’t know about, as you walk the streets. Specifically, we were going to try to collect all the information like on the murals in each one of the towns and that kind of thing. Of course, COVID got in the way.

RM
[02:16]
We had gone so far as... A university class at UTM were willing to do the back side of the technical part of an app. The mapping and that kind of
thing, for us. And then COVID. I’m communications director for the school system. So I haven’t had any time to do anything with any of that. But recently, because of a wedding gift, I met [name removed] and because of my love just for the arts in general, I’ve been kind of keeping my ears wide open to what’s going on, what’s possible.

[02:59]

KC And I have been inspired with the idea, I would love Weakley County to do something that attracts artists. I remember a few years ago, I don’t know if this is still true... Gatlinburg used to have a blue highway tour. And you got a little tour map of all the potters and glassblowers and you drive through just the back road and stop at their studios. I think that became a little bit more commercial, a little less “interrupting an artist.” It became more of a bigger thing than that. I know there was a school in Kentucky, that also was really big on arts and bringing in arts. And then I know North Carolina has several enclaves. And so I was thinking, wouldn’t it be great if we could in some way entice artists to come here and be known for being an arts-forward kind of community?

[04:18]

I would look forward to reading your study so that maybe you would give a few clues as to how that might be. Because my background in both the arts and local government suggests that education, hospitals and quality of life are the three prongs to a successful economic development. You’re going to attract business when you have those things. And there is no, to me, no better indicator of quality of life than a thriving arts community.

[04:57]

RM OK, yeah, I agree, I think Weakley County has a lot of potential for things like that. There’s artists that are working locally that may or may not talk to each other, but there’s not really a kind of cohesive organization of people that are sharing information like that. And I know exactly what you’re talking about with the arts tours, too. I spent a little bit of time in Maine last year with [names removed] and they have guides and information on potters and local artists. And you can just spend the day driving through and talking to them. Just drop by their studio and see what they’ve been up to and making.
And it doesn’t take a whole lot to pull something like that together. Just knowing where people are, and them being open to having drop-bys. There’s a definite attraction. Of course, it wouldn’t hurt if we would maybe have some sort of arts focused festival. The closest one I’ve heard about, that’s of a bigger variety is Linden, Tennessee. Do you know about that one?

No.

It’s a great story. There’s a couple of entrepreneurs. They were real estate folks up in Rhode Island. Not not an older couple, middle middle aged, like younger than me. And they were real estate in Rhode Island and had a second home in Florida. But they felt like it had gotten too much like a city. And so they were looking for something rural. And she was just flipping through travel magazines and saw something about Tennessee. And some land in Linden, Tennessee. So they checked it out, wound up buying a farm, wound up buying the hotel in Linden, Tennessee that was falling down, practically. [They] remodeled the hotel. Eventually, a lot of stores come in and they start doing more art-based stuff and now they have an annual arts festival and get over 100 artists that come in. Now, the festival is on hold because of COVID. But they still have the speakeasy going on Friday nights where they’re bringing in small music. Because it’s only like an hour from Nashville.

Yeah.

So people are coming over from there and performing and stuff. And so it’s proof positive that small towns can...

Sure.

...With the right decision and the right push. Things can happen. You just got to get everybody focused on the same page.
Right. Yeah. There’s actually, I should send you this. There’s information that I found early on in doing my thesis where I started reading about creative rural economies and towns that completely converted their whole economy structure into being an arts-based economy. And you don’t have to go that far to make it happen.

Yeah.

But the stories of how they did it and the types of things that they did are really similar to what you’re talking about.

I’d love to see that, yeah.

Yeah, I’ll share some of that for sure, because originally that’s what I thought about researching. And I just realized really quickly it was so big that there’s no way I could map the whole thing. So can you tell me a little bit about your history in the arts, how you’re drawn to arts promotion?

Well, as you know, I’m a writer. I’ve done that, you know, even since I was 14, 13, 12, something like that. Poetry, bad poetry. But nevertheless. And so as a writer, I’ve always been around... anything I did in publishing or whatever, I hung around artists, like graphic artists. I love the visual arts and those two go hand in hand so very well. In the beginning I worked with churches and then I moved into just working with non-profits and now in the education realm, which means never a budget. So I, with the advent of more and more resources, to in no way rival what you can do, create my own graphics to go along with whatever I was doing. And then with social media, the need to create very pithy visual storytelling elements and so forth. I had to up my game just a bit and and I and so I’ve done that.
I would never, ever call myself in any way a graphic designer. But I have an appreciation for it and need for it. And so I've just always been drawn to that. And then when I went to Houston and went to my first arts festival there...I've been to others... but when I went to my first one, and at the time, it was like eighth in the country as far as arts festivals go, I just started volunteering and I loved the community, the ethos, you know, just the atmosphere. Stay up late and get them in and get them set up. I actually served them water and walked around, make sure they had food and took care of their tent while they went and did stuff. And then from many, many years as that, worked into being on the board.

So it just keeps me around them. I don't call myself an artist, but I do remind myself that, you know, writing is part of the creative realm. And so in that sense, I've always been a part of it.

So what’s your connection then to either establishing or just how you got involved with Weakley Arts Can, and especially the educational aspect of it?

Well, I was reporting for the Weakley County Press, and I went to a board meeting of the school board and Julie Hill and [names removed] were there along with [name removed] and they were presenting about Weakley Arts Can, and requesting that there be an increase in the amount of arts that were included in the schools. And when it was over, I went to the leaders, I think it was Julie and [name removed] at the time who I talked to and I said, "I’m just working for the paper at this point, but if you ever need anything, let me know. I’d like to be involved in some way." And I did a couple more stories about Weakley Arts Can, not just for that particular board meeting, but just in general, and then just became involved in that way.[...]

When I took on this role a year ago, well, a year ago in July, I became the communications director for Weakley County Schools. It just sort of worked hand in glove that I sort of report back to them now, and tell them what is going on and what we are doing. And I’m a conduit for
what they like to see happen. And we’ve seen so much good things come out in the last year or so.

[12:49]

KC I don’t know how much you know about what Weakley Arts Can has done, but everything from, they brought in a group that did training for arts advocacy, and then they’ve connected us to Bartlett schools where they are renowned for arts integration. And we are currently in discussion about increased arts integration, which would be a little bit different than what currently. We in the school system believe that we already do have a lot of arts integration, we just haven’t labeled it as such and formalized it.

[13:33]

RM Right.

[13:34]

KC But we’d love to see even more because we know how effective that is. And so we’re in discussions about how do we do that, where we, Weakley Arts Can, and we Weakley County Schools are in discussion about how do we increase that. So we’re paying more attention to it right now. Our instructional supervisor for elementary education, [name removed] took part in a day-long arts integration, online class that was sponsored by Weakley Arts Can and Bartlett schools.

[14:13]

And then, okay, Julie just chimed in. Julie’s chiming in. So I don’t know if she’s coming or not, but I just saw something pop up. Anyway, so, [name removed] is very involved and we’ve become more aware. We’re paying more attention to what we’re doing. One of the problems in a school system, that is a lot of smaller schools, which we are. And which I’m a big advocate for. I actually believe that’s a good idea, rather than one large one.

[14:46]

There she is.

[14:48]

JH Can ya’ll hear me?
We can.

Can now. Yeah.

Hi.

Hello.

Sorry I didn't have my mike on. I don't know if y'all saw my email. I was at the tent measuring ramp’s with the maintenance guys. And I’m so sorry. It slipped my mind because I was out there with them.

It’s all good.

There’s lots of different things that I don’t normally do happening every day, but no excuse. I’m so sorry.

No worries.

I’m sure Karen has done very well without me, though.

Well, I was just actually getting to a little bit of the history of what all Weakley Arts Can’s been doing. So I told her about the Arts Advocacy Day, Arts Integration Day, and then encouraged us this year to observe art appreciation.

National Art Appreciation Week.
Yeah. National Art Appreciation Week, which we did. And did lots of different things on that.

And so we’re keeping art in front of people as best we can. And then a lot of what she’s going to be doing with “Live from the Tent,” we’re going to be encouraging our students to be paying attention to. We’re going to get in the music. Oh, and then recently, one of the things that the school system, because of WAC’s encouragement, I learned about [name removed], who is a dance instructor.

So when the schools need to, and we have had a mandate to increase the amount of P.E. time, a lot of our regular teachers who are not trained to teach P.E. are now having to teach P.E. as part of recess. And so we just shared a bunch of dance ideas and are getting our WAC member, [name removed], into some of our schools to use that as P.E. time too. What I was just about to say about Weakley County Schools is that we’re a collection of small schools. That to me, is a very good thing because it allows the intimacy that you don’t normally get in a very big school. But it also means that you don’t always get as many opportunities because how many teachers you get are based on your school population.

Right.

And that means that in several of our schools, half the year you have a music teacher and half the year you have an art teacher. And we have a countywide theater option now. We have one teacher who is, because WAC encouraged it, teaching music in middle school. And that came about because of their advocacy. But she’s going to all the middle schools. And so we have some challenges when you are formed the way we are. But I also think that the kid who if he was in a big school, he’s going to be, third string, third chair in a band or whatever. Well, he may be right there, and lead in a lead position in our smaller schools. And so it gives kids a chance to taste art and to breathe it and to really feel it in a way that maybe wouldn’t get in a larger school system.
Well put Karen.

Yeah, that’s great. Would you describe Weakley Arts Can then as primarily an advocacy group as opposed to other types of groups?

Yeah, that’s what we always were. But it took us a little while to find our identity in terms of... Are we going to be about events? Are we going to be about trying to fundraise for the teachers? No, we’re going to be about helping people find the resources they need to help themselves.

Okay.

Because we’re a small group.

Very small. [laughter]

It’s exciting. The past couple of weeks, I’ve had one or two people a week from similar school systems reach out to me to find out how we built Weakley Arts Can, and I’m like, “it’s not really that big of a thing....” it was like two girls having a beer going, “we gotta fix this. Stuff is wrong in our area.” And then just from there you get a few dynamos like Karen coming in to help and then [name removed] in my office. And pretty soon you’ve got five workhorse women that can get anything done.

Do you have a membership system?

We do. And we have more people listed on the email list, but just in terms of the worker bees that actually spend the time getting the work done, you know, it’s I don’t know, Karen. Six or seven of us.
Yeah, core. Pretty hardcore folks. Yeah. I’d say that we only have like 11 or so arts teachers in the school system and several of them are now involved in the group. So far what I’ve found is that there are a lot of people in this area that think it’s a great idea, but they don’t know how to take a great idea and make it happen. And Rachel, kind of what I was talking about earlier about towns and turning them into art enclaves, and all that kind of stuff is, if people have a map, they tend to be able to get somewhere. But you don’t have a whole lot of mapmakers running around. And that’s what you got to have to really pull off something like what we were talking about. And it’s kind of what Weakley Arts Can is providing for the for the school system. We have people who are focused on elementary school. We have supervisors focused on middle school, focused on high school. But we didn’t necessarily have the supervisor like they do in Bartlett, where they have a very large staff who can focus on the arts. So if you have that mapmaker like Weakley Arts Can, and you say, “hey, what if we go here” or “what if we explore this? Oh, we did explore it and that’s not a good idea. Don’t go there.” If you’ve got somebody doing that, whether they’re paid or they’re not paid, but they have that passion for making a map, I think people will follow.

I don’t have a sense at all with anybody like, “oh, no arts. No, we don’t want to add art” or “that’s frivolous.” I’ve said often our director here is not about a “no.” He’s not going to say no [inaudible]. He’s just going to say “how?” and that’s what advocates have to do, is they have to be extremely creative with coming up with how’s. It’s so beneficial for us to have Julie, who’s over at UTM, who has the resources that she’s getting for UTM, that she turns around and makes available to the local school system. And we have a great relationship with [the UTM Chancellor] so that’s all good.

