THE HEART OF APPALACHIA
Dynamic Stories of Williamson, WV as told by Fulbright Amizade participants
Foreword

In March 2016, the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs sponsored six Fulbright Foreign Student Program students and six Fulbright U.S. Student Program alumni to participate in a week-long service-learning program led by Amizade in Williamson, WV.

Williamson is known locally as a “typical southern coalfield town” and not a tourist hot spot. Located in the heart of Appalachia on the border of West Virginia and Kentucky, Williamson has a population of around 3,500. Coal has been the central pillar of the local economy, with approximately 40% of jobs in the region directly linked to the industry.

Since 2012, Amizade Global Service-Learning has partnered with Sustainable Williamson in order to promote engaging activities and learning opportunities for students and individuals from across the map. Through a new partnership with the Fulbright Program, Amizade was able to send scholars to Williamson to capture stories of transformation and empowerment happening in the heart of Appalachia.

What you find on next pages are beautiful, inspiring, and surprising narratives captured during their program with Amizade. We encourage you to dive into these narratives and we hope that after a careful read, you’ll have a fresh look of rural America.

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American folk music of Williamson: Father and daughter perform to Fulbright Amizade participants
I am, frankly, overwhelmed. In the first day and a half of my experience with Amizade in Appalachia, I’ve been forced to confront a swarm of questions that I don’t have answers to and are perhaps unanswerable, but our asking questions without necessarily arriving at conclusions will give shape to the rest of our week.

Today I saw a barber shop called Cuttin’ Up with Belinda. I loved that. I love Americana, and here, it’s everywhere. There are church steeples, American flags, and main streets. There aren’t very many streetlights. My mind jumps from comparison to comparison: Convenience stores selling a little of everything remind me of Bangladesh. The high school football stadium, an island of bright green in a sea of gravel on top of a mined mountain, made me think of Friday Night Lights on TV. The old pickup trucks and main streets remind me of south Georgia and country songs. Despite how different my own community is from the ones I’m getting to visit here and despite West Virginia’s reputation elsewhere in the country, my associations with small town America are almost universally positive. In fact, I have the tendency to romanticize rural communities.

To me, they represent values that are fundamental to building mutual understanding: trust in your neighbors, opportunities for one-on-one interaction across difference, knowledge of and compassion for the community as a whole. While I believe these things really are hallmarks of small town American life, I also suspect that in large part, my romanticization of rural America reflects my nostalgia for something that doesn’t exist and never really did. I’ve never lived in a rural community, so I’ve never had to face the downsides of small town life. The crushing desire to get out of a small town and escape is so common. I’ve never experienced that. I’ve always been able to drop in and out when I want to, and that feels important.

I’m looking forward to my time here being a forum for exploration. Such an exploration must begin with an honest assessment of what I don’t know, but also what I do know. I want to learn, but I also want to bring my knowledge to the table. I want to aggressively challenge what I know and remain open both to the possibility of my assumptions being contradicted, but also to the possibility of their being confirmed, remaining cognizant of ways that the program limits my understanding (e.g. only having a week).

The sky was gray today. It drizzled some. The trees remain leafless and the landscape beige as the last week of winter begins. I was struck by the implications of our visiting at this time of year. Williamson’s community garden is still mostly empty, and my preconception of poverty and despair in a post-coal community were exacerbated by the season. As the team at Sustainable Williamson drove us around the community showing us some of the successes that their community initiatives have had — walking trails around the garden, a wheelchair accessible garden plot already planted for the season, a thriving health clinic in the middle of town — I was reminded that the end of winter is also the cusp of spring.
The hotel offered a complimentary shuttle from the airport with a most amicable driver. While chatting about various things West Virginia, such as my childhood obsession with the Sacramento Kings and specifically West Virginia’s own Jason Williams, the driver asked the purpose of my visit. I explained the Fulbright—Amizade collaboration with Sustainable Williamson, the idea of global service learning, and some additional background on the Fulbright Program. He asked me to clarify where I would be going.

“Williamson?” he said, “that town is so poor they have a layaway program at the dollar store.” I hoped he was not able to see my puzzled expression in the rearview mirror. It was unclear to me if he was speaking from fact or out of sarcasm and I had no idea how to respond.

“That place is a step back in time,” he continued. After muttering an interjection and giving a half-smile, I moved the conversation forward with small talk and eventually we arrived at the hotel. For the rest of the day, I never shook the stark picture he painted with his words. An image of absolute poverty and a community lost. An image that is frequently projected on to communities in Appalachia. But what was the basis for this stereotype? I hoped to find out.

