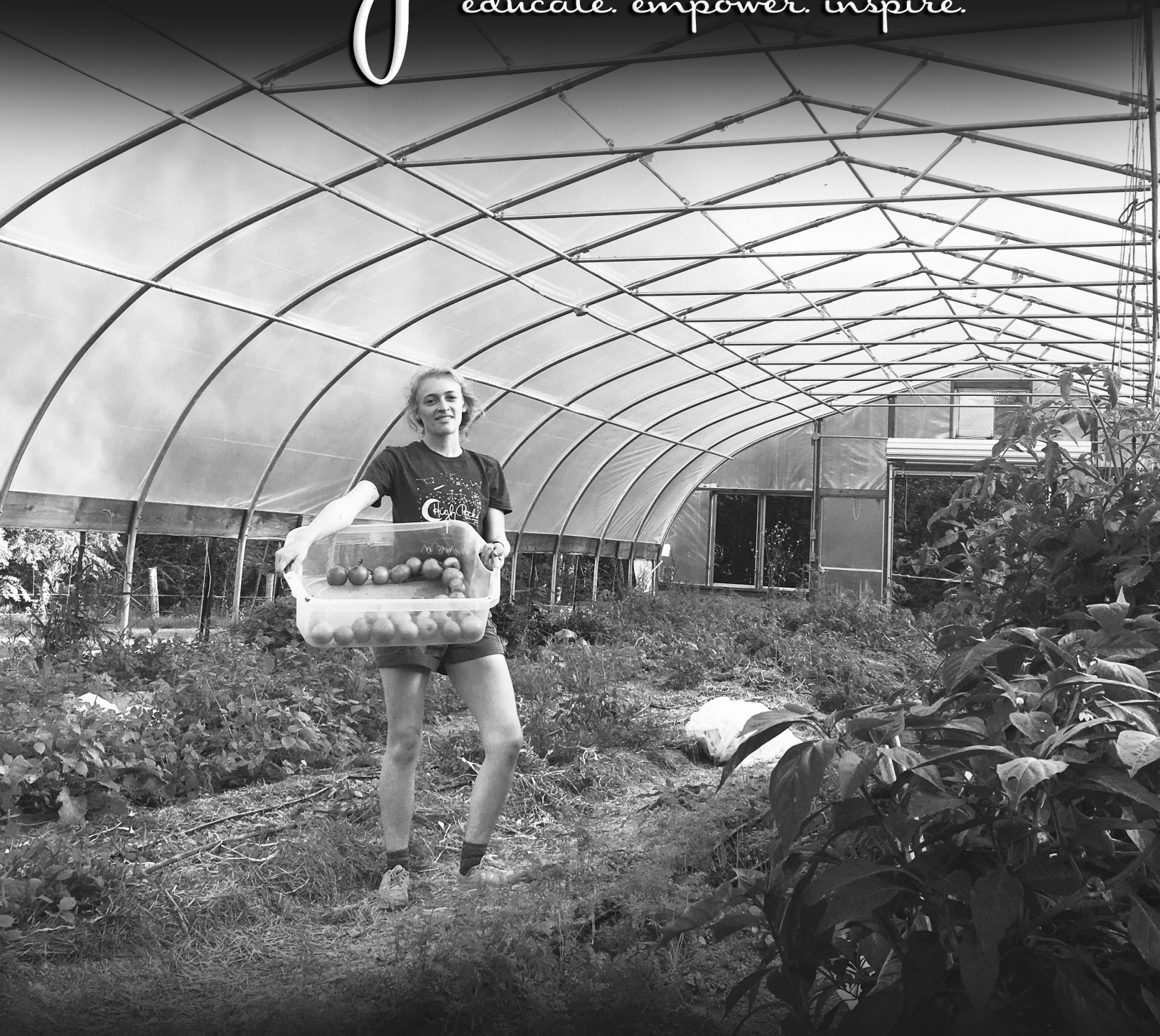


#ifyouaskus

2018

# High Rocks

*educate. empower. inspire.*



[www.highrocks.org](http://www.highrocks.org)



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

In 1996, High Rocks was founded as a gifted camp in the woods. For the last 22 years, we have expanded our programming throughout southern West Virginia but our goals remain the same: to educate, empower and inspire young people in West Virginia to become future leaders, here at home and around the world.