Yeah, you can see how easy it would be for arts to decline through the years when there’s not a dedicated supervisor that’s got that kind of training. They’re all spread thin. It doesn’t happen year round. I mean, it’s just a natural dissipation when you don’t have a group to advocate.
Again, they’re not anti art. It’s just pointing it out like, “hey, we used to have band at every school” and now how do we make that opportunity happen for more people? So I think it’s just a natural dissolution through the years when you’re not just like, “hey, [knocking] hey, you could do this, [knocking] you know.

[22:55]

KC

It also takes, like somebody said, let’s get together and talk. Okay, so all the reading people are organized by the reading coach to get together and talk about reading. All the math people are organized by the math coach to get together and talk about math. Nobody’s organizing the arts teachers. Nobody’s saying, “what are you doing. What are you doing?” They’re just getting in there and many of them are literally carting their stuff around. They put all their stuff on a cart and they’re taking it to classes as opposed to having a space and an identity within a school. When you’ve got that kind of a loose system, it takes a while to be able to have a voice.

[23:35]

I think right now, metaphorically, we are at best the beginning warm up of a band. Everybody’s playing a different thing. It’s cacophonic and it’s not very pretty. But we are warming up. And I am thinking that very very soon we’ll see a cohesive message that’s coming out from all of us. Because we are beginning that warm-up. We are encouraging it, we’re giving people the instruments that they need. I haven’t told you this, Julie, but not only did we get all the video cameras the other day, that was a donation, [name removed] just told me that she’s gotten us the possibility of sinks. Everybody was asking for sinks in arts rooms. Back when we said, give us your wish list...almost everything they wish for, they’re going to get.

[24:40]

JH

That’s so great. That’s awesome.

[24:42]

KC

But before this - Weakley Arts Can, they had been asked, but they didn’t believe they would get it.

[24:53]

RM

Right.
KC And so they didn’t ask. They didn’t ask. And it’s taken us two years of saying, “no, we’re not kidding. Tell us what you want.”

JH Right.

KC And the school system is now finally getting feedback from the arts teachers and saying, “oh, you were serious? Oh, well, this is what I want.”

JH Right.

RM Is it a fundraising model? Like how do you raise funds to provide these kind of things for teachers, if it’s a smaller group?

JH That’s a question for Karen, with the school board on that end. On our end, we’re doing things like looking for grants, state funding that we can point, [name removed] that Karen’s already referenced. Because none of us really have time to do anything else in terms of the weeds. And [name removed] gets paid by the school system to do that. But can we help find things and then point them to her? Can I sign off on those with UTM music and say, “it’s a grant, it involves kind of a partnership with a local university or things like that?” That’s easy for me to do. But if it’s me writing the grant, it ain’t going to happen.

KC That’s again, the beauty of the makeup of Weakley Arts Can, because not formally representing the school, but knowing about the school system with Weakley Arts can determine we’re not going to be able to be a fundraising group. We are providing that organizer, that catalyst kind of role, that stirring up, ask the right questions, find out things. When we figured out that that’s the role we were going to play and we couldn’t be another fundraiser group in this county, by that time, I had learned more about [name removed]’s role. And she’s a grant specialist here in the Weakley County School system. And so I was able to say, “what about
this grant? What about this?” And [name removed] just looked at us and said, “hey, I’m a big supporter of the arts. You tell me where they are, I’ll write them. I don’t even want y’all to write them. You just tell me what you want and I’ll go after them.” And that’s what she’s been doing. So it was this great collaborative effort because we can’t be a fundraising group, but we can be an “ideas generator and point you in the right direction” group.

[27:14]

JH And that’s where again, Karen is so critical as the conduit between Weakley Arts Can and the school board. I mean, to have her in that position, of communications director, has moved this light years ahead. I know we would not be where we are. But, you know, the fact that [name removed] has that position, and I didn’t even really know that, and she was happy to have a conversation, it’s just communication and having the right people put the right folks in the same room. And it was easy.

[27:38]

RM Right. How much of the work that you do is focused on K-12 educational systems versus general community arts promotion?

[28:00]

JH Right now, it’s certainly all focused on K-12 because we’re not able to have very many community events. UTM music is, but the talent of Martin, the city of Martin, is not being allowed to do that. Karen mentioned the “Live at the Tent” series that we’re doing. That’s been really fun. We’ve had three outdoor events so far and then we’ve got a new series, “Culture Ed Online,” that we’re programming pre-recorded events and editing those and putting them together. And a lot of those are for our young people K-12. And we’re programming those on Tuesday and Thursday nights at eight o’clock. So a lot of things we can do for just general outreach, but also K-12 education. If people want to take advantage of that. If they don’t, we can’t do anything about that. But we’re providing resources and it’s also some recruiting for us too. And just keeping visible as a department in the public.

[28:53]

RM Right.
But yeah, we’re talking about one possible December event right now. And that would only be if the county art teachers have something ready that they would like to perform, then we might create some sort of drive through Christmas thing where they do little mini vignettes in small groups of dance or singing or acting. Karen’s been checking on that with the art teachers, but that’s about all we’re planning with the community events right now. We do have art on the Greenway and [name removed] I just walked out there earlier, Karen, the art’s still up [on the] Brian Brown Greenway and there’s other things happening. But they’re distanced, of course, and we’re not going to have Santa’s Village this year. But normally both.

[30:01]

RM

[...]Thank you both so much.
Interview with Professor Robert Thompson

Interviewer: Rachel Melton

March 26, 2020

Conducted via Zoom

Acronyms: RT: Robert Thompson, RM: Rachel Melton

[01:09]

RM
Could you talk a little bit about your background in using [Experience Based Learning] and maybe a little bit about where you’ve done it?

[02:10]

RT

So I started teaching over a decade ago and my first semester ever teaching during the actual academic year, not summer, was really eye opening because I discovered that I was a practitioner coming into education where students were getting a lot of practice work. They were doing fictional projects in class and I largely regarded those as exercises. There wasn’t anything on the line except a grade and maybe a future portfolio. And for me, I’ve always done work that had meaning beyond just a grade. Honestly, when I was in undergraduate school, I didn’t care about my grades. I cared about making great work and sometimes making great work compromised certain grades for whatever reason. And because I knew that at the end of the day, you need to have satisfied clients and need to hit all these different benchmarks for marketing, analytics, “like what kind of exposure did you get?” “how did this convert?” there’s a sales component, all of these things that matter that designers just weren’t aware of until they actually entered practice and then they had to learn all new things.

[03:35]

So I decided to start building out a practice based program at La Roche University. We were able to create a design studio and create a practice based course and the students loved it. They got a very grounded understanding of what it was like to work with other people, which they hadn’t done at that point, and I know that experience helped radically transform their perspective on design as a discipline, but also as an industry and just exactly how they fit into that relationship as service providers. From there, I ran the design studio for another year. We had a lot of great clients, great outcomes. And then I left La Roche and I wasn’t able to do any practice based teaching until I started at Youngstown State in 2012.
I was there for about two years before I was able to create the Youngstown DesignWorks program, which is no longer in operation. It was a student run graphic design agency that served small businesses, nonprofits, and community groups in Youngstown, Ohio, which is mostly urban but on the peripheral outskirts is very rural. We provided great design services for a very accessible price point. And I ran that for five years, basically, and the students that went through that program, they were hand selected. So they were elite level students and they got to experience client life. And, you know, it was transformative for them. And a lot of them got jobs before they graduated or because they had Youngstown DesignWorks on their resume. So this was very much a benchmark for companies in the area to assess who was truly good or not. And, you know, for for all the good that it did, sometimes it did some irreparable harm, like some students discovered, “wow, I do not ever want to work with clients, ever” or “I can’t believe these clients are abusing us the way that they are.” And that’s a sad truth, the sad reality of the design industry, especially if you’re a freelancer, you get bullied and beat around and pushed around. But, for some students that really understood what it was like working with people, this strengthened their resolve, and they looked at this as a glass half full situation on how to work with people effectively and not be disrespected in the process. For five years, we served hundreds of clients. We made damn near twenty thousand dollars in revenue, which went back to the students and helped us by technology. And in some cases, I was able to employ the students and create jobs. So that was amazing. But then I left YSU and they closed the program.

So to present day. My class at PIT Brand Management in the Business College. I discovered that my marketing students, aside from an internship or a case competition or something like that, they had no real practical, grounded experience like working for companies or other people. And I had to take this class over as an emergency sort of situation. So I did what I knew. And the previous instructor, he taught the class as a project based class, but his projects were fictional. They didn’t mean anything. There’s no skin in the game. So I decided I’m going to do away with this and we’re going to do something real. So I put a call out on my Facebook page and I said, hey, I need a real client for my class. And I had a bunch of people reach out to me, a lot of people
from Youngstown that need the help. And one of those folks was a person I connected with at a conference, and she was from Hermitage, Pennsylvania, and she works for their municipal government. And I'm like, "well, that is absolutely perfect." So that's how we ended up working together.

[08:38]

RM So going back really quickly to the Youngstown DesignWorks, did students work with that group for credit?

[08:49]

RT That was it three credit class. It was the most advanced class in our curriculum.

[09:00]

RM So it would pretty much last for one semester and they would be working throughout the year?

[09:06]

RT Yeah, it would last for one semester and in some cases we were able to convert an internship class into the DesignWorks profile so some students would get a year's worth of professional experience before they graduated, under my guidance in this very protected safe environment.

[09:29]

RM Do you have any particular personal connection to working in rural places or has it just kind of worked out that way?

[09:39]

RT It's a little bit of both. I grew up in a rural area. I've been a designer since I was 11. You know, where I grew up, there were no designers, there were no companies that really hired designers. There was one company that did hire designers. They hired me for freelancing for a bit and that was cool. But most of the people that they had doing graphic design, they just hired and taught them how to do it on site. When I was growing up, I would design stickers and decals for race cars and other vehicles. And I did a lot of animation, web design for little projects that I would do. So it wasn't like I had clients necessarily, but I was absolutely on an island in this rural area. So where my friends were tending to their farms, I was sitting behind a computer in Photoshop.
Once I entered my career, it just sort of worked out organically because I knew that there was a possibility that I could bring high quality design work to these rural areas that absolutely needed it. And I knew that they wouldn’t necessarily be able to pay the city rates, so to speak, but they would be able to pay something competitive as well as they should because there were no designers in the area. So that became a novelty service.

So I developed a real niche for working with rural clients and I enjoyed that process. I enjoy those folks. But, you know, there are some pitfalls to that, that are just unfortunate. But it doesn’t it’s not exclusive to rural areas.

In what ways would you say that collaboration plays a role in all of that?

Basically, we would have several clients at one time and there would be several teams. So in some cases, like if we had three clients a semester and I had 10 students, I would break them into two or three person teams. I would assign the creative, I would assign the art director. I would assign an account rep and then a production designer, and they would all proceed in their intended responsibilities. So the account rep would be the person that would be maintaining communications with the client. And I would be CC’d on everything and I would actually literally sit next to the student and dictate how they should communicate to their clients. They were really able to understand how you design your email communications to teach people what you’re doing. The art director would manage the quality of the work and then the production designer would just do the production stuff, whatever was necessary. Since this was an elite level class that you had to interview to get into, there were never any illusions about who had a higher talent or quality skill set or whatever.

I was very apparent about it, like, “OK, Rachel, you have the strongest aesthetic taste. You’re going to be the art director.” “And you, Taylor, you actually have the most production. You’re not the strongest designer.
And so you’re going to be the production designer, because you may know the software better, but you don’t have the aesthetics down, whereas Rachel has the aesthetics down, but not the software.” And then generally I would choose the most extroverted or open minded person to deal with client communications.

[13:59]

RT And that’s not all they would do exclusively. They would also be doing design so that that comms person would kind of do a bit of both.

[14:09]

RM And was this with Youngstown or with the Hermitage class?

[14:13]

RT Well, this is both. So what I just said was in the context of Youngstown DesignWorks. With Hermitage, it was a little different because while the philosophy was the same, you have to understand, I wasn’t teaching graphic designers. I was teaching marketing students. I couldn’t ask them to design anything, so how I broke their team down was: you would have your team director who would manage the team, manage the project; so the team manager. They would manage the project, manage the clients, manage communications, management, everything. Then you would have the research people that would do the research: all the fact finding, data gathering. And then you’d have your creative support.