On Monday morning we drove through picturesque Appalachia. The bluish purple cast of the rolling, seemingly infinite, hills and the delicate mist constructed an almost dreamlike landscape. Perhaps this serene stillness is the origin of the preconception that Appalachian towns are sleepy, I pondered. We pulled into what appeared to be a small, but comfortable country town and I assumed we were stopping for food or to refuel. When Nathan Darby, the Amizade Community Engagement Coordinator and the Executive Director of The Global Switchboard, explained we had arrived in Williamson, I was very shocked. This could not be the Williamson about which the hotel driver spoke.

Our first destination was the Williamson Health and Wellness Center, where Jenny Hudson (Director of the Mingo County Diabetes Coalition), Ian Fields (AmeriCorps VISTA Member of Williamson Health and Wellness Center), and Mary Arnot (Health and Wellness Promoter) shared the many initiatives they have begun with the goal to breath life back into central Appalachia. But what was the basis for this stereotype? I hoped to find out.

The Coalition works diligently to promote active living and healthy eating throughout the region in a series of ways. The group facilitates regular opportunities for active community engagement including a regional talent show called Coalfield’s Got Talent, which boasts over 40 participants. The Fulbright Amizade group will see a preview later this week. Alexis Batausa, a health and wellness promoter with the Coalition, organizes monthly 5K races in addition to leading two programs, the Lunch Walk/Run and the Take 10 Health Challenge. The Coalition is also spearheading a project to build community gardens near lower income housing to increase access to healthy foods. A factor in the development of these various sustaining projects is their replicability. The Williamson Health and Wellness Center is not intimidated by its own smallness. The Center maintains that their vision is not for Williamson alone, but that other communities in the region have already started adopting their initiatives and they hope to continue to grow.

Williamson, like any place, has social issues that need addressing. The town is sharply segregat ed and the population has continued to drop since the steady decline of the coalmining industry. For decades coalmining was a way of life here. Now with the decline of the coal industry and a growing need to diversify economic opportunities, there is inevitable struggle. I have heard people in Williamson talk about pride. A person can have pride regardless of circumstances. I suspect Williamson will always have pride, but because of the Williamson Health and Wellness Center and their various revitalizing initiatives, I believe Williamson has been offered a beacon of hope and a path forward.

It is not possible to define a place, much less so when one is a visitor. I don’t know what I don’t know. What I do know is that there is not a dollar store in this town and perhaps Williamson, and the Appalachian region as a whole, deserve a second look.
I've only been in Williamson, West Virginia for 48 hours and even though it's not enough time to have a deep sense of everything that is happening in town, I've found a significant contrast between the quiet energy that I feel on the streets and the vitality of the residents who are trying to make improvements to their community.

I have been walking around with my camera capturing signs of a town that has suffered a dramatic decrease in its population—from 10,000 to 3,000 people—and talking with locals, asking them why they chose to stay when the coal industry has slowed down.

1. Williamson, West Virginia, was once a vibrant mining town with a population of 10,000 people. Since the big coal mines closed, there has been a dramatic decrease in the population. You can feel the absence of those who have left.

2. The current population of Williamson is 3,000 people. There are a lot of empty buildings on Main Street; a lot of spaces available for rent.

3. The coal industry has been the main income for Williamson's economy since the late 19th century. However, the business is not as profitable as it was a couple of decades ago, and the town has been struggling to find other sources of income.

4. "We have always been proud of coal, but we also acknowledge that we need alternatives that guarantee us a future, we must diversify our economy now," says Darrin McCormick, former mayor of the town.

5. Even though it's not as big as it was before, the coal business is still at the core of Williamson's economy. Trains full of coal cross the town all day long.

6. Jenny Hudson is one of the leaders of Sustainable Williamson, the city-wide initiative to diversify the economy of this Appalachian town. She explained to us the four lines of the model they're implementing: 1) Recreation: How to engage the community 2) Agricultural: How to increase Williamson's food production 3) Clinical: How to improve the health of the community 4) Entrepreneurship: How to train the people of Williamson so they can create their own enterprises.

7. Harold worked for 27 years as a coal miner. Now he's soon to be eighty and lives with his wife in Shelby Valley, Kentucky, very close to Williamson. We spent the morning with him working in the community garden where hopefully he will grow his own vegetables.