One of the ways High Rocks educates young people is by helping them find their voice. We encourage our participants to look at the issues that matter to them and to explore both sides of that issue. Teaching these critical thinking skills is one way we prepare participants for success at school, at work, in their families, and in the world at large.

High Rocks recruits students from every table in the cafeteria. Our students, interns, and AmeriCorps members come from all kinds of backgrounds and hold in their hearts many different belief systems. Through our summer camps, after-school mentoring programs, college trips, and other community activities, our young people learn communication and leadership skills as they navigate each other's different perspectives and world views while learning to fully articulate their own ideas.

Last spring, High Rocks Academy for Girls traveled to the Appalachian Studies Conference in Cincinnati, OH. There, they joined students from Spring Mills High School in Berkeley County and the Appalachian Media Institute in Whitesburg, KY, to create the keynote presentation.

The students gathered in groups all night, preparing their stories and writing a song that reflected their thoughts and beliefs about growing up in Appalachia. The following day, they shared those stories as the keynote speakers for the conference, articulating their views, hopes, dreams, frustrations, and beliefs about what it means to grow up in this particular part of the world.

We've chosen to share some of their stories here, because the best way for High Rocks to show you what we do is to allow the young people we work with to speak for themselves. Therefore, these stories are not a reflection of High Rocks staff, mentors, or instructors' beliefs; they are, rather, the beliefs of our participants, and we are so happy to share them with you.





## Appalachian Studies Conference Song

Written by young people of West Virginia, led by Natalie Quist

*If you ask us, we have a story  
If you ask us, it's worth hearing  
If you ask us, we want change, and it's gonna happen today*

*I was born in the mountains, I was born in the city, the way  
the river flows speaks to my soul. Everything you do, please,  
please don't destroy my home*

*If you ask us, we have a story  
If you ask us, it's worth hearing  
If you ask us, we want change, and it's gonna happen today*

*I was born in the holler, I was born in the valley the way the  
river flows, speaks to my soul. Everything you do, please,  
please don't destroy my home*

*If you ask us, we have a story  
If you ask us, it's worth hearing  
If you ask us, we want change, and it's gonna happen today  
Yes, it's gonna happen today*

**High Rocks Educational Corp.**

**195 Thompson Rd., Hillsboro, WV 24946**

**304-653-4891 • [info@highrocks.org](mailto:info@highrocks.org) • [www.highrocks.org](http://www.highrocks.org)**

# PRIDE

If you ask me why I cry every time I listen to "Country Roads," I'll tell you why: state pride. I can tell you about crying in my own elementary school music class when I first heard that song. I can tell you how awestruck I am every time I see fresh snow on the mountains or those warm summer nights sitting around a bonfire laughing with your family while the crickets chirp a tune. It's times like these when I feel most connected, not only to my state but to my people. My people who are so loving, kind, and put up with no B.S. The people who I know share the same memory as me at one point or another. The solidarity we have as Appalachia is both terrifying and empowering. We, as states, have started revolutions. West Virginia, I know, has a strong union history. One moment in state history I'm proud of is when the UMWA strikes were getting so violent that federal troops were sent in. This is how powerful we are. We didn't quit, and eventually we got what the workers wanted. Another solidarity moment for me is the recent teachers' strike.

I am proud to be Appalachian. I am proud to live in a place where there is always something to explore. This is my Appalachia. My Appalachia is beautiful, unified, and powerful. This is Appalachia. This is why when people bring up those stereotypes, I shut them down, because no matter where I go, Appalachia stays in my heart. - *Stella, High Rocks Participant and Youth Advisory Board President*





There is only one Appalachia. This mountain range is home to a plethora of fauna and flora, biodiversity that rivals even the Amazon. When I look at the rolling hills and flowing rivers I feel the life of Appalachia looking back at me, but her gaze is getting weaker. I should not have to protect my Mountain Mama. We should have respected her long ago.

Like country roads, rivers take me home. I live on a family farm nestled in the Greenbrier valley of West Virginia. During the hot summer days I take my younger brother Ben and our dog Jet down to the creek. It flows through the middle of our cow pasture and in the last bend, under a huge oak tree, is our favorite swimming hole. The water is always a little bit too cold but I don't care. I'm lucky that the water does not make me sick.