[15:03]

These are the people that are coming up with the taglines, with ad campaigns, and even in some cases they were using Canva and whatever else to make logo designs, which I did not hold against them grade wise. More to that point, since we were showing these and presenting these to actual clients, I made it a point to have a heavy hand in making sure that that design work looked as good as possible. So I would take their base designs and clean them up in Illustrator and that made me a de facto part of every single team. Had this been a class with graphic designers in it, I would have left that responsibility up to them. But there were a lot of students that were just terrified of doing design work.
That’s interesting that you asked them to do a logo design, but there was no adverse grade associated with it. It was just like, “try this out.” And that’s kind of different because it doesn’t usually happen that way.

Yeah, and that’s a great point. And here’s why. They were graded entirely on their marketing strategy, advertising brand management strategy, those things, because that’s what they know, that’s what they’ve been learning. I didn’t want to grade them on the quality of their design because none of them have ever had a design class. So that’s not fair.

That’s like, you know, me being graded on how I fix your plumbing, not a plumber. I don’t know how to fix plumbing, right? I hire people to do that. But what this did was, it gave them an immersive experience in understanding the creative aspects of a marketing team, and it put them in the shoes of a graphic designer and how that person functions within a greater marketing environment. So that way, when those marketing students actually enter the field, they’re going to have a one to one relation, or a relatability to the graphic designer. And they’re going to know how that designer plugs into their workflow.

Yeah, that makes sense. Have you seen community changes and how people respond to maybe students working in design or to the idea of graphic design as a theme for their community through some of this work that you’ve done, especially in rural places?

You know, graphic design to a lot of people is just a foreign concept. Like I’ve met people that don't even know the term “graphic designer.” Right? They just say artist at the very most. So when when we introduce this concept of graphic designer and how they’re a visual communicator and they’re involved in visual marketing and things like that, it starts to make more sense. So I try to have a very concerted effort to show people what we do, how we do it, et cetera. So part of that philosophy is any time I make a logo, I never just send the design. I always contextualize it, like on a t shirt, because that is what makes sense to the layman. I don’t have to explain what design is because you’re literally looking at it. Right?
Right.

It also gives them a different value. So it’s like, “wow, that’s cool enough. I would wear that on a shirt.” Great. So that shows that you have a value with it beyond just acknowledging it as a flat digital concept. So when when we introduce these ideas, people start to gain a better understanding of it, but there’s still a lot at stake that they don’t understand. I’m not calling people stupid, but in some cases, it’s just beyond their understanding. Like, “oh, you make websites?” No., that’s a deliverable, that’s how our work manifests, we do high level strategic work in psychology and sociology and focus groups and marketing and all of these other things.

And I have to explain to people that as a designer, you have to know a little about a lot. You almost have to have this journeyman’s sense of things. You have to have this very well-rounded understanding of the world in order to design for it. And, you know, once we clear those hurdles, it becomes a bit easier. But generally, it still requires explanation every step of the way.

What would you say are some of the benefits to doing work in rural places?

Well, I would say some of the benefits are that, if you look at a rural community as a blank canvas, then there’s a lot of opportunity to do cool things there. It’s very much a playground to define and shape, and a fun one, right? But also it brings new thinking to rural areas. Urban centers are considered more progressive and Democratic for obvious reasons. Rural centers are considered to be more conservative and Republican, for obvious reasons. There are rural areas that are extremely progressive and Democratic. Right? Just like how there are urban centers that are conservative and Republican. It’s not one way or the other. And I think in some rural communities, there’s a lot of opportunity to create progress, not political progress, but just thinking progress, cultural progress. Some of that manifests through design, and not just graphic design, but design.
thinking, design strategy, creative placemaking. Adding a splash of color to the light posts in your small Main Street could add an entirely new dimension and personality to a place. So design has some very deliberate and precise abilities to change people and the places that they live and thrive in. I found that most of the communities that I’ve worked in are very accepting of design as an agent for change, especially in rural areas that don’t see change frequently, if at all. They’re very much interested in that.

At that point, it transcends political parties. It transcends political ideologies. That’s like the perfect storm and the best way possible, when design can be used to elevate beyond personal politics and really be used as a transformative agent for change and most people being willingly accepting of that.

Recently, I created a survey because in my thesis, I wanted to base a lot of the things I was talking about on perspectives from rural places. I want to ask people how they felt about the places where they live, how they felt that art should be supported, if so, and all that. And so coming out of some of those answers, I looked at a lot of themes that people were commonly talking about in rural places in terms of what made their place good or what made them able to support the arts, or maybe what were barriers to that. And so some of the themes that came up in terms of like the strength of a rural place was a “sense of community.” “We all feel like family, we know everyone,” things like that. One of the things that came up often surprised me, because I thought that funding would be a big theme, where people are going to say, “well, we don’t really have a lot of money to do it.” They didn’t really talk about funding or affordability as much as they talked about just community interest in general. It was almost like they thought, “you know, this is a great idea, but our community just won’t support it.” So is community interest and involvement something that you see happening in the work that you’re doing, maybe in bigger ways than it might otherwise?

It is absolutely critical to the work that I’m doing. So with my design practice, Plus Public, we front-end all of our work with research. So the thinking here is, if my partner, Kent and I are going to come into a...
community and use visual design and design thinking to create radical transformations of a place, and this work is supported by taxpayer dollars, we need to make sure that every single decision that we make is justified by the public. So we come into a community, we put out advertisements for focus groups and we ask questions. We put out surveys. We try to collect as much information as humanly possible, and then synthesize all of that, analyze it, and develop a creative brief out of that, but also some other learning documents.

[25:13]
So if we're being hired to make a logo, well, we want the community to help us design that. Strategically, this is best because it’s not like we’re coming in as carpetbaggers and we’re just making a thing and leaving. We want to work with people to help them make the thing that will best represent them. Any other process would be invalid, in my opinion. So we work with the community and if we survey 100 people and in that survey they say, well, we want the color red in our logo, then, damn it, they're getting red.

[25:55]
They know their places much more than I ever will. No amount of research will ever give me that level of intimate lived experience. So we listen to it. And ultimately, at the end, what we discover is that people are pretty satisfied with the work that we do because they had a hand in shaping it. And the one sort of deviation here is that this whole process is for the community, built by the community, but they’re using our expertise as designers to focus that lens. So if they say red, my partner and I are going to look at that and say, “what shade of red? Let’s really get into the fine details of that and ask those important if technical questions and pull those truths out and then proceed accordingly.” It’s critical to our work. We won’t do any work for a community without that component. And part of our pitch to our municipal clients is that you’re going to get information from us through this process that you would have to hire a research firm to do so.

[27:24]
You’re actually killing two birds with one stone. You’re getting a full researched agenda and reporting on top of getting design deliverables. So they can utilize that research in their other areas of interest, were it for transportation or infrastructure or community development, economic development. It all correlates.
So I know we've talked about Plus Public before and I know a little bit about it, but just for having it recorded and in this interview, can you kind of just tell a little bit about what Plus Public does?

Sure. Plus Public is a communications, design, and research agency where we work with communities in revival, specifically Midwest communities, small town municipalities, to create branded communication platforms. This includes new branding systems, websites, social media strategies and implementation. We essentially are positioning ourselves to be the in-house marketing department for any town, village, city or borough. So that’s essentially what we do and our work is front-ended with research in order to be justified relative to taxpayer accountability. We are a B corporation (a benefit corporation), so we are mandated to provide benefit to society through our work. In some cases, this mandates that we give back X amount of hours in gratis or pro bono work, or we make significant donations towards public benefit. So we hew as closely to a non-profit as you can get while still having a for-profit structure to our business organization. On the periphery of that, we are close to deciding on whether we want to be a full blown non-profit with this work, so we’ll see. Some of the feedback that we’ve gotten from some of our municipal nonprofit clients, is that our sales pitch basically is palatable and perfectly in line with expectations, but we might be able to do better work if we were a full 501(C)(3).

In terms of some of the classroom experiences either with Youngstown DesignWorks or with the brand management class, can you think of a project that has been most successful, that has just went exceptionally well in terms of how people have received it and the outcomes? And if so, what would that be?

Well, with DesignWorks, without a doubt that would be the City of You project where we re-branded the city of Youngstown. Not to get too into the woods, but this was a five year long project. Extremely successful. We received a $107,000 implementation grant. I was able to employ my students. We were able to do some amazing work in the community implementing this brand over a five year period. We received a Best of
Marketing award from the Ohio Economic Development Association. And I received the 2019 Ohio Governors Award in the Arts, which is one of the highest arts honors in the state, for my personal work on that. So, I mean, there was extremely amazing outcomes. I got a research award from my university, and I was able to present on the City of You re-branding at over a dozen conferences. I’m still talking about it to this day, actually, people still approach me to talk about this project. And then the City of You project was really the catalyst after we won that marketing award from the OEDA. That was a catalyst for starting Plus Public. So I keep getting returns on that work and the students, they do as well. Like I said, most of them got jobs before they graduated. If they were involved with the City of You project, that spoke very well to their character, their talent. I had a lot of students get jobs based off of that. The Hermitage project, because of COVID, you know, wiped out all opportunity for the students to present their work to the mayor and his staff. And really, there is not a lot of outcomes from that, other than I’m going to be doing the work for Hermitage myself. The Hermitage people said, “if it has to end, fine, but we want to keep it going. And if that means we have to hire you to do it, then so be it.” I’m good with that.

[33:23]

RM You talked a lot about students getting jobs before they graduated. This kind of work that students are doing, have you seen that affect their perspectives on rural places or maybe the type of work they want to do?

[33:42]

RT Yes

[33:44]

RM OK, how so?

[33:45]

RT Well, with the Hermitage project, I had one student very matter of factly tell me that he wants to get into travel and tourism marketing because of that project. Now, whether or not that student is doing that, I have no idea. But in the Youngstown context, I had some students that moved away and they’re trying to do a branding piece for their new residents wherever they’re living or they’re getting more involved in civic and community efforts. I can’t say I know of any students that are explicitly doing this type of work, but I know that they all know that being able
to design a logo or wayfinding system or whatever for a city, borough, town, village, municipality, is absolutely on the table. They recognize that as a viable place: a viable type of client to pursue.

[34:54] 
RM That’s great.

[34:59] 
RT I had one student, [name removed]. She graduated and she ended up working for a community development corporation because of her City of You work. And she was there for a year and migrated on to something else. And another student [name removed] who actually followed in her footsteps and took her job. And he was there for two years and he was also doing work on City of You. So there are some more established outcomes there.

[35:31] 
RM OK. So this is pretty much the questions that I had. Is there anything I haven’t asked about the work or rural places you might like to include?

[35:45] 
RT Well, I would say some things for you to think about are: a lot of rural communities feel like they have all the opportunity in the world. And they may feel like they communicate that opportunity to the rest of the world. They may also feel that no one is listening. So when you come into a rural community and you actually say, “I’m listening to you,” that’s transformative for them. Suddenly someone gives a ****. And whomever that person is, if they’re really good, especially if they’re empathetic, if they have empathy, they’re going to be able to do some amazing work in a rural community.

[36:38] 
But not everyone has the patience for that because it’s work that largely falls on you. The challenge there is you want to work with the people in that community to do anything. But they may not have the skills, the understanding, even the awareness of what you do and how you do it. And the additional layer to that is if you are the outsider, you will always be seen as the outsider. There will be some people that will be like, “this guy’s carpetbagging, he’s just coming in, taking opportunity, making something and then leaving. What’s going to happen to this dude once we’re done?” And my goal has always been, “I want you to think of me as
your neighbor by the time we’re done with this work, and I don’t want
to go away. But if I have to, I want you to think of me as your neighbor.
I want you to know that I have as much of an understanding about this
place and the soul of it, as much as I can possibly get.” Respect.