8. Ian Fields, 19 and his girlfriend Brianna, 26, are waiting for their first daughter. "We chose to stay because we only want to raise our daughter here in Williamson. Growing up here gives you something, a personality that we haven't found in other places. I want her to have that," says Fields.

9. Garret Gregory, 31, was born and raised in Williamson, WV. He has four children and has been working as a full-time fireman for the past eight years. Even though he has strong roots in the community, he is planning to leave. "You can't buy anything to put on a loaf of bread because there aren't stores in our town. There are no places for our children to play. To be honest with you, we've already been looking for jobs in Ohio."

10. Williamson is located in Mingo County in the southern part of West Virginia, bordering Kentucky and at the heart of the Appalachian Mountain Range.

11. There's a deep pride in the community about its rich history and its relationship with coal, but many people are already talking about the alternatives they need to adopt in order to revitalize the community. The process is just starting.

12. Colombian Fulbrighter Jorge Caraballo connects with a local musician in Williamson, West Virginia, in the heart of a billion dollar coal field. Photo by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.
They said that West Virginia is like a U.S. version of the developing world, and told me to get ready to see a completely different face of America than what I had seen since I began my Fulbright grant. Having worked with people from rural areas in Mongolia, who struggled to find drinking water, and Aboriginal Australians, whose livelihoods are almost completely dependent on mining, I wasn’t sure what to expect from West Virginia.

On our second day, we drove to Williamson and enjoyed the beautiful scenery all throughout the trip. When we arrived, it was nothing like my friends had described. It was small, yet well-organized and unbelievably clean. We were welcomed by the former Mayor Darrin McCormick, who showed us around and spoke about how Williamson is rebuilding its economy after their coal production had plummeted. It seemed to me that Williamson is headed in a positive direction and has great potential to diversify its economy.

West Virginia is almost entirely mountainous, and as I was flying in, I saw several strip mining sites, or what they call “mountaintop removal mining.” It broke my heart to think about the impact strip mining has had on locals and the environment. To my surprise, West Virginia decided to keep these flatter lands and utilize them for agriculture and industrial livestock production, as well as for building a new airport, school, and even a golf course to attract tourists. Moreover, Williamson’s citizens have turned an old mining butcher shop into an amazing sports and recreational center, and other abandoned buildings into an indoor, year-round farmer’s market and restaurants.

One of the dangers of a “stereotype” or fixed perception is that it can easily and slowly destroy a community. I truly believe that it is time for America to break away from the pervasive stereotypes it holds about Appalachia and help rebuild the region’s economies. The process will take a lot of time, money and hard work.

It is my third day in Williamson and I am still looking for a clear answer to my question about how it ended up where it is now. How did mining go so wrong in West Virginia? Was it caused by the decline of the coal industry in the region? Was it the unsustainability of the company town model? Or, was it the government’s fault?

My country, Mongolia, is blessed with natural resources, and yet, we are not doing a very good job of adequately managing our mining revenue so that the socio-economic development and livelihood of local communities can be sustained even after a mine closes. When I was speaking to Piper Anne Wind Campbell, the then-U.S. Ambassador to Mongolia, before leaving Mongolia to pursue my Fulbright grant, she asked me why I made a decision to go back to school. I told her that there had to be a better way that I could support the realization of a long-term, sustainable future for these communities and I wanted to find it. Fulbright Amizade’s service-learning program has been a great experience for me thus far, and it has allowed me to explore more about the multiple causes and impacts of a town’s dependency on mining and possible preventative measures. I am excited for Williamson and cannot wait to come back and see its progress in few years.
As an architect from the Middle East, I came to United States to pursue a master’s degree. I was invited by Fulbright and Amizade to Williamson, West Virginia, to do community service. Williamson is a small town in Mingo County that recently experienced the impacts of coal mines being shutdown.

As a result, the population declined from 10,000 to 3,000 citizens in the past few years. The town was in a critical situation until community heroes tried to find new hope. Through Amizade and Fulbright, I had a chance to meet these leaders and learned from them that it is not impossible to change a community whose livelihood has depended on coal into a sustainable, green one. I learned from these leaders that small actions can have huge impacts on the community. Actions like community farms, health care, building renovations and a CoalFields Got Talent show. It is like throwing small rocks in a calm lake; you start seeing ripples spreading and growing throughout the community.

