

ON WHAT MATTERS

The Power of Appalachian Art With Willa Johnson and Sarita Gupta

Welcome to "On What Matters," a conversation series in which Ford Foundation leaders talk to our social justice grantees on the frontlines of change.

In this episode, Willa Johnson, director of the film department and Appalachian Media Institute at Appalshop—a media center in Kentucky that is home to the largest collection of Appalachian art in the world—and Sarita Gupta, vice president of U.S. programs at the Ford Foundation, explore the rich history and exciting future for artists in Appalachia.

Willa and Sarita discuss the power of rural storytelling to inspire social change and promote conservation efforts, and Willa shares her journey from documenting local history as a young participant in Appalshop's programs to becoming a mentor to the next generation of filmmakers.

Learn more about Appalshop at: <https://appalshop.org/>

Transcript begins.

SARITA GUPTA: Hi, I'm Sarita Gupta. Thanks for joining us for the latest conversation in our "On What Matters" series. I'm the vice president of U.S. programs at the Ford Foundation. I'm a brown-skinned South Asian woman with salt and pepper hair. And I'm speaking today with Willa Johnson about making art and media in the Appalachian region and seeding new creatives. Great to have you with us, Willa.

WILLA JOHNSON: Hi. Thank you for having me here today. My name's Willa Johnson. I'm the director of the Film and Appalachian Media Institute here at Appalshop in East Kentucky. And I am a white woman with light brown hair in a blue dress.

SARITA GUPTA: Terrific. Well, welcome. Let's get into it. I'm really excited to learn about your work in action. There is such a rich culture in rural America, and uniquely in Appalachia. What inspired Appalshop's creation in 1969? And how are you carrying that mission forward today?

WILLA JOHNSON: In the late '60s, there was the War on Poverty that was taking place, and with that was a lot of media being created about what poverty looks like in America. And Appalachia really became the poster child of that. And along with that were these initiatives to train young people on how to learn how to use cameras. And the idea was that they would train them how to use cameras and they could leave and find employment, but what happened was because we had been facing a lot of stereotyping and, and really harsh, gritty pictures that didn't tell the full story, that didn't tell the full narrative, that people felt really misrepresented and untrusting of media in the region. But then suddenly you were training young people with cameras and they were turning that lens on their own community. And they told the story of the

community they know. Which was a richer, deeper story than the outside media could do. And so at the heart of it, it really became, how do we show America what living in Appalachia is really like—the good and the bad—how do we represent our community, and also how do we push our community to be better?

SARITA GUPTA: What an amazing story you just shared with us. The idea that people in the community can gain these incredible skills, and the assumption was that they would leave the community, but in fact, they decided to stay in the community and tell the story of their own experiences, their own lived experiences. That's such a powerful idea of voice and agency. So Willa, how does Appalshop reflect its community today?

WILLA JOHNSON: Today, Appalshop works across many different platforms. We have film, we have radio, we have an archive, we have youth programming, theater, a little bit of everything. And every summer we have 18-year-olds, 14 to 22 year olds, but approximately 18-year-olds, make a documentary about their own community. And so for 35 years, we've collected what it looks like to be 18 in Appalachia. And to me, that's a real representation of what Appalshop does, because it shows historically where we were, where we are, and where we want to be. And that is evolving—there's full stories here happening, there's diversity, there's conflict, there's community, there's color. And so a lot of what we do is like, how do we represent our community as it looks today, how do we preserve what was yesterday, and how do we dream of what's tomorrow. And so it's not only pushing our own community, it's, it's pushing the outside world too, to look at us as, as a place that deserves investment, so that people have the ability and access to move forward.

SARITA GUPTA: So Willa, can you tell us about Appalshop's work to lift up and support emerging artists, and why it's so crucial? And I wonder if I could invite you to tell us a little bit about how you got involved with Appalshop.