[37:50]
So that makes a huge difference. Approach is everything. You have to
talk the talk, walk the walk, and what you say is just as important as how
you say it. And what’s really most important is that: if you seem to be
listening, if it looks like you’re listening, you actually need to be listening.
If you placate or condescend, it’s done. Small towns: they talk, they all
know each other, and word of mouth is crippling if it’s negative, right?

[38:25]
You really need to understand why you have a dog in that race. If it’s so
hard to work in a rural community, why do it? And the thing is, it’s not
hard if you know how to manage yourself and expectations and work
with people and be human centered. If you’re coming in just [to] make
a thing and leave, then your intentions are not pure. If anything, they’re
completely egocentric. You’re making a thing so you can take pictures
of it and brag to other people. You may never go back there for another
20 years. The relationships that I develop with the communities that I
work with, I want them to continue to work with me. I want to be a part
of that community. I want to be able to go to Hermitage 10-12 times a
year and work with those folks. Places like that are a part of my legacy
and where I grew up. And I understand them. It takes a lot of patience to
work with rural communities.

[39:33]
And just because they’re rural, doesn’t mean that they don’t have
resources and capital to build amazing things. You’d be surprised that
most of them do. They just don’t know. They just put the money into
other things. So, for example, Hermitage. Is marketing a part of their
budget? No. Do they make several million dollars a year from their
tax base? Yeah. They could easily drop $50,000, $100,000, $200,000
into their marketing budget. They’ve never had the need and they
never understood how that works. So why would they put money into
marketing? So the resources are there. You just you have to know the
systems. You have to know how government works. You have to know
how people work within government and how budgets are set and how
they’re ratified and how laws are made. As a designer, it’s a pretty cool thing for a community to have to pass a law just to make your project happen. That’s happened a few times, and I thought that was awesome. There is a lot of parliamentary procedure and there’s some politics involved, but it can really all work out.

RT And, you know, for me, I just wish I had the availability and the resources to do this at a greater scale. For as much opportunity as there is and as much money as there is, one of the things that governments lack are the people to do the work like Hermitage. They’ve straight up said, “we need a marketing person to work with us on the ground. We don’t need a consultant. We need a marketing employee of the government to do this work.” But they can’t sustain that. So they look to vendors like me. Let’s put it this way. If I said I can come in and do the work for $50,000. They would say, add another $50,000 to it and give us someone that can be here permanently. And we’ll pay you one to two times more just to have that person here than we would, rather than employ them underneath the government. So there are opportunities like that, that I’m really interested in, and it just takes time. I have to cultivate these leads. I have to have a lot of meetings. And, the onboarding process can take it. I mean, Liberty Township, Ohio. [...] we started that in February of 2019. We finished it... September, 2019. Four months of that was just getting through the contract phase and the pitch phase and public meetings. As a business model, that is not financially sustainable. In our current form, it is because we’re so low stakes. But if we wanted to deploy nationally, like, we would have to have a huge war chest just to pay these people to sit, to pay our employees to sit around and wait.

RT And you layer in the pandemic into this? Communities aren’t putting money into marketing right now. They are if they’re really gearing up to have to have a huge release after the pandemic is gone or lifts or cities open back up or whatever. But for the most part, they’re putting their money into pandemic remediation, which is absolutely appropriate. So we get this... right before the pandemic, we had a lot of momentum. We were doing great work. Pandemic hits and it stops. The only thing that we have going on right now is Hermitage. And the only reason that project is happening is because they’ve already committed the budgetary money. They can’t change it. Unless it was like an extreme emergency, which it’s not. So, yeah. So that’s what I would add.
Interview with Herb Peterson, Co-Founder of Marion Design Company

Interviewer: Rachel Melton
June 16, 2020
Conducted via Zoom
Acronyms: HP: Herb Peterson, RM: Rachel Melton

[00:06]
RM I’m working on my thesis in art and design in rural places, so it’s not specifically design, but I’m kind of including the two together. It’s more about creative initiatives, opportunities ranging from studio art, to art education, to design. And I’m doing this because I grew up in a rural place. I’m from Tennessee. So I lived there my entire life. And I was involved in rural arts engagement in undergrad and I loved it. And so I decided to do my thesis on that. The reason that I ended up here wanting to talk to you with Marion design studio and others was, I did a survey of people, mostly living in rural places that came from seven different states. It was a smaller sample, about 60 people total, just mostly from art supporters gathering their perspectives and opinions on how the arts are supported in their communities, what they would like to see differently. And so that kind of became the structure of the middle of my thesis. And so I’m looking at themes that came out of that survey. And now I want to say, OK, here’s what people in rural places would like to see. Here’s the issues that they see. Here’s the benefits. And here’s some case study examples of how artists and designers are working in rural places to solve that.

[01:40]
HP That’s very cool. Can I ask you, when you said you were part of kind of arts initiatives in undergrad in the rural community...what did that look like for you?

[01:56]
RM Oh, it was super cool. I went to the University of Tennessee at Martin. And Martin is a small rural town of maybe ten to twelve thousand people. And the state system, University of Tennessee, has a branch in Martin. I was in graphic design, but our department, Visual and Theater Art included graphic design, art, education, studio art, and theater and dance all together in one department.
[2:31]
HP  Wow.

[02:32]
RM  Very compact. But all the students knew each other and got along well. So there is a student organization in that department that is student organized, student funded by donations. It’s not really tied to class work or anything like that. It’s all volunteer based. And they work to basically promote their own artistic development and also community development through service learning, through educational programming, department events. And it’s involving theater, dance, art, everybody. So we painted murals. We did educational days for local kids.

[03:13]
HP  Cool.

[03:13]
RM  We did free graphic design projects, just a ton of stuff all the time. It was awesome.

[03:21]
HP  That’s really great. Yeah. I’m always curious to hear what that looks like for other folks that have had experiences working in the arts or working in design, especially in a rural context, because there’s a lot of amazing folks out there doing great things in it. I feel like I’ve seen so many differing examples, so, yeah, it’s cool.

[03:45]
RM  I’m actually planning to write about that. So in my case, study examples, I want to use one from an education perspective. So I have someone who teaches through service learning, I want to use a business or nonprofit perspective. And then I want to use a volunteer perspective and I’m going to use LSA as the volunteer perspective.

[04:06]
HP  Yeah.

[04:07]
RM  From that.
Wow. Cool. That’s great. Well, what can I tell you?

Well okay, so I know a little bit about Marion Design Company from what I’ve read online, but I was hoping you could give me maybe a little bit more of an introduction to what you guys do, specifically. And kind of if it’s more design related or design research or maybe it’s all of it? Maybe we could start there.

Yeah. Excellent. I have to let you know, I have two little ones that I’m actually... my wife is also in a meeting right now. So the likelihood of them just kind of coming in and coming out is pretty high. We absolutely hate the TV, but boy, does it become like an important tool when you have multiple meetings. [...] That’s what we’ve learned from Corona, is just this whole working from home thing, oh, my goodness.

So. Marion Design Company kind of has... First and foremost, I think our website’s terrible because it doesn’t really quite tell the breadth of what we do. It is maybe like a little bit of a glimpse to it, but a lot of the work is broken into...The mission is pretty solid. What it does is it brings students from various universities, the university that I’m attached to, in particular, into the rural community where they work side by side with community members on a wide variety of design needs. And that can look like design research where we actually are helping other organizations understand maybe more efficient or effective ways of doing their work or working alongside individuals that are fighting against systemic issues. When you think about the rural community, we, like most across the country, we’re facing multigenerational poverty, we’re experiencing multiple food deserts. We have issues... the amount of opioid and drug use, systemic racism, which is a big one, obviously. Even more so for Marion where I’m located, because we’re known as one of the last public places a lynching happened above the Mason-Dixon line. In 1930, ten to fifteen thousand people gathered on our square where a lynching of two men took place with the potential of a third who actually was let go at the last minute, which is kind of an unbelievable story. But since then, nothing has actually happened. There’s no marker. There’s no visible healing or a place for people to reconcile. So the community, while
as 29,980 people, I mean, we're just kind of at that tip of the marker, I think, for rural, which we're geographically really rural... is divided.

[07:45]

HP

We from the very beginning, saw that there was a need to be able to offer design services from a wide variety of avenues and to educate students through that experience and then also empower a community through that experience at the same time. Well, it could be research, it could also be applied, so maybe we're working on, I don't know, a local campaign for the City of Marion, working with the mayor or working with the people that are part of PR and marketing. Or maybe we're also designing for... I'm trying to think...Right now we're helping research the history of motorcycles in our community. This is a really fun one for me, just in the sense that there's an organization that has created an event called Hog Days. And the term hog, as in motorcycle, right, was apparently coined in Marion, Indiana due to a Harley Davidson race that happened way back in the day. And the winner of the race received a pig from a farmer. So people once a year, kind of gather. Thousands of people in bands and motorcycles show up and whatever. It's a big event. But the organization that put that on has realized that they've really lost kind of an understanding of the history. So now we're designing for an experience. We're designing for how to educate the populace that kind of come to that event. That's just like a random one of these kind of crazy kind of projects that we do. Then, well, you have the really wicked problems that range in kind of the depths that I was talking about, rural issues and opportunities. And then you have these commercial applications, kind of like what I just shared, then we have kind of our own self curated projects and those kind of look like anything from mural projects to placemaking and place keeping to very random, crazy things. Like we have a project called Marion Cinema House where we turn our space into a giant movie theater and we invite the community in for free, offer popcorn and everything like that. And then we film some kind of either documentary or film that can really educate or empower the community. And then also we have a discussion about it or maybe there will be some kind of informed action. We did a whole thing called the Marion Maid. We’ve done it twice now because it was received so well. That was a giant reuse, kind of repurpose rethinking, fast fashion. And helping the community to design their own outfits, and so we put on this humongous fashion show using a space downtown that wasn’t really used publicly as it should be. Because it’s an alleyway. That first time was
standing room only. The second time it more than doubled. And it was kind of crazy to see how many people loved the experience of watching this massive fashion show take place in a rural community, with really crazy, reused threads. So in that project, what made it really exciting is you have college designers and art students who are working with local high school students, who are being taught by women and men, I think, who are part of the Quilters Hall of Fame, who know how to sew and how to use all these amazing tools. And so there’s this kind of vertical learning that’s taking place where you got someone who’s in their 60s, maybe retired, teaching a college student who’s teaching a high school student, who’s then working with a community member to outfit them because it was the community who became the model.

[11:45]

\textit{HP}  
So very fun to watch and experience. That project was totally about being present and bringing people together. And there will be more, and then obviously there was a learning component to it, but very much just in the nature of “how do we utilize creativity in our design abilities to enact presence and being community, being humans with one another?” So that’s kind of the gamut. We go from really hard core doing both qualitative and quantitative research methods where we’re working alongside a variety of individuals in our community, to putting on fashion shows. Which is unbelievable.

[12:36]

\textit{RM}  
Yeah, you said that much of this work is with students. Is that a main part of it or are there design professionals that are working hand in hand with students, or how does that work?

[12:52]

\textit{HP}  
Yes. That’s good. The students are a massive, important, massive role. They play a massive role in the whole organization and so do professionals. So we have multiple professional designers who work full time as designers. They work full time elsewhere. Then they also work contractually, almost like a freelance position for us, where they take on projects and then they work with students underneath them as teams that they build, almost kind of like Pentagram meets IDEO, if you think about like a business model. So the cool thing about that is these are individuals that want to give back to the community, but then they also are interested in furthering along the mission of Marion Design Co.
Not only are they using their design skills to do something good that’s different than their nine to five, but then they’re also empowering and teaching students, which is kind of a really cool thing. And then they’re like part of the kind of ethos of what we do as a whole.

