

Food Security in the High Country: Compassion Comes to the Table

1. PROGRAM GOALS, AUDIENCE, LIBRARY GOALS

North Carolina is one of only nine states with higher household food insecurity rates than the national average (Coleman-Jensen, 2010). Northwestern North Carolina (the “High Country”) is an area that is particularly hard hit. 21.2% of our county’s residents live below the poverty line, 5% more than the national average (Census, 2010). Last year, 1 in 8 Americans received help from a food bank; for us, that number was 1 in 6. Our neighbors who seek emergency food assistance often must choose between paying for food and other essentials such as fuel, housing, and healthcare. And 36% of households seeking food assistance here have at least one employed adult, reminding us that having a job does not equal food security – and that hunger’s face is rarely what many expect it to be (FeedingAmerica, 2010).

Our program will make the Watauga County Public Library (“the Library”) the hub of a ten-month, community-wide focus on the issue of food security through a collaboration with the Appalachian State University Office of Sustainability, the University Humanities Council, and local pay-as-you-can restaurant F.A.R.M. Café. Our Program Goals are that through participation, community members will:

1. Understand the connections between food security, sustainability, and compassion;
2. Develop skills to address our area’s food security challenges;
3. Cultivate a deeper commitment to the common good of our community.

Boone, North Carolina – the seat of Watauga County (51,000) – enjoys a rich community identity in its own right as well as a close relationship with Appalachian State University (a public four-year university with 15,000 students). Our audience will include town and University community members alike. The Library, the F.A.R.M. Café, and the Appalachian State University campus are within five minutes’ walk of each other and are connected to Boone’s vibrant downtown thoroughfare. This proximity will be a great asset in promotion and publicity.

The Library's mission is to "promote the power of knowledge, the joy of reading, and the spirit of imagination; to support and encourage life-long learning; and to contribute significantly to the sense of community and the economic well-being of Watauga County." This project will provide opportunities to engage books, films, art, and other texts in imaginative exploration and discussion of the themes of food security, sustainability, and compassion with community members from all stages of life, and it will directly benefit the sense of community and economic well-being of our area.

2. PROGRAM PLAN

Our program consists of eight events that support participants' reflection, engagement, and action with the issues. They include:

a. Three community book groups, facilitated jointly by a Humanities Council member and the Library's adult services librarian:

- A discussion of *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* in six bimonthly sessions (February – September 2012).

- A discussion of *Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and my Journey from Homeless to Harvard* (September 2012).

- A discussion of *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?* (May 2012).

b. A community screening of *Foodstamped*, an informative and humorous documentary film following a couple as they attempt to follow a food stamp budget, followed by a panel discussion with members of the local food security and sustainability communities (April 2012).

c. A Common Ground bus and walking tour of local sites related to food security and sustainability including local sustainable farms, the Farmer's Market, and lunch at the F.A.R.M. Café, coordinated with the annual High Country Farm Tour (August 2012).

d. A festival of sustainable artmaking on the theme of food security and sustainability, facilitated by the staff of the Elkland Art Center (April 2012).

e. Two F.A.R.M. Café teach-ins and trainings, where volunteers will learn about all aspects of this unique business, including cooking, serving, education, and accounting (March and September 2012).

f. A community service fair ("What Can I Do?") featuring a panel of local sustainability and food security experts and information on volunteer opportunities (November 2012).

Our program will nurture thoughtful and engaged exploration of the issue of food stability as a daily reminder of our interconnectedness and increased compassion as a necessary element of living together. We will use the fact of hunger in our midst as a jumping-off point for explorations of community attitudes of greater compassion in our public life. Our ultimate goal is to provide multiple ways to engage these themes in personal, communal, and ultimately civic ways. The result, we hope, will be a personal realization like the one Armstrong describes in her chapter on "Recognition":

We sometimes fail to recognize the signs of poverty, grief, fear, and desolation in our own city, our own village, our own family. So look to your world anew, and do not leave this step until you have chosen your mission. There is a need that you – and only you – can fulfill (p. 169).

3. ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The Library's five-year plan includes a goal to "partner with local business communities, Chambers of Commerce, and cultural and educational institutions to provide cost-effective, relevant and diverse programming, exhibits, and materials to enhance the quality of life for all citizens." Our three community partners align directly with our program's goals.

- F.A.R.M. (“Feed All Regardless of Means”) Café is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to build a healthy, inclusive community by providing high quality, delicious meals produced from local sources served in a restaurant where everybody eats. It is part of a national movement called One World Everybody Eats, which began with a single restaurant by the same name in Salt Lake City, Utah. This successful business concept helps relieve hunger at the local level where diners are served by volunteers in the “pay what you can” spirit. For the last year, F.A.R.M. Café has partnered with the local homeless shelter, The Hospitality House, to host monthly dinners. In spring 2012, The Café will be moving into the lunch counter of the historic Boone Drug store on King Street, and will begin serving lunch daily from the center of downtown Boone. F.A.R.M. Café enjoys robust relationships with other hunger relief organizations in the region (Heifer International, Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, local faith communities) and is therefore uniquely able to create rich service opportunities for program participants.