WILLA JOHNSON: How I got into this work started really personal. I grew up in front of a mountaintop removal site in a holler. And one day during a storm, a coal silt pond burst, and they're these, man-made dams that they create to, to clean the coal, it burst, and when it did it, it wiped out the entire holler I was living in. Neighbors lost homes, lost cars, lost yards. My dad, who drove a coal truck, who never questioned the industry, became really irate when the coal industry said, "It was a God, a God-made event, it wasn't man-made." And so he took a 1990s VHS camera in the middle of the night, and he hiked up to the mountaintop, and he recorded the footage from the dam and how it had broke. And he drove it an hour away to the local news station and handed it over. And it was this moment of the power of a camera and how it can hold people accountable. That was a really pivotal moment for me to realize the power of media and storytelling, and, what it means to have these capabilities in local people's hands. It changes, it changes everything. And so finding my way to Appalshop as a young person was this really pivotal moment of, I didn't have to leave to become a journalist in another community, that my own community was rich with stories that deserve to be told. And so, that really led me down a road of recommitment to my own community when I thought I would leave—we're told that in order to be successful, you have to leave—and, and so finding an avenue like

Appalshop, finding a way to tell stories was really life changing for me. And so now, in my line of work, I get to work with young people who are looking for that, that outlet, right, they're looking for ways to create art, to create stories, to question the systems they're in, to represent the full narrative of their community. And so it's really important work not only for what we're putting out, but for the people who are creating it. It's life changing to be able to represent something you love, but also want to see be better. And it really changes a lot of how people talk about where they're from. You know, I remember 20 years ago, young people weren't using the phrase, I'm Appalachian. They were from Kentucky. They were from East Kentucky. "Appalachian" was sort of this, this thing that you weren't always proud of. But now, there's so many young people who have really found identity through creation and art and storytelling, who really changed the narrative of what it means to be Appalachian. And I feel like Appalshop in particular, had a huge role in reclaiming the pride of, of that label.

SARITA GUPTA: Oh, I love that. I could just imagine young people in the region, you know, just gaining a sense of real agency, dignity, and voice, which is so crucial to any community. So, Willa, why do you think rural storytelling is so powerful? And what do you think outside audiences can learn from it?

WILLA JOHNSON: Rural storytelling is incredibly needed. It's incredibly powerful. And anyone who doesn't believe that in America, I promise every four years in the election cycle, you turn to rural America to ask what's going on. Rural America makes up the majority of your land mass. It makes up a huge chunk of your voting population. And it really dictates how people are interpreting these national messages that get spread down to smaller communities. And so, rural storytelling is incredibly important in, in every aspect of journalism, of media. There's this way that people talk about rural America where it's either painted in this really soft, romantic light, or it's really villainized and demonized as the problem. But there's, there is complexity here. There is difference of voices here. There are people who are working across all spectrums of an issue here. And so it's really important to invest and listen to rural America, instead of just writing them off, because at the end of the day, like, they are deciding what is going to happen in this country. They are deciding what is, what is the message that is being played out throughout America. And so rural storytelling is incredibly important. It's also really important because we make up a lot of the culture, a lot of the history of America. A lot of things that will play out to be popular are born often in rural America. Think back to 10, 15 years ago when drinking out of mason jars became very trendy. That was not that was not something that we thought about here. And so it's just, you know, it is really impactful to see how rural culture plays out and rural storytelling plays out in this country. But it's not often spotlighted or identified. And I think there's another complexity to it of who is telling that story. It's different if you don't come in, and you understand the people and you understand the culture, you're not going to get the story that someone who is from here is going to get. And so it's really important to have people who understand the community they're in telling the story they're telling, and that's not just for rural America, I believe that's for any subculture in the world, really, is you need someone from that culture to be able to tell that story fairly and justly.

SARITA GUPTA: Yeah, Willa, the work you're doing is so important, and I deeply appreciate it. You know, at the Ford Foundation, we have worked on, and we've been paying a lot of attention to just deepening polarization in this country. And so much of the polarization we experience is, is the lack of deeper understanding of the, the texture as you're describing it. That you're right, when people think about rural America, it's so black and white, as you were saying earlier, yet there's so much nuance, there's so much richness, there's so much texture there. And so the work you're doing and the way you're describing it really resonates with me. So to that end, Willa, what are some current projects that excite you?