“I believe we can make Williamson sustainable and green if we believe in it and start involving the community.”
Darrin McCormick, Former Mayor of Williamson
Vignettes of a Coal Town

WILLIAMSON

Driving around the central part of the Appalachian region in early spring, one is struck by the jagged, rocky hills and the bare-leaved trees. All along the winding roads, I saw old and rusting conveyor belts and mining equipment lying abandoned by the wayside. It was a stark reminder of what used to be considered the heart of a billion dollar coal industry and what sustained an entire culture and way of life for generations. It made me aware of how the burden of history looms large over this landscape and its people—one that even visitors like myself cannot escape from.

Arriving in Williamson a few days ago, I was initially struck by the absence of people on the streets and the lack of human activity. It was strangely new to me, and I fell into the immediate trap of comparing it to small towns in India and with familiar images of urban decay. But a few hours into my stay here and after interacting with the dynamic team of Sustainable Williamson, I realised that underneath its “sleepy” mask was a group of passionate and dedicated individuals who are trying to revive the local economy and revitalize the lives of the local community.

Learning about the challenges confronting Williamson—of declining jobs, a coal economy in terminal decline, depopulation, poor health, and flooding—I found myself grappling with the difficulties of reconciling its prosperous and vibrant past with the strained circumstances of its present. Hearing many elderly residents talk about the heydays of Williamson, I felt a palpable sense of loss and resignation that things will never be the same again. However, while interacting with some of Williamson’s younger residents, I was filled with a sense of hope and optimism that things will eventually look up. In a sense, the town occupies a liminal space as it struggles to reinvent itself in a manner that respects its rich heritage while also being open in its embrace of the future.

At the focal point of efforts to diversify the economy, encourage active and healthy living, regenerate food systems, support entrepreneurial ventures and tourism, restore and re-purpose old buildings, and improve access to quality health services has been the need to build and strengthen community bonds and relationships. “People energy,” as they say here, is the soul of community life and it is what drives the transformational changes in Williamson. Everywhere I went, I encountered remarkable individuals who are bringing about holistic development in a way that is relevant and meaningful to people in the community. The model of community action is a humble, organic, and down-to-earth attempt at fostering self-reliance that captures a “small is beautiful” spirit of reconnecting with the land.

In these past few days in Williamson, I have explored its quaint streets, eaten the local produce, chatted with the townsfolk, participated in community service, and forged new friendships. This full immersion in community life has given me an opportunity to reflect on the values of solidarity, resilience, cross-cultural understanding, and mutual learning in how discourses and practices around sustainable development are shaped and realised on the ground. More importantly, it has reaffirmed my faith in the individual power for social transformation—one that I know will drive Williamson’s recovery and rejuvenation in the years to come.

“Everywhere I went, I encountered remarkable individuals who are bringing about holistic development in a way that is relevant and meaningful to people in the community.”

By Nidhi Sen,
Fulbright Foreign Student from India
Photos by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin, Daniel Alexander, and Nidhi Sen

Leading the way:
From mountains to downtown Williamson, WV

Made of Coal:
Fulbright Amizade participants visit the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce, an edification made of coal.
Into farming:
Fulbright Amizade participants visited Doug Dudley, a former coal miner and compassionate man whose farm serves a field for volunteers to learn more about seeding and planting.
A postcard from West Virginia

The musings herein were gleaned from a few days of service-learning through a special Fulbright Enrichment Activity with Amizade in the town of Williamson, WV and its surrounding area. My intuition and meager sample size have yielded this blurry, self-reflective view of what was, is and may be.

By Jimmy Mahady, Fulbright scholar in Uruguay 2012-2013. Photos by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin and Arthur Alexander

Williamson, WV: View from the mountains. On the right, Fulbright Amizade participants listen carefully to Sustainable Williamson staff members.

Six participants from abroad, six from the U.S. — I have come together under the banner of mutual understanding with my fellow fellows to Williamson, WV and we are growing together like a bunch of grapes. I've never been to a place like this. Infinite hills — friendly, drawn-out speech and demeanor — a town with its head held high — in spite of unforgiving squalls of global market forces. From far away, current residents' forefathers arrived here, willing or not, nearly all of whom fought hard to survive. The rich seams of coal presented an ob-sidian opportunity, but avaricious plutocrats spared no expense to make the people's sometimes deadly struggle for fair treatment seem Sisyphean. Eventually they prevailed, and fairer wages and better working conditions begot longer hours below with the black particu-late that crackled in their chests.