Right now, we are on the banks of one of the most polluted rivers in America. The Ohio River is an Appalachian lifeline, and we are poisoning it. We can't continue like this. We can't keep killing our rivers and, in turn, killing ourselves. A healthy Appalachia means healthy Appalachians. - *Gillian, High Rocks Participant and Youth Advisory Board Secretary*





# POVERTY

Marlinton, West Virginia, a small town located in the mountains of Pocahontas County where I am growing up: in this royal paradise, everyone knows everything: where you live, who you partied with at two o'clock in the morning, or where you grew your broccoli in your garden. Back in the good old days, no one went to bed hungry. Everyone had clothes on their backs, shoes on their feet. Families were families and everyone had a roof over their head. Today, you would wonder, where did it go? What went wrong? Our town was built around timber, but when you depend on a boom and bust industry, not even the trees can withstand the cold grip of poverty. Poverty is a plague on the Appalachian region that has a body count that is steadily growing. As businesses leave, we can feel the economic noose tighten around our throats. Family coffee tables fill up with unaddressed bills, rent notices, wondering, can we get by another second knowing when we wake up tomorrow that those bills will still be there taunting us because we know damn well we won't be able to support our simple lives.

I live in poverty every day. My father is unemployed. We live off food stamps and the food pantry. I am 15, living in poverty, trying to find one simple job so I can help my father who is still depressed over my stepmother leaving him for a drug addict who is just next door. I. Us. We. Can the change, are the solution. We can make a change. Just ask us! - *Shayna, High Rocks Participant and Youth Advisory Board Member*





# DIVERSITY

If you ask me about Appalachia, I can tell you that one of the biggest reasons people leave the region is because they don't feel like they have a home here. Single stories affect people in one way or another. I moved to West Virginia from California at a very young age. Growing up, I discovered that one of the most common single-story narratives about Appalachia was that our region wasn't diverse. It was a place that was only home to white, uneducated hillbillies. And as I grew, I saw how people might believe that. I had no opportunities or outlets to connect with my identity as an Asian American. When the faces around you aren't like your own, it becomes difficult to feel accepted in your own community. And I know that's a common problem among many Appalachian youths of color. When all the voices of our generation aren't being represented, why would we stay?

The youth want change. We want diversity. We want to feel like we have a home. We want to build an Appalachia that embraces all of our differences, where everyone's voice is heard. The reason why people leave is because they're searching for what they can't find. But what I want people to know is that wishing for change isn't hopeless. Change won't happen unless we take action. The future of Appalachia is youth and we need your support, your help, and your trust to make the future that we want a reality. Build organizations that support people of color and the LGBTQ community. Invest in our education and listen to us. If you ask me about Appalachia, I can tell you that together we can rewrite our single story. - *Appalachian Studies Conference Participant from Spring Mills High School*



Richwood High School and Middle School was robbed from our teachers, our peers, and myself by the historic 100-year flood on June 23rd, 2016. This was a storm that brought rushing waters, swept away homes, and caused thousands in damages. But the storm that was to follow was much worse. My junior year started off full of unknowns. Was our high school going to be repaired? Where were we going to go if not? Our schools were condemned and our lives were swept upside down. The community came together after the disaster to rebuild from the remains of a town that has been on its deathbed. But our sweet solidarity was short-lived before our county was ripped apart by one question: consolidation or separation of our education? Our proudest community wasn't enough to combat the petty rivalry that no one knows the concrete origins of. "Think about the children," was the phrase plastered on the squabble. One half of the county was thrown into an old grade school that wasn't good enough for elementary kids, and three pods, or trailers as I like to refer to them, to trek through sloppy mud mixed with something foul. Meanwhile our rivals eat around sewage that bubbles up in their cafeteria floor, but don't you worry about that. Because they decided to buy a new, flashy sign to distract them with. We were brought a few smartboards that we didn't know how to use and couldn't pay attention to as construction began on our educational trailer park. We ate in classrooms because we didn't have a cafeteria or gym. Only the alphabet decided who you could spend your meal with. Our metal walkways balanced here and there. Watch for ice or there might be another teenager with a metal rod in their hip. But don't worry because our walkways are structurally incapable of coping with our bipolar blizzards. Our minds and spines are weary and worn out from carrying





stress, and hardback books upon binders upon folders. We got closer as the suffering and suspense continued while our FEMA deadline whittled. My senior year has been plagued with minimal progress, lawsuits, scandals and, some say, corruption.