- The Appalachian Humanities Council seeks to “promote an appreciation of the humanities and the significant role they play in providing a deeper understanding of our history, culture and lives.” It is well-positioned to identify and provide access to speakers, experts, facilitators and scholars, to advocate for the value of the humanities in developing community capacity for compassion (a humane value), and to strengthen relationships between Appalachian State University leadership and service organizations and the Library through this project.

- Appalachian State University’s Office of Sustainability seeks to apply the University’s intellectual, academic, cultural, and research resources to promote sustainable economic growth, prosperity, and quality of life throughout this region and state, and to become a bridge between the university's sustainability resources and the community and vice versa. A focus on sustainability has been a hallmark of Appalachian State University since its founding in 1899. Appalachian Food Services is working with the Office of Sustainability to incorporate local and sustainably produced food products into our campus dining with an overall goal of improving the campus food system and providing fresh, healthy food options. As a campus-wide entity and a national leader in sustainability development and research, the Office will raise the profile of our program across the community and the country. The Office’s support also facilitates access to the Appalachian & the Community Together (“ACT”) network of service learning organizations and resources, which will help develop a volunteer base in support of the food security efforts the program features.

4. FACILITATORS, SPEAKERS, PRESENTERS, OR SCHOLARS

The following experts have agreed to present or facilitate events in the series. All are qualified, experienced, and competent facilitators of adult learning activities, as discussed in their attached bios.

Michael Behrent PhD, History, Appalachian State University

Renee Boughman and Chris May, President and Vice-President of the Board, FARMCafe

Martha Enzmann and Cindy Bell, Elkland Art Center

Evelyn Johnson, Adult Services Librarian, Watauga County Public Library

Ged Moody, Director, University Sustainability, Appalachian State University

Chris Osmond PhD, Leadership & Educational Studies, Appalachian State University

Jeffrey Scott, Appalachia Director, Heifer International

Melissa Weiss, Director of Programs, Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture

Wendy Winn PhD, English, Appalachian State University

5. PUBLICITY AND AUDIENCE RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

The Library has a history of successful partnering with organizations in support of its mission, including Appalachian State University, the Internal Revenue Service, the Downtown Boone Development Association, Watauga Literacy Association, Kiwanis Club, Watauga County Project on Aging, Employment Security Commission, the Watauga Youth Network and the High Country Writers Group. The Library's spacious public meeting room is a well-known gathering place and is frequently used by area groups.

The Library's institutional marketing goal is to ensure that it continues to be "recognized by the public as a valuable informational, recreational and economic resource whose materials, programs, and services are used extensively." It promotes its frequent community events through connections with local newspaper, radio, and television outlets. The Library maintains a website, a Facebook page with 512 "friends," and a monthly email list, and submits events to local online resource "Todd's Calendar." It also has a competent in-house staff that designs and distributes attractive bookmarks, fliers, and posters.

6. PROGRAM EVALUATION

We will evaluate the impact of our program in four ways:

- a. Participants will be asked to complete an anonymous one-page evaluation form following each session of the book groups, the film screening, and the day of artmaking (attached). The form gathers quantitative and open-response data and tracks cumulative impact for participants who have attended multiple sessions.
- b. Participants will be asked to provide anonymous pre- and post-event written responses to one question at the Common Ground Tour, the F.A.R.M. Café teach-ins and trainings, and the community service fair (attached). Participants will write their answers on the front (pre) and back (post) of index cards.
- c. The FARM Café's volunteer coordinator will use the "Volunteer Form" (attached) to track how volunteers hear about the Café's work and how the program has impacted the number of volunteer hours served.

d. The University Sustainability Office will track impact of the project on its program objective of “Program Effectiveness” (“Outreach and Engagement: Increase the outreach and engagement between the Office of Sustainability and the community”).

All data will be reviewed formatively (to improve series offerings) and summatively (to assess how the project is impacting our Program Goals).

7. LIBRARY’S COMMITMENT TO ADULT PROGRAMMING

The Library has a history of effective adult programming.

- The Library offers three long-standing book clubs: a monthly daytime group, a bimonthly evening group, and a monthly branch evening group. Local authors are often selected and invited to attend. (@ 30 people / month.)

- Each September the Library partners with Appalachian State University’s Summer Reading Program for incoming freshmen through its “Watauga Reads” program. Appalachian State University brings the selected author to campus to speak at Convocation exercises; s/he is also invited to present at the Library as part of a “community read” of the selected book. (@ 50 participants / year.)

- This year, the Library sponsored a monthly film series of World War II movies. This series was proposed by and programmed in collaboration with a local veteran; teachers from Appalachian State University and Watauga High School facilitated discussions following screenings. (@ 15 participants / month.)

Census. (2010). State and County QuickFacts: Watauga County, North Carolina Retrieved November 16, 2011, from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37/37189.html>

Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., Andrews, M., Carlson, S. (2010). Household Food Security in the United States in 2010. USDA.

FeedingAmerica. (2010). Hunger In America 2010: WNC info Official Press Release. Retrieved November 7, 2011, from <http://mannafoodbank.org/hunger-in-western-north-carolina>