[14:05]

**HP**

That’s been really great to watch. Then we have educators that kind of come down also, and they kind of will either sit in on a project or they’ll do a project with us. Because of the positive response of Marion Design Co. for the past handful of years, it’s now started to influence other faculty and other areas at the university. So we have a psychologist who started URG, which is the Urban Research Group where he’s taking his senior psychology students and they’re doing like quantitative research analysis for multiple nonprofits that are trying to serve the community. And we’re like, “oh, this is great. You’re an arm that we don’t necessarily need to do anymore! So, okay, you guys have that information. What if you bring that into our conversation and we can kind of think about this from a design opportunity?” In what ways might we drive sustainability or efficiency or create more of a positive effect for individuals in our communities that are doing really great things? So to me, that’s an exciting kind of...as you watch growth take place. I don’t know if I originally had that in my head thinking that that would happen, but it’s cool. Then people are like, “well, if they did it, we could do something too. Let’s do it in our way that makes sense to us.” Yeah.

[15:38]

**RM**

So you co-founded Marion, am I right?

[15:46]

**HP**

Yeah. So social impact work has been kind of part of my M.O. for a very long time. I worked in advertising and branding for quite some time as a professional once I was out of school and then somehow started finding my way to helping local non-profits and people that had missions that were really valuable and that they wanted to do good but maybe didn’t know quite how to. That was like pro bono or low bono work and stuff like that. And then it started to move into more facilitation roles where could help maybe teach you design thinking or ways of employing design in your practice that would change how you view what it is that you do. That jumpstarted me, and when I took my position here at the university, I immediately knew, because we were coming from L.A., that one: there
was a way to engage design on a level that the university had not experienced before. So I mentioned it to a colleague who also had come from L.A., funny enough. Both of us are from Indiana. So it was weird that we were totally in another kind of context, but then felt called and led back to Indiana. Immediately it was like, “what would it look like if we had an environment where we were all teaching from our and practicing at the same time from our strengths? And then we bring students underneath each of us? What would that look like?” My colleague is a digital designer and that’s his kind of world: UI/UX. Mine is a social impact designer and researcher. And then another colleague whose background is interior architecture and then another colleague who works on theater and a wide variety of build skills. Well, then it happened the first summer, we had 17 students that signed up to be with us. Everybody was volunteer. No one got paid. We didn’t know where to put anybody. We had no place to go. And immediately, as we started to tell our story and share that we were going to do this pretty big research project for the city of Marion, that’s what jumpstarted us. We got one project to get us going. Then, boom, it was like next thing you know, the community was like, “oh, well, we had this bank, it’s been sitting here vacant for a handful of years. What could you do with that?” We were like, “A Bank? Are you serious? Of course we could do something with that.” And then immediately we’re like “look at this big wall right through the bank that could have a big banner on it that says: you are the answer.”

So we immediately became present downtown and I think what was kind of part of that, the impulse to create something like this, was we were also part of a very privileged private university that for years has been divided and not connected to its community. It’s caused a substantially large amount of hurt. And there are many of us that are amazing schools that are part of rural communities, and they unfortunately have built walls around the institution. It’s crazy, but if you cross the main where the university’s northern road is, if you want to think about the division line between the university and the community, the average household income goes from forty seven thousand, [inaudible] to like twenty four.

Whoa.
Right? You know what I mean? And the demographic radically changes. So it’s really super, super visible. The disparity between privilege and poverty, when you look at the university from kind of just a visual way of experiencing it. I actually felt almost like there was a contradiction, you know, like how can you be an institution that claims to be world focused and wanting to empower people and do good, but the community feels like you’ve kind of left them in the dust? So we just did it. We didn’t ask for permission, by the way, we didn’t tell our bosses or get approval from the dean or we didn’t get any approval from the IRB at first. And then, you know, we just showed up, got keys to a bank and then made something happen. To me, that was kind of the ethos spark that allowed it to be something more than what we even thought we knew that we were getting ourselves into.

Right. And do you operate on a donation based model? You said at first students weren’t paid, and now you have people contracting and freelancing.

Right, yeah. So at first everybody volunteered, which was pretty awesome, but also isn’t necessarily the best way to explain how much we see value in a person. And so as we were able to start to take on projects that had budgets assigned to them, that allowed us to start to actually create a way to pay the interns and pay the students that were part of the process. So that kind of grew naturally. Then we started getting grants and that helped. So when you start obtaining larger grants than you can kind of almost secure student wages. So all the work has kind of been about that, too, in an interesting way. If one is empowering the students to see that they’re valued in a place such as Marion. Also paying them more than the average student wage at the university has been kind of cool, which we got into a lot of trouble with.

But we’re like, "look, you know, in the industry, they’d be making way more than what we’re even able to pay them right now. But at least we’re showing them that they really do have value." And the value that they’re offering the community is substantial. So that’s that’s been really exciting. So now, yeah, we have we have a budget and we have money
coming in. And we have to be very careful with how we spend like any
other kind of group of people. It’s awesome because we were able to hire
and have a wide variety of different types of students and contractors.

[23:09]

RM I saw the intern list and it was so cool to me how there was an intern for
every different specific thing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that before. It’s
usually just like an intern that does a bunch of different things. And that
was so specific.

[23:23]

HP Yeah. And we’ve done it a few different ways. Every summer we kind of
rethink how we go about it. Obviously this summer was really weird for
us just because of working remotely and thinking about the pandemic
that we’re all under. So we have one person working from Pennsylvania,
one person in West Lafayette, Indiana. One person in Michigan. Three
people from Marion, and then essentially the leadership, so it’s kind of
amazing, you know, that we’re all we’re still doing things even though
we’re kind of all separated.

[24:06]

But we’ve been able to really fine tune teams. And I think that’s one of
the ways that we’ve been able to do multiple projects at the same time,
also. When you can kind of pick folks, and we don’t take all designers,
like we take people that are coming from business schools or schools of
communication. I’m trying to give the most divergent person that we’ve
had... We’ve had folks from a lot of differing backgrounds that have
applied, and be part of the team, which to me that is really exciting. And
the students, when they do come in and they become a team, and it’s
different every year because it’s totally dependent on the team, right.
So while it’s selective and there’s an application procedure, we get to
really kind of ask big questions about the why behind your motives and
what pushes you, what keeps you up at night, those kinds of ways of
thinking. And it’s easy. You can kind of go, wow, this person really will
bring something to this team that we’ve not experienced before. We
got to have them, even though they have zero design skills, right, like
that’s okay. Whatever. And I’m always amazed, like we had one person
who was brilliant. Great application, just beautiful person and had a
background in communication. And I think she applied to do, I think, like
strategic marketing or something. And we ended up using her more so as
an illustrator. I walked by her one day in the studio, and I was like, “what are you doing?” She’s like, “oh, I do this, you know, whatever.” “Like, this is amazing work. Why aren’t you, a designer?” And she’s like, “oh, you know, I’ve always wanted to be, but I don’t know. I just didn’t think I really could.” I’m like, “are you crazy?” So we immediately put her on like two design projects. And she’s killed it. We were like, “what, this is awesome!” She ended up writing copy in a way that just blew us out of the water. We were so excited. That’s really fun to experience with students. It’s even more, I think, exciting to watch community kind of come in and learn also alongside them. And what happens is when the student is learning on their own and they’re like kind of like, “is there an answer to any of this?” Well, we’re just in the middle of it. We’re learning as we go. They become more empowered and become leaders in a way that I don’t think they often have maybe considered themselves. Yeah, and they end up teaching the community, which then empowers the community to go on and do really great things. So that’s been really kind of cool to watch.

[27:14]

It’s interesting that you kind of talk about that, because I mentioned doing the survey and getting themes and perspectives. That was kind of how I wanted to do the research, is gather perspectives from people in rural places. And one of the activities that I asked them to do was to select words out of a list that they felt described their community, and also that they felt that other people would use to describe them. And many people, an overwhelming majority of people, in rural places did not use the term artistic or creative to describe themselves. Maybe eight or nine percent. But these same people were expressing support for the arts. They wanted to see more initiatives. They wanted to see [inaudible], and it was such an interesting disconnect, almost as if they were saying, “we want to support the arts. We believe they’re great, they’re wonderful. Creativity is…Let’s do it. But also we’re not the people to do it.” And it kind of came up as a theme throughout the survey that community interest and involvement just… many people felt like it wasn’t there. But it seems like, at least in your case, there’s a lot of community interest and involvement.

[28:26]

Yeah, well, I think those who are new to it come in with a little trepidation or a little kind of anxiety, maybe even, because they don’t quite understand. But we do a substantially large amount of design
thinking where we do sessions with the community. We’ll bring them in, we’ll work with them, we’ll get them brainstorming really big ideas, and then we’ll help visualize or show them how their idea could work and it’s almost like a catch fire at that moment, like “wow, wait, I thought that? I could do that?” They’re like “wait, this is possible.” The stigma of, “oh, I can’t draw a straight line” or “I was never the artistic person, so I can’t think that way” is kind of ridiculous. So putting that power back into their hands. Often it comes from weird places. It’s not from a technical place. It’s often retelling of people’s stories and allowing others to hear a story, that maybe the way they hear it has always been “less than.” But when it flows from another person, it can be actually the opposite. It can be empowering. It can be life giving. And that often will start to create this energy. And it’s like, well, “what do we do with this energy?” Like, well, we could do a mural or we could do this thing over here, we could have 60 year old ladies teaching us how to sew. Anything can come out of that place. And it can also be really strategic from the sense of community development and economic development, economic empowerment.

[30:19]

*HP*

One of the more interesting design thinking sessions we conducted was within our first year. We brought all the administration from the university down, along with the city of Marion mayor, his council, etc., and then a substantially large number of local leaders into our space for our design thinking session. And I don’t know how that even happened, still to this day, how you could get that many people available on one day for four hours. But it happened. And because of that, for the very first time, the university started talking with the leadership of the community, which they had not done forever. And so it allowed dreaming to start to take place. And just that alone is what allowed others that have maybe creative impulses or abilities that have been lying dormant to kind of step in and kind of take a certain role. That’s been really great to watch.

[31:28]

*RM* Yeah. Do you ever experience community members that, well, you said they have some anxiety, because they don’t really understand it, but maybe they’re confused on exactly what you do? Where they might think you’re making art or you’re doing graphic design and they don’t really have the full picture of what it can entail?
Oh, yeah. I mean, continuously. It’s continuous education of what design is or what design could be. And I’m always hesitant to even define design at this point, but explaining to them that it’s more than just logos and posters, that it’s more than aesthetics. You know, when you say, “whoa, so are your community developers?” And we’re like, “yeah.” “Oh, are you architects?” You know? Like people just can’t quite put their finger on it and we’re always like, “sure, yes, maybe, could be. Why not?” We come from this place of “anything is possible.” So it’s the opportunistic kind of ethos of how we use creativity in our design work.

But the mission to serve and help people through all this is really kind of the driver. At the end of the day, it’s still about getting to the heart of the real big issues that we’re all facing as a community and multiple communities. We’re constantly explaining ourselves to people and ushering them in and trying to include them in various ways or connecting them to another entity of folks in the community that we know. That itself has been kind of a beautiful thing too, because I think in many ways we’ve become a resource where...I don’t know what it is. I’ve tried to figure this out for a while, but somehow we’re not the university. But we are. We’re kind of part of the government, but we’re not. We have this great relationship with the mayor and the mayor’s leadership and a lot of leaders in the community, but we’re also people. So we’re on the ground floor kind of fighting the fight. So somehow we’re able to leverage our privilege in all these different kind of capacities and become either voices for others that might not be normally allowed or invited to the table. To remind, “hey, these individuals might need to be here too.” Or we become advocates. Saying, “another person would be better at this than us.” That’s where we get to educate the populace. It’s what we are able to do. But there’s something kind of, from a business model, terrible. Because when you’re talking about a brand and you’re talking about like, people need to know exactly what you do. Like, “I do this one thing. I make coffee mugs.” We’re not that. So there’s always this question mark that kind of lingers over the head of all of us that others project on us.