The construction to solidify our trailer park continued while our education still suffers to this day. The good teachers we have are like respected family. Our unqualified, long-term subs must earn the respect that will form from mutual suffering and battling alongside us over time. Our teachers work hard to give us everything they can, but they're people too and get just as depressed and tired as the students in these conditions. We're used to it all now and ready to escape our education and the state that fostered this environment. We are strong, resilient, and can show you, if you ask us, what we are overcoming.

We have access to AP credit courses that only a few take advantage of. We're going to colleges in and out of state. A good friend of mine just graduated with the honor of magna cum laude carrying her beautiful, baby girl on her hip. We're enlisting to serve and die for our country. A peer of mine is running for House of Delegates as a senior in high school. Some people have no idea what they're gonna do and could absolutely care less. Education needs equity. We are the new Appalachia. We are the future. We may be young but we want to make West Virginia better than it is today because we have experienced, observed and are told we are powerless to bring change around us. Not anymore because policies like this are unacceptable, but also unseen. We are fighting a fight for solutions. We just need our voices to fall on open and hungry minds willing to consider the people who are the most affected, yet never consulted, when it comes to their own education. – **Nicole, High Rocks Alumna and former Youth Advisory Board Officer**





# OPIOIDS

I'm 16 years old, and I'm a survivor of an epidemic. My mother has lived in West Virginia her whole life, and opioids have taken over her life for over 20 years. I was born addicted to opioids. Let me say that again, because this is the reality of a child of an addict that no one wanted to help. I was born addicted to opioids. That was not my choice. This burden has stuck with me my whole life. No, I'm not an addict, but I'm treated like one, and the way we treat addicts needs to stop right now.

For 16 years, I haven't been able to mention my mother's name without being attacked by messages connecting me with my mother and treating me like I was the one incarcerated for her decisions and crimes. We never asked to be the children of addicts. So stop treating us like we did! I have watched my mother overdose more times than I can count on both hands.

If you ask me, instead of discriminating and criminalizing, start educating. Instead of pointing your fingers at the junkies, point your fingers at the companies that flooded our communities. Open needle exchanges and safe injection sites so children don't have to watch their parents die. If you ask us, we are the future. We are Appalachians too. - **Marlowe, High Rocks**

***Participant and Youth Entrepreneur Leader***





In order to heal Appalachia, it must already be broken. Who broke Appalachia? What broke Appalachia? We blame the government, the market, the outsiders. We cowered as our undefined borders edged smaller as technology, pills, and iPhones slowly crept in.

But did we break ourselves down? Did we put the dynamite into our very mouths and watched as our homes crumbled around us? Did we allow the media to take hold of our stereotypes, to make the equation barefoot X banjos – education = Appalachia? Did we allow the pharmaceutical giants to stuff their drugs down our throats and have the nerve to call it medicine? We lost the war on poverty before the government gave it its name. It's so easy to talk about the problems of Appalachia. It's like writing about grief or heartbreak. And I feel my heart cracking when I see photos of dirty children in trailer park homes flash on the TV. It tells a story where they set the narrative long before they set foot into our mountains.

Too often we find others writing our biographies, telling our stories. How do we show the world what they're getting wrong about Appalachia, that we're not some Hillbilly Elegy.

These mountains can heal us, but we're too busy blowing our tops off. Appalachia has been sawed in half and our borders are tattered. But I feel my heartstrings pulling at the hands of resistance, at the hands of the mountains, sewing us back together, tying me to the land. The healing starts in the hollers and trickles down the streams. We have to learn to heal our borders, from Pittsburgh down to our brothers in the south, to our sisters in the north. We have to heal ourselves with the medicine of our own making.

Healing is when the people sit in the trees on Peter's Mountain... healing is learning to love thy neighbor after learning they voted for Trump. Healing is playing with the loopholes in the system meant to keep us down. Healing is learning to sustain ourselves, planting our own seeds of corn, our own seeds of resistance. Healing is finding spaces to heal where you don't have to work for it.

If you ask me how our community rebuilds ourselves, I'll tell you, in living rooms with white boards. If you ask me, I'll tell you how the people in the hollers still sing their mountain music and play their banjos, and when my friend Carson sings his great uncle's songs about West Virginia, I start to feel something like whole again. I start to heal. – *Mabel, High Rocks Alumna and former Youth Advisory Board President*