They paid for the chance to raise happy, healthy families on an honest labor with singed lungs and bent backs. Economies grew around the mines, and the people drew a deep pride from fueling the American industrial juggernaut. I think Williamson's story, like so many before it, is one of the tumultuous nature of a community built on a sole commodity. Theirs is a hard-fought heritage written in carbon, sweat, blood and toil. But mechanization, slack demand in the global market, and the threat of U.S. energy regulations that would ef-fectively regulate coal-fired electrical generation out of existence have brought this place to its knees. “70 percent of the peak population gone” ~ “20,000 mining jobs lost in the region within the last decade.” These are the lamentations of a reeling, proud proletariat whose multi-generational economy has been snatched out from under them.

So here I am. Since high school graduation, my scholastic and professional endeavors have focused on an overarching goal of cutting carbon emissions and fighting global warming. Folks in Williamson have cau-tioned me to tread carefully, as it may be too early for many to consider a broad range of economic and en-ergy alternatives. In the town, a few solar panels pop up, but unfortunately, without electric utility buy-in and larger-scale regulatory impetus and incentives, I fear there will be no significant growth in cleaner power in the short and medium terms. It will be tough to move the needle on coal here, but who is to say that ex-coal miners couldn’t leverage their stories of sudden loss to lobby regulators and politicians, to bring cleaner energy sources and a revitalized sense of purpose to this place? Perhaps they could spread the message that promoting social equity in coal communities losing their econom-ic lifeline is a key component of cutting carbon emis-sions while keeping social justice in mind.

I do not think, though, that all is lost for this place. The team at Sustainable Williamson, the non-profit hosting us this week, are part of a group of com-mitted residents working for the common good. Their perseverance seems borne on an intense pride of place and an open-minded commitment to rebuilding a local economy on diverse platforms of infinite possibility. They stand in stark defiance of the backwards, rural stereotype that I’ve so often maligned in my own short-sighted frustration. What I often picture as homogeneous, closed-minded communities averse to almost every policy I support, turned out to be diverse and deeply thoughtful. Here, there are Filipino, East Indian, Latin American, African American and European com-munities that mirror the diversity I treasure in my urban context in Seattle. Like the traditional “Old Time” music of Appalachia, these global stories and points of view intertwine to create, in my opinion, some of the most valuable, harmoniously profound perspectives and wis-dom from which a community can draw in tough times. I have faith that Williamson’s pride, perseverance and optimism will carry it forward into a prosperous and sustainable future.

I owe a deep gratitude to Williamson for sharing their story with me, and for being so generous and wel-come to a kid from far away.
As a participant in the Fulbright Amizade service-learning enrichment activity, this trip to Appalachia showed me how old coal mines are being reclaimed for agricultural use and how community revitalization has created a pathway towards sustainable living and economic growth. Getting close to nature also offered me an opportunity for reflection. Often times we tend to neglect the very small things that matter.

I grew up on a farm in a rural community in south western Nigeria. Coming to a rural community in the United States was, for me, a rare and unique opportunity. I visited many places and met many people but the most exciting aspect of my experience was visiting the community gardens and learning the local style of growing crops. The decline of the coal business has had an effect on the people of Williamson, causing a visible decline in population as evidenced by the abandoned houses. But the general sense I got was one of hope and determination.

Williamson and my local community in Nigeria share some close affinities: the mountains, natural vegetation and community gardening. What struck me was the story of a man who left San Francisco to move to rural Williamson. His story is one of hope and perseverance. Jim Pajarillo told me, “The Williamson I left was full of optimism and a growing city. When I came back, the economy, which is dependent on coal, had disappeared.” He further said that the city is at a tipping point, and the next ten years are very crucial. Being in Williamson gives Jim a sense of being an agent of change and a part of the community. For Jim, Williamson is a very good place to raise kids.

The alternative to agriculture remains a pivotal pathway to societal development and longevity. Though one could feel an air of frustration and desperation in Williamson due to the coal business decline, I decided not to see that as a problem for the community. After all, every society has its own challenges. I can only feel a sense of hope in Williamson.

This was more of a journey of self-discovery for me. The Williamson Appalachia story is one that is not always found in the news. I see that the issues, challenges, and problems facing a community like this are almost the same as those facing my community in Nigeria. I believe the sustainable revitalization of a community is the only way to end world poverty and hunger.

In several discussions I had with locals, I discovered that the city has experienced ups and downs in the coal industry. One significant problem that led to its decline was that union activities were phased out, which prevented any progress towards achieving more competitive pay and better working conditions. Today, the story is different. Alternatives to coal mining have been created. Most people are growing vegetables. The farmers’ market under the Refresh Appalachia program has become huge, by using a mentor to teach people lifestyle skills related to agriculture and healthy eating. People are now aware that to stay healthy, you have to eat healthy.