Through that, people start to define us how they feel like they need to. That’s what I was trying to go with this. And I’m totally okay with that. Whereas if I was working in a different kind of environment, I don’t
know if I would be, because that can be dangerous. When you’re for community and in community and through community, then it’s okay for the community to define it as it needs to be. Not necessarily how you want to choose to define it. There’s an openness to that, that allows it to kind of flex and adapt and pivot when necessary. It’s also incredibly hard to explain to donors.

RM
Yeah, I can imagine. How many projects would you say that you’ve done so far?

[36:23]

HP
Oh my gosh. That’s a good question. We’re in the process of re...Well, they’re not on the website right now. There was a tab for a while where we had some case studies that were up there. But we’re re-going through all of them. We’re on our fifth year. I know we’ve given over a million and a half dollars worth of design work. If I had a number in my head. I don’t know. And I think maybe 50-100 different projects that range in all kinds of scale. So it can be really small like facilitation or like kind of a listening session with community members for doing something big. For two years, we helped rebrand the community, working with the city of Marion. So that was massive, where we surveyed in questions and table focus groups of community members. We did about a third of the population.

[37:57]

RM
Wow.

[37:57]

HP
That’s a lot of input. And then we went through that data. Kind of what you’re doing. What we found was people, 80-90 percent of the individuals that we connected with, always use the word “home” for Marion. It was amazing, but then the second largest used word was...not plagued...cursed.

[38:32]

RM
What was that?

[38:33]

HP
Cursed. Like you’ve been cursed. Like C.U.R.S.E.D. Yeah, talk about a dichotomy, right?
And that was the second most used word?

The most used word is “home.” The next used word was “cursed.” And what we found in that was what we already knew in many ways. Not one person said, you know, “we really need a new logo,” no one said that. And we knew that.

They pointed to systemic issues that I don’t think a lot of times as a whole we have paid attention to. There was an overt sense of trauma that was textbook. Luckily we were able to bring in psychologists to work with us on that, even for the design team, because after days and days and days of inquiry and negative story after negative story, it starts to weigh on you. So at the end of the day, the therapists would come in and be like, “so how does everybody feel?” And just people would, “oh, my gosh,” kind of word vomit out onto the table and then be able to leave the studio that night feeling somewhat okay so that they could come back the next day and continue the work. That was pretty tough. It was pretty tough to hear over and over and over again, “this is how it used to be. It used to work like this”

Were these direct stories that people were telling you? Or were these words that they were selecting, or this was just something that was coming up?

All the above. So the amount of individuals that would come in and just either share direct stories like, “oh, when I was a little kid, this used to be this. And, you know, look, Cross Street used to be that. I used to get my shoes over there and now it’s just an empty, boarded up building.” Even the focus groups and how they would share information. I will be very honest. Out of that came discussion of... well, you know, I had heard about the lynching prior to coming to Marion, but I didn’t know anything about it. I didn’t know the whole deeper kind of story and the division between the families that still exists and what that looked like. Let alone being a white male of privilege, trying to have a conversation about that with someone. That was my first year in. And it knocked me off my
socks, you know, and there were a few times where I had to defend my motives to others that were, I think, in question because they had seen other organizations or people come in and kind of have a savior complex where they’re like, “hey, we’re going to save you.”

[42:02]  
RM  Yeah.

[42:03]  
HP  But my goal is to work alongside you, because this is where I live now and I’m raising my two crazy little boys here. And my wife is part of this place and you matter. And that was kind of crazy. So when you put all that together, we learned so much. Honestly, if you could put it in like categories, I’ll be working on this till the day I’m dead. Literally it’s endless. When you think about everything from reviving historic buildings and kind of revitalization of communities, Main Street infrastructure, to governmental corruption, money issues, crime. There’s an avenue worthy of going into. No matter who you are, you can find a way to serve in this space. Sometimes I think I’m ridiculous because I do somehow truly believe that with the right resources, the right people, with the right attitude, with empathy, there are ways to create positive change. And I think often a good way of doing that is through design.

[43:33]  
So we’re just picking a little bit each time. As much as we can, we just kind of go through it. Now we’ve been able to bring the Equal Justice Initiative to our community, which is amazing. And talking with the community and black leaders, people of color, about what it would be like to have a memorial to the individuals that were lynched so long ago. And we’re part of empowering those folks and helping them do their work and our work together. I think that it’s such a response to the moment and not just the moment, as in the United States moment, but the moment every single day, which is in relation to being present. If you’re present, you’re going to constantly just be almost in reaction to what’s happening around you.

[44:46]  
RM  [If] you had an ideal future for what Marion would look like as a result of this work, what does that look like?
That’s a great question. Yeah. We have this statement that Marion is home to a full and capable community that has been underserved, under-realized and kind of disconnected in itself. Our secondary underbelly mission is to see all those factors happen, to see that it does have everything that it’s always needed. It’s here. To see it be communicated more clearly, to see people have access over ownership, to see us embrace the fact that the blight that exists in our community is a direct result to redlining and racist choices back in the day. To see healing and reconciliation truly transform and take place, to create hope for people, to empower young individuals to become leaders in ways that they’ve never maybe considered themselves, and even more so, to change the face of how we think about what design is and what design looks like.

That’s the romantic idea of what it could look like. The real future is interesting because I think Marion Design Co. is being built to remain sustainable in itself. Part of that is the way it gives back to the community and the way it’s set up now that we’ve kind of slowly, moved it into a place where if I die tomorrow or if I leave or I’m called to to another place, that it can continue to operate the way that it needs to. That it’s not just based off of one person’s ideology or that it’s really a space for community. So I’m excited that we’ve built that into its infrastructure. If I’m honest, I am on a path of handing the baton off to the next individuals, which is exciting.

I’m one of those individuals who... I love to help build and help kind of identify and then connect individuals and kind of build the “what could this look like” and the process and the system. And then once it’s going, I’m kind of like Johnny Appleseed. Like alright, you don’t need me anymore. You’ve got this. You’re good. Kind of slip out the back door while people are celebrating.

So that is happening. And partially because of the influence of what Marion Design Co. has done, so I’m in the process of working with some others across the United States to develop a model that is rooted in the rural. I should sidenote this: I believe, and I’m assuming you’ve probably had a similar experience...Rural communities, one, are on the upswing,
right? People are wanting to move there because it’s cheap and the risk is low. You can do all kinds of stuff. You can get a building for a half- I mean, oh, my gosh, I can’t believe what I own here. Like a 30,000 square foot bank down on the a square. Our house is 2,600 square feet. It’s kind of insane. In L.A., this house is like three million bucks, you know, like here in Indiana, it’s one hundred something thousand dollars, like nothing. It’s kind of amazing that you can do that. You can start something here and be part of something.

[48:57]
But at the same time, because of the lack of substantial concentration of numbers, our flaws, if you will, the human issues that exist in our system are really visible here. We can see it here very clearly. I mean, it’s evident. Racism is evident. Opioid crisis is evident. Blight is evident. Redlining is evident. It is all evident. What’s crazy is that it’s not any different than anywhere else. The problem is we just don’t see it in larger metropolitan or kind of urban environment. Because we can see here, this becomes a great place to be to figure out new ways or new systems and new processes that might help us tackle bigger environments. While it doesn’t always fit, it’s not necessarily like a square to square or circle to circle, there are ways. And I think that’s kind of the interest that I have in that. So we’ve been developing the Rural Institute for Design, which is kind of a grouping of professionals from all over the United States that have this kind of human capacity to empower community in ways of learning how to bring design to people and then people to design so that they can take it and apply it in whatever context is necessary for them. This could this could work in a place that’s in rural Appalachia or in Tennessee or farmland, heartland, to coastal communities that are dealing with watershed issues. That’s kind of the goal. And building teams around that to go into these environments and help support. And part of that is also to help not just support it, but...most individuals that are fighting good fights in these kinds of communities are exhausted and they need someone to just kind of come in and just give them a reprieve. So how do we do that? To bring reprieve to them so that they can be renourished and refueled to keep doing the work that they’re doing. That’s my next my next adventure, which is crazy. Who knows where that will take us.

[51:50] I know of a group called the Citizens Institute...
Yeah, right.

Separate from that, right? It’s not related.

Yeah, absolutely.

Okay.

Right, this is an educational model.

Yeah, that’s really cool. So first of all, thank you. This has been amazing. I have so much I want to write about. […]

[…] I think that we need more folks like yourself who are kind of probing into what creativity, design, looks like in these kinds of places, because […] you now become kind of an advocate to influence others to consider this as a place of being. Part of the other issue that exists, is that there’s been a lot of flight where people have left the rural to go to the bigger places because of opportunity or access. But now coming back, those individuals have the opportunity to be more involved in ways that maybe they’ve never considered. Right now we have more young people in Marion, a lot of people have pointed it to Marion Design Co. being this kind of leader, that are wanting to run for city office. Young people, that are on the Democratic ballot or whatever, just saying, hey, “it shouldn’t always be old white men making choices for us.” It should be people of diverse thought and diverse background and sex and race and everything. And I’m like, “yeah! More power to you.” And you can do that in places like this. So you’re writing and maybe influence and however you choose to put that out there can help that aspect also, which is really exciting.
This research was conducted in compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. IRB protocol forms were approved for the study. Along with the protocols, the following consent forms were created: Documentation of Informed Consent, Consent for Use of Secondary Data, and Documentation of Informed Consent (Online Survey). These forms were distributed to and signed by their respective participants in this research.

**Documentation of Informed Consent**

You are being asked to participate in a voluntary research study. The purpose of this study is to gather opinions from rural community members on their involvement in the arts and design as well as to gather opinions from artists and designers on their experience working in rural places. There are no anticipated risks greater than that encountered in everyday life.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign | School of Art + Design
Rachel Melton | Research Team Member | rbm2@illinois.edu
Lisa Mercer | Principal Investigator | lmercer@illinois.edu

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in a 30-45 minute interview. The interview will be recorded and notes will be taken during the interview. You may be asked to be a part of a group interview with others who have participated in your work in rural places.

2. Share examples of your work and student work on community projects.

3. Share photo or video examples of your projects in rural communities.

I understand that I will be asked a series of questions about my opinion on rural communities as well as on the arts and cultural events within
these places. I may be asked to contribute photos and or video of my experience working with rural places as well as supporting documents and records which quantitatively demonstrate my work.

I understand that I will not be offered payment for participating in this study and that my participation is entirely voluntary. If at any time, I decide to withdraw participation, I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study I may contact Rachel Melton at rbm2@illinois.edu or Lisa Mercer at lmerc@illinois.edu. My participation whether or not to participate, or to withdraw after beginning participation, will not affect my current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The researchers also have the right to stop my participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in my best interests, or if I were to object to any future changes that may be made in the study plan. I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, I may contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Faculty, students, and staff who may see your information will maintain confidentiality regarding personal identifiers to the extent of federal and state laws and university policies. Personal identifiers will not be published or presented without your permission.

I have read and understand the above consent form. I certify that I am 18 years old or older. By signing this form, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this study.

☐ By checking this box, I certify that my name and occupation may be used in written and published research in connection to my interview and work.

☐ By checking this box, I certify that my interview may be recorded for accurate representation of data.

____________________________________  __________________
Name       Date

____________________________________
Signature
Consent for Use of Secondary Data
The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign | School of Art + Design
Rachel Melton | Research Team Member | rbm2@illinois.edu
Lisa Mercer | Principal Investigator | lmercer@illinois.edu

You are being asked to contribute secondary data for research surrounding the topic of arts engagement in rural places. The purpose of this study is to gather opinions from rural community members on their involvement in the arts and design as well as to gather opinions from artists and designers on their experience working in rural places.

By signing this form, I agree that data representing my work in rural places may be analyzed and represented in this research. I understand that the data requested may include and is not limited to:

1. Records of hourly involvement and service on artistic and creative projects in rural places

2. Examples of curriculum, prompts, lesson plans, or design briefs used in projects which I have completed or in which am currently involved.

3. Samples of my work or of my students work.

4. Photo and/or video documentation of the community and places in which I have facilitated art or design based projects.