WILLA JOHNSON: There are several projects we're really excited about at Appalshop right now, that really make us feel passionate and enthused about what we're telling. Climate crisis is hitting a lot of rural America first, so really becoming a voice for how that is happening is pretty important part of our work now. And so we've really taken a pretty big step in that by producing a film called "All is Not Lost" about the flood, where we talk about climate crisis being a part of what led to a one in 1000-year flood that cost us lives and cost us so much. So we really have taken that as a step of trying to connect people and remind people that, in order for us to create change, you have to pull rural people up to the table with you. We're getting ready to launch "Shades of Home," which every month will feature a regional artist, whether it's a singer-songwriter, a poet, a rapper, a potter, a painter, and really shine a spotlight on the art that's being created here. And not only the art, but the diversity of the artists who are creating it. We have rap videos in line right now. We have singer-songwriters, we have young trans musicians, all who have been working with us to tell the story of what their Appalachia looks like to them. And then we also are working on a project called "Roof Over My Head" that talks about the unhoused here in Appalachia. The housing crisis looks very different here than it does in other parts of the country, and so often it's not discussed enough. It's not seen as critical. But we were already in a crisis before we faced a major natural disaster, and now it's even more crucial that we talk about housing. So we'll be following people who are living in campers, living on couches, couch surfing, living in churches, shelters, to really talk about the housing crisis we're facing here, and try to talk about the systemic reasons that lead to that.

SARITA GUPTA: They sound like incredibly powerful projects, because again, they challenge the assumptions, right? And help us understand the bigger issues at play. So, we have an audience-submitted question from John Heckmann of Memphis, Tennessee. He's with WKNO Public Media for the Mid-South. And his question is, "How can the challenges and proposed solutions to addressing rural and urban poverty best be highlighted through multimedia?"

WILLA JOHNSON: Yeah, I think that's a really great question, and I think, the real power lies in bringing folks together who experience poverty in different areas. I've seen in this line of work at Appalshop, we've worked with a lot of urban communities dealing with poverty, and what happens is like we see a lot of differences from the immediate start, right? Like we, we think, oh, there's such a difference or oh, your access is better than my access, or the reason why we're here is different. But once we're together, once we talk about the root causes, often we find a lot of similarities and, and I think there's a lot of power in how we work together to tackle these issues, and to lift each other up in our own voices. And so a lot of times, we really will work with

other groups who want to tell the story of their community, whether it's another rural community or an urban community, to talk about what we've learned, about what it means to turn the lens on your own community, and what it means to push the stereotypes that people think about your community. And so, I think there's a lot of importance for us to work together, to lift each other up, and then also to, to not only notice the similarities, but to notice the differences as well. To be able to talk about things like white privilege, even when you're in an impoverished community. To be able to talk about monoeconomies or often environmental damages that lead to impoverished communities facing the challenges they face. So there's a lot that I think there just needs to be more space for these communities to be able to work together to tell these stories. There needs to be more space for collaboration. But the importance of both being told is critical. If we want to think about how to create a healthier world for the people who are below a certain income level in this in this country.

SARITA GUPTA: That's so important, the importance of partnerships, collaborations, investments and really helping make sure these stories are being told, but amplified, right? And I love what you said about, we want to lift up the similarities, but we also want to be clear about the differences, that we shouldn't shy away from that either. Thank you, I love that. So, Willa, this work takes time and can be really tough. So in this context, what keeps you motivated?

WILLA JOHNSON: What keeps me motivated is to celebrate the smaller wins as well as the bigger wins. Especially rural organizing, rural storytelling, it's really hard to see the numbers at the end of the day, and, they're never going to be as large scale as someone maybe in an urban community, because of the isolation, the way we're spread out, the size of the audience. And so, realizing on the scale that we are in, the success we are having, and for me, that often the way I've taken that success is when we have a community screening and 100 people show up and participate, and are excited to be there and ask questions, that is one of the things that drives me the most in this work is that community engagement aspect we have here. But also, when I go into work and I see so many talented people from the region in the office with me, really pushing themselves to do this really complicated balance of celebrating and questioning our own community. It inspires me a lot. My coworkers inspire me a lot, because I know what it's taken for myself to be here, and I feel really proud and excited to see them in the same setting as well. And often every summer we bring in new young people and train them how to create documentaries and that summer is really a recharging time for me every year, to see new young people, new perspectives, new stories being brought into the space. It brings so much energy to us every year, and so having that revolving door of, of talent and passion and investment really is what inspires me to keep moving.

SARITA GUPTA: Wow! Wonderful! Thank you, Willa. And to everyone tuning in for this insightful conversation, we hope you will continue to join us for the rest of our "On What Matters" series.

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