Williamson still faces some challenges like finding alternatives to coal mining, upgrading the local infrastructure, and most importantly, addressing waste recycling. For instance, waste could possibly be used in some of the reclaimed coal mines and could become agricultural land in a few years’ time. Listening to some of these challenges gave me mixed feelings. Does the community want to retain its natural heritage and green vegetation, or, does it want to open up to become an industrial state? I believe the natural heritage should be preserved and sustained. At least some people like Jim would love to raise their kids in such community. A quiet place in the mountains is more beneficial than a polluted city.

The Fulbright Program, and in particular the Fulbright Amizade service-learning week, has taught me that there is still hope for sustainable development in a globalized world of environmental degradation and loss of values and cultures. This week in Williamson was an opportunity for me to become more involved in what I love doing: serving, helping others and being an agent of change.
A few days before I traveled to Williamson, West Virginia, I was speaking to a university friend from Chicago about visiting the Appalachian region. He told me that his uncle passed through eastern Kentucky, just across the Tug River from Williamson, in the early seventies.

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The Heart of Appalachia

Community discussion: Fulbright Amizade participants engaging with community members

When he stopped to ask which was the best route back to Chicago, an old man by the side of the road paused and said, ‘oh, I don’t think you can get to there from here.’ This story somehow captures the sense of far away, and of inwardness, that reverberates through the American imaginary of rural Appalachia. It’s a region that has a mythical quality to outsiders, a place of coal, ‘hillbillies,’ and bluegrass.

Appalachia keeps you grounded, close to the land and close to the people. Sustainable Williamson, the collective that hosted our congregation of Fulbright Amizade Students and alumni, is trying to reinvent centuries-old connections to the land. With the discovery of coal in the 1880s, Appalachia’s rolling hills became known as much for the riches they contained as for their quiet beauty. The earth here is quite literally coal-soaked; since the turn of the last century, billions of dollars worth of coal has been extracted and the commodity has become the mainstay of the local economy. Sustainable Williamson’s espousal of agriculture is an attempt to shift the region’s soul to the land’s surface, an echo of the hills’ nineteenth century agrarian existence before the discovery of black gold.

Over the past century, the coal industry has left striking marks on the landscape. Mountaintop removal in particular reflects more recent and aggressive attempts to get at lucrative underlying coal seams. In some places, the Appalachian panorama is abruptly interrupted by missing peaks. I can’t help but feel that such invasive mining is destroying much of Appalachia’s wilderness forever, but it’s the price that the region has been told it must pay if its core industry isn’t to die out entirely. What to do with these sites, sometimes reconstructed into their former contours but often left flattened, is a pressing question for the local community.

Standing atop leveled hills I pondered the acute local awareness of outsider perspectives on the region. Hackneyed ideas that reduce Appalachia to a place of poverty and misery, of backwardness and stagnation, still hit a nerve. The hillbilly caricature in particular provokes ire for many people, but it is also one that some ex-miners have tried to repurpose to capture a fading way of life. Harold, a former miner and veteran, nonchalantly said, ‘yea, I guess I’m a hillbilly. My dad certainly was.’ I got the impression that to refuse the hillbilly’s existence would be to wipe out a precious rural way of life.

Jane Moran is an 81-year-old public interest attorney focusing on child abuse and neglect who’s been practicing in Williamson since 1975. “People tell stories down here, that’s their way of communicating,” Jane explained, referring to the intricate and interesting storytelling style of rural Appalachia. During her early days in Williamson, Jane would try to hurry clients to get to the details of their cases, facts that would have currency in the courtroom. When she cut them off they would reply, “You’re not from around here, are you?” It took her a few years to realize that she was rushing people at the expense of understanding them. Her advice to me was to listen to what people were telling me. Speaking to Jane made me think about what people’s stories articulated about Appalachia, and how these narratives echo bigger issues. Romantic or totalizing narratives of Appalachian life never quite capture the complex and contradictory nature of the area and its history.

The stories I heard while in Williamson were about identity and livelihood amid changing economic circumstances. They were about refusing to be lumped together or to have their lifestyles – crucial for so much of America’s twentieth century development – mocked by outsiders. Appalachia remains a place often unfairly maligned in the wider American imagination. Its people – or at least the handful I have had the pleasure to speak to – are warm, insightful and tireless. I hope for the sake of the