I understand that I will not be offered payment for participating in this study and that my participation is entirely voluntary. If at any time, I decide to withdraw participation, I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study I may contact Rachel Melton at rbm2@illinois.edu or Lisa Mercer at lmercer@illinois.edu. My decision whether or not to participate, or to withdraw after beginning participation, will not affect my current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The researchers also have the right to stop my participation in this study without my consent if they believe it is in my best interests, or if I were to object to any future changes that may be made in the study plan. I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, I may contact the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Faculty, students, and staff who may see your information will maintain confidentiality regarding personal identifiers to the extent of federal and state laws and university policies. Personal identifiers will not be published or presented without your permission. I have read and understand the above consent form. I certify that I am 18 years old or older. By signing this form, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this study.

☐ By checking this box, I certify that my name and occupation may be used in written and published research in connection to my interview and work.

____________________________________
Name

____________________________________
Signature

____________________________________
Date
**Arts in Rural Places**  
**Documentation of Informed Consent (Online Survey)**  

You are being asked to participate in a voluntary research study. The purpose of this study is to analyze the opinions of community members on the quality of life in the places in which they live, as well as how they feel that these places support the arts. Participating in this study will involve an interview with the option to follow up with personal notes from your interaction with rural places. There are no anticipated risks greater than that encountered in everyday life. This interview will be recorded for accurate representation of data.

**Principal Investigator**  
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U of I Extension  
The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
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**What procedures are involved?**  
You will be asked a series of questions about your opinion on rural places and the quality of life in rural communities as well as your opinion on the arts and cultural events within these places. You will also be given the option to record your experiences in rural places over multiple days.

**Will my study-related information be kept confidential?**  
Faculty, staff, students, and others with permission or authority to see your study information will maintain its confidentiality to the extent permitted and required by laws and university policies. Your age range and education level may remain connected to the data. Identifiable
information will be removed from the data prior to publication of the research results.

Will I be reimbursed for any expenses or paid for my participation in this research?
You will not be offered payment for participating in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?
If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate, or to withdraw after beginning participation, will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests, or you were to object to any future changes that may be made in the study plan.

Will data collected from me be used for any other research?
Your de-identified interview information could be used for future research without additional informed consent.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
If you have questions about this project, you may contact Rachel Melton at [personal cell phone] or rbm2@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

☐ I have ready and understand the above consent form. I certify that I am 18 years old or older. By signing this form, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this study.

____________________________________  __________________
Name       Date
APPENDIX D: SURVEY DATA

Primary Research data from the survey conducted at the beginning of this study is shown below. As much of the word-sorting and related content has already been discussed, this section only shows answers from the open answer section of the survey relating to community strengths, weaknesses, and participants’ opinion on arts support. For the sake of space, only results from West Tennessee are shown. The information shown in this section includes direct quotes from community members and is unedited.

What do you believe to be the greatest strengths of the place in which you live?

Participant #1  Sense of community even when you aren’t from here.

Participant #2  the university community, which bleeds into the town community. They value services such as the public library and support arts programs as well as athletics.

Participant #3  the people

Participant #4  Even though I live in a rural community, being close to friends, our place of worship, access to arts in our community and the surrounding communities is very important. Also the friendliness of small towns.

Participant #5  It is a safe environment where people can develop themselves to the degree that they wish to be improved. People can be educated and develop careers of their choosing. People can worship as they want and not be ridiculed for it.

Participant #6  I love all the green spaces we have. Lots of room to get outside, get some fresh air and be active. The people are nice too. This town feels more like a family than a town. There’s not a lot of us who are active in the community but those who are seem to be there for each other as much as we can be.

Participant #7  Small town friendliness and southern hospitality.
Participant #8  Accessibility, proximity

Participant #9  Living in a rural community with a small population provides more opportunities for locals to be involved and make a difference in their community. It is a great place to raise kids because it is safe and tranquil.

Participant #10  Community

Participant #11  lower crime rate, the university

Participant #12  The community and the people who live here. It is small but a vibrant area.

Participant #13  Sense of community, fiber internet, strong local business community, higher education facility in our community

Participant #14  Higher education facilities and associated activities. A caring community. Green spaces and groups active in promoting and caring for the same.

Participant #15  Safety and community as well as access to education and places of worship.

Participant #16  great housing at not exorbitant prices, cost of living is relatively low, not a lot of people/traffic congestion, easier pace, lots of nature

Participant #17  Friendly people, safe community, reasonable cost of living

Participant #18  Agriculture, opportunities for those with initiative, good school system

Participant #19  I am surrounded by some great people who want to create change in our community, but change should not be this difficult to evoke. Civic leaders and city councils need to be more progressive in exploring creative ways for citizens and towns to work together to create incentives for living here in order to help make rural life all it can be. How can we attract and keep people in our area? Martin seems to have done this more effectively than Union City to be sure but Martin still needs more work as well.

Participant #20  The University of Tennessee at Martin, strong local leadership on Martin, low cost of living, surprisingly good healthcare
Participant #21  Strong community support for local businesses and education

Participant #22  Our rural community is anchored by a four year college. Small business is promoted heavily.

Participant #23  1. Safety  
2. University... university influence, university facilities, university people resources
3. Municipal Recreational Facilities
4. A revitalized downtown

Participant #24  No answer

Participant #25  Community events

Participant #26  Cultural Facilities with UTM. I am able to attend events and play violin in the orchestra. Community, church events. Family close by and many friends in various activities.

Participant #27  A strong sense of community.

Participant #28  We experience a casual way of life.

Participant #29  Growing economy, Caring community members/partners.

Participant #30  Affordable housing, safety, community events

Participant #31  Higher Education Facilities
Community events/activities
Local Law Enforcement

Participant #32  Sense if community

Participant #33  Safety and sense of community

Participant #34  Sense of community and pride of place.

Participant #35  Low cost of living, access to affordable higher education & cultural events that come with higher ed
It is close to a public university and the community support each other.

Community

The greatest strengths is the community activity in and involvement around the town. Also, the university being close to downtown is an amazing asset to the community. Also, Martin has a lovely downtown area and is continuing to expand its resources for its citizens to include new things such as the updated police station and new community library.

Diversity with overall close knit community

Low crime

Safety/Law Enforcement, Low Cost of Living and Access to surrounding amenities that are within an hours drive or less from our community.

A sense of community among residents, quiet nature

What do you believe to be the greatest weaknesses of the place in which you live?

Lack of diversity. Specifically in the working class.

Money. We can not raise funds for things such as a concert hall or the last little bit for a new library.

public transit, availability of goods and services, cultural enrichment opportunities

The demise of small town places of business, such as clothing stores, etc.

We do not have adequate access to broadband.

There’s just not enough people here to build a truly thriving art community. We do our best to plan art events in the community but if we only get a handful of people we consider it a decent turn out because there’s just not enough people here. Us getting 10 people to show up to an event is probably equivalent to a larger city having 50 people show
up. This isn’t just art events though, I’ve seen the library host what should be fun literature events that only 5 people show up to. However other events like food truck nights are immensely popular with hundreds of people turning out for them sometimes. So the people are here we just have to figure out how to get them to come to our events. We also don’t have an art supply store which we desperately need. There also aren’t enough jobs here, art world or not. I know people with masters degrees working minimum wage retail jobs because that’s all they can find here. And due to the fact that we’re so far away from larger cities like Nashville and Memphis this is an easy town to get stuck in. If you don’t have enough money to move to the larger city you can’t take a job there. It’s like a chicken and egg scenario. This is true in the art scene too. It’s expensive and hard to find the time to travel to Memphis or Nashville to network in person with artists and galleries in those cities. A task as simple as going to an art crawl becomes a huge task. Personally, I have to get a sitter for my dog, make sure I have the day off work and make sure I have enough money for gas. It’s a huge ordeal. And even if you do get a chance to it’s hard to stay an active member of their art community when you live so far away. Bottom line, a lot of people who live here are poor because there’s just not a lot of good jobs and without money you can’t leave here to get to the better jobs and opportunities.

Participant #7
Small town means less experienced/available law enforcement. This means more crime/drugs possibility because of less enforcement of laws.

Participant #8
Cultural hubs, entertainment diversity

Participant #9
The lack of public transportation is key to creating more accessible opportunities for all.

Participant #10
Distance to other larger cities

Participant #11
poor schools, poor economy, low literacy, no infrastructure for individuals to live a healthy lifestyle (no sidewalks, no green spaces, no rec facilities other than organized sports, no options in restaurants for vegans and almost nothing for vegetarians, grocery stores do not have quality fresh produce), no public transportation, no facilities for quality entertainment.

Participant #12
Economically there are weaknesses. Not much industry in the area and there are limited services available (shopping, dining, etc).
Participant #13: Housing. We need more development to accommodate growth.

Participant #14: Lack of public transportation. A downtown with few retail outlets or other reasons to visit downtown.

Participant #15: Diversity and quality of diverse and healthy places to eat out.

Participant #16: Access to medical facilities and grocery & other store options as well as restaurants.

Participant #17: Lack of entertainment options.

Participant #18: Poverty, drug use, apathy.

Participant #19: Complacency and a majority of people who won’t demand that arts and cultural diversity be an integral part of our schools and a vibrant part of our community.

Participant #20: Blight in Union City, poor shopping options, an under-educated population, high rates of smoking, obesity, drug use, crime, lack of recycling, weak leadership in Union City, distance to a major airport.

Participant #21: Lack of cultural diversity, lack of support for arts and arts events, lack of fresh produce and healthy food options, lack of fast speed internet, lack of adequate emergency healthcare.

Participant #22: Unemployment for unskilled workers.

Participant #23: 1. A general community mindset not in favor of improvements and or progress
2. Low average family income.

Participant #24: Lack of diversity in many counts.

Participant #25: Lack of industry.

Participant #26: Proximity to a large airport.

Participant #27: Lack of industry.
Participant #28: Nepotism


Participant #30: Healthcare

Participant #31: We have absolutely no form of public transportation, which can make life difficult for our international students and students who cannot afford their own vehicles.

Participant #32: Education, health care

Participant #33: Lack of cultural events, isolated

Participant #34: The pervasiveness of religious faith into our civic institutions.

Participant #35: Very conservative & judgmental, far from cities & their offerings (jobs, shopping, cultural events)

Participant #36: Lack of healthcare, lack of support for the arts, poor k-12 education, poverty, lack of job availability.

Participant #37: Lack of entertainment, shopping & dining & not enough diversity in schools

Participant #38: I do think the weaknesses of the community is the size is limited and there seems there is going to be a cap of what growth can be done. Expansion can only occur when there is room for it and it seems Martin may be close to reaching its geographical cap unless it makes some changes. Also, there could be more improvements in bringing more jobs, better and more variety public transportation, and more things to do as far as nightlife in Martin. It seems after 8 or 9 pm the only places that are busy may be the local rural bars. It seems there is not enough variety offered in Martin as far as cultural events and social events.

Participant #39: Perception of lack of activities by other citizens
Partisan Politics which alienates people into clusters that thrive on division. Pitting people against one another in matters that undermine community unity.

The polarization and divide amongst people of different racial, political and income backgrounds.

Lack of access to the arts in educational institutions.

Do you believe that the arts should be supported in your community and if so, why? [All participants from Tennessee believed that the arts should be supported in their communities. These are their reasons why.]

Participant #1: Visual art is in everything you do, everywhere you go. It shouldn’t be suppressed because you don’t understand it. Anything with this much influence deserves attention.

Participant #2: Creative industry draws people together. It also provides outlets for emotions and triggers thinking that can lead to all kinds of discoveries.

Participant #3: Arts bring people together in the community to create a sense of pride and understanding.

Participant #4: Very important to our citizens and our children and grandchildren.

Participant #5: Because these things are blessings to us.

Participant #6: I think the arts enrich the community and make it a happier, more well rounded place.

Participant #7: It fosters individualism and creativity that students rarely come in touch with since so much time is geared towards high tech and electronic games.

Participant #8: Creative development supports economic and spiritual growth within the community.

Participant #9: The arts allows for great opportunities to expand our creativity to solve complex problems – thus strengthening problem-solving skills. Also, the
arts serve our community by giving access to creative endeavors and showcasing them for all to enjoy.

Participant #10 Rural areas need to support the arts and support those engaged in them the arts bring people together

Participant #11 Arts are important to a community and society that is well-rounded. Art is more than just beauty - it’s another way to express yourself and allow for people to be.

Participant #12 It is important to expose all to creative arts and should be supported by local government and community organization to showcase the talents and uniqueness of residents and organizations.

Participant #13 Creative expression is a means of escaping the ordinary, broadening our view of the world, and telling stories (especially of the oppressed).

Participant #14 Creative outlets are intellectual and inspiring gathering places that foster thought and community.

Participant #15 To provide opportunities for the best developmental opportunities for all residents, children through senior adults.

Participant #16 the arts foster creative thinking, problem-solving and also enhance the community through their presence being part of the “more” there is to life than just work.

Participant #17 Improves community culture and opens to new ideas

Participant #18 Arts adds to quality of life via educational benefits and feelings of general well-being. Quality of life attracts industries which then provide opportunities to grow communities and add to artistic development. All forms a positive reinforcing loop.

Participant #19 The arts enhance quality of life in any community.

Participant #20 Arts inspire; engagement in artistic endeavors is beneficial to children; arts bring people together; arts further expression and encourage discussion
Because the arts are fundamental to the human experience and overall quality of life.

Yes, art in any form is relevant to people everywhere. Local art can be shared and marketed globally.

Supporting these endeavors can lead to so many positive opportunities for our communities... Art is one of the most revealing ways to describe who we are as a people. It provides creative outlets for all, but most important for our children. It is a source of entertainment and expression... something to look forward to! It is vast and limitless. We have a fundamental right as human beings to create, to make better... to give meaning to life in all of its realms. Art is a celebration of life.

Because it enriches our lives.

Culture and values are reflected in the artistic expression of a community's members.

Some people associated with the university are very interested in supporting the arts in various forms.

Creative arts opportunities should be offered to everyone regardless of socio-economic background.

Creative individuals and organizations tend to introduce progressive ideas.

Because the arts (music, theater, design, etc.) has the capacity to help us think differently and open up our minds to new and wonderful experiences.

It is important for education, culture, and the community.

How else can the younger generations learn that it is ok to be creative? Or to express themselves?

The arts are what make humans human. Not supporting the arts is like not supporting the community at all. Arts deprivation is not okay.
Art is what makes humans “human.” Otherwise, we are just mammals.

They contribute to the quality of place that can improve quality of life in both abstract cultural and real economic terms.

The arts make life worth living. And they make money for communities, too.

Supporting the creative industries and creative individuals adds cultural to the local community and gives children the idea that there are opportunities in the arts for them as well.

As a rural community, our primary focus is in athletics. If a child isn’t athletic there really are no options for them in k-12.

Arts are important to our society and culture. The arts allow self-expression, communication through a wide array of mediums, as well as being able to provide a safe haven for people who don’t fit into a STEM-oriented society. The arts are a way of finding community with others who we may not even know but can appreciate similar things. It can also be a way to portray ideals in a way that can be expressed no other way.

Arts provide an avenue to gain appreciation for other cultures and increase brain activity and development.

I believe the pursuit of such an ideal would foster a synergy amongst the locals and serve as a magnet for tourism and commerce for not only our rural community, but for the Region also.

I believe there are individuals who are looking to relocate from larger urban areas to rural communities that are progressive and offer some of the same amenities that they have become accustomed to in more thrive and progressive cities. Such as College campuses, warm pleasant temps year-round without cold and harsh winters. Most of the growth opportunities seem to be along the path of appealing to those outside rural communities who want the freedom to explore an interest in the establishment of new business opportunities that provide all the best conditions for success. Young people/adults who are looking to get out and away from the hustle and bustle of urban centers are beginning to take a look at rural governance (political sensibilities) that are on the
front end of laying the infrastructure to attracting young families and retirees who are looking for low cost of living. Many of these relocating individuals come with disposable income, new ideas and/or have access to capital to explore establishing their own businesses. They are also interested in low-crime rates.

Participant #42
The Arts provide opportunities for creativity and expression, which are not provided by agriculture and business enterprises.

**In what ways does your community currently support creative industries, the arts, and/or artists?**

Participant #1
The local University has a gallery and theatre to allow both visual and theatre arts to thrive while teaching the process. The school also offers student organizations and fraternities to encourage involvement in a low-risk setting.

Participant #2
The university is the main source. Also a museum. The public library sponsors a children’s book fair and a number of after-school programs.

Participant #3
No answer

Participant #4
We have a very active community theater group and an art museum.

Participant #5
Classes at the university for art. Classes in photography and other arts in the local community. Artistic businesses are supported.

Participant #6
Our city is very supportive of the arts. It’s hard to support us financially but they give us a space to show our work and make sure we get as much exposure as possible and help us get experience we need.

Participant #7
We have a mural on a large wall of historic buildings downtown.

Participant #8
Musical and art based functions. festivals, and educational programming.

Participant #9
UtMartin has a strong arts program (music, performing arts, woven arts, visual arts). Also, a new advocacy group formed last year - WeakelyArtsCan to promote more arts in our schools. The TN Soybean festival features different musical, performing and visual artists each year in September drawing in thousands of people to our rural town.
Local university, Local arts group

They do a music in the park series and have a few small arts events at an annual festival celebrating big agriculture.

Partnerships with the local university’s art department, shows, music acts.

Tennessee Soybean Festival events and activities (Too numerous to mention), Martin Community Band, Craft Markets with the local Farmers Market, Fine Arts Department at UT Martin, Santa’s Village, Greenway Opportunities to encourage nature walks and look at art along the greenway.

Many of the creative outlets in our town are hosted by the local university. There are other groups that foster creativity, but these can be exclusionary.

University programs
K-12 programs
public library programs
Soybean Festival

Lots of exhibit and performance space, classes in the arts although not in the middle schools

Supports university programs and initiatives

The university has a diverse arts program, each town in the county has a festival that includes arts, the local schools have recently expanded arts options (though still limited), a new advocacy organization has formed to support arts in schools

Union City does not do this at all and it’s sad. Weakley Arts Can has gotten some support in Martin from the city and that’s been a nice change in the past year, but so much more needs to be done.
Participant #20: The City of Martin does a number of things, including arts-focused activities such as a Soybean Festival, community musical performances, and public displays of visual art; Union City has a local theater operation and there’s lots of stuff going on at Discovery Park.

Participant #21: The community supports the arts if it does not take priority over athletics or agriculture. There is also a serious lack of attendance to arts events because of the lack of value in the arts.

Participant #22: I believe we have a few graphic artists around doing work for websites and for fundraising purposes that help local charities. We have the university that offers cultural events.

Participant #23: No answer

Participant #24: No answer

Participant #25: Hire live bands for street dances
Attend junior/senior high band concerts
Purchase artwork from local artists

Participant #26: Weakley County Arts Cares

Participant #27: My community offers arts based opportunities through the local university.

Participant #28: Annual Fair

Participant #29: UT Martin hosts open gallery shows, theater productions, and the community has an annual festival with live music, art vendors, etc.

Participant #30: No answer

Participant #31: Community Art Program. Art/design contests through the university as well as in the community. Allowing the collegiate “league of striving artists” to help with murals painted in town or in the community

Participant #32: I live where Rockabilly is a REALLY big deal. We even have a whole festival for it! Arts in McNairy (AiM) brings in different bands, musicians, and artists to showcase. They also have a full community theatre season, including an annual summer musical and children’s plays.
UTM has a up and coming arts community. The public schools need to incorporate more arts (art, music, dance, theatre) in the curriculum but because it is not on state testing, they don’t put the money and resources into these.

Thriving community theater in nearby Union City, the WeakleyArts can program here in Weakley County has been successful and through the University of TN at Martin

Very little, just via the university in our town, and even there, it’s on individual faculty and departments, not university-wide initiatives.

It mostly occurs at the public university in the area; the other surrounding towns do not really offer much support for the arts.

Slowly adding back in art class for elem age children.

The local college has some fine arts events and musical programs. The community offers some art competitions as well during local festivals.

Active community theatre in neighboring town, strong arts department in both public school and local university, several small museums and galleries as well as community festivals.

There is an annual festival every year.

Not sure! But there is an annual Festival every summer.

Personal support of individuals

What resources, if any, would you like to see in your community to further support creative industries, the arts, and/or artists?

More options through public schools, more involvement among those classes. I.e. football used to be a last period class so players would be dismissed to the field whereas Art classes only offered two and both were visual arts. Theatre was an after school activity.

concert hall, expanded program at the library, arts back in the public schools (we are currently violating federal law by not offering music and arts in K-12)
Participant #3: No answer

Participant #4: No answer

Participant #5: More art training in schools.

Participant #6: I don’t know if they already have this but an arts center for us to host workshops in would be great. The library lets us host but we aren’t allowed to charge. Also a fund for the arts would be nice. I’ve done work for the city and they pay for my supplies but it would be nice to be paid for my time as well.

Participant #7: More effort on the part of town leaders to employ and seek out local artists that can use their talents instead of hiring outside work done by larger companies to beatify and/increase interest for growth in the community.

Participant #8: Allotted finances annually for development, programming, and events.

Participant #9: Artist guild or cooperative, more fine arts selling at the local farmers market to promote start-up businesses, more public art pieces along the rural greenways in our county and region.

Participant #10: No answer

Participant #11: concert hall, community arts center with space for small productions, arts festival, galleries downtown and let’s not forget quality food options (culinary arts are incredibly important)

Participant #12: No answer

Participant #13: Resources to funding for art programming and a network of artists to recruit for markets and fairs.

Participant #14: I would love to see a community space dedicated to creative and artistic pursuits that would bring the same to the broader community rather than relying on the university to provide that.

Participant #15: more programs in the schools
Participant #16 have art, dance and music teachers in EVERY school as mandated by state law.

Participant #17 No answer

Participant #18 More murals, a magnet school approach school system with arts as an option in high school, a community theater, establish housing options to entice artists

Participant #19 ESSA requires that all public school students in the USA have access to art and music. Having those subjects offered in all of our schools would be a great start. Having arts related events in our community throughout the year is much needed. UTM generates much of this, but there is a disconnect with the community and events are under consistently under attended.

Participant #20 Fund arts education in the public schools; permanent outdoor and indoor performance venues; more public displays of art works

Participant #21 I would like to see more community support rallying behind the arts. There are already arts initiatives in effect that are starting to get the community aware and supportive of arts and arts events, but it is only the beginning. Ideally the area would become supportive of both school and community arts access, and both arts events and their attendees would at least double in size.

Participant #22 Make use of current spaces for more events like concerts. Make our university’s art programs more accessible for residents not connected with the university. Maybe not hand out parking tickets when going to see events on campus

Participant #23 No answer

Participant #24 No answer

Participant #25 Venue for live performances and/or art gallery

Participant #26 More art/music in the schools.

Participant #27 I would like my local school system to offer music and art classes to all students.
More live music, additional festivals or a mercantile where vendors could sell their goods would be a great addition.

More support for arts in the schools would be great. The community’s arts activities are well supported, but I don’t feel the same support in the schools.

Funding for a performance hall & to attract and publicize artists to perform there. Art festivals would be amazing, too!

Funding for arts programs in the different public schools in the area, art shows, plays, dance programs, etc.

Art Classes, Clubs for K-12

I think locally we are doing an exceptional job as is but more emphasis in elementary school grade levels

An increase in local Galleries and/ or local gathering places for Artisans with more opportunities to share and sale their work. Also, more opportunities that showcase local youth talents that encourage budding (school age youth) entrepreneurs.

It would be good to see more Visual Arts opportunities to sale original hand made artwork.

Community center/art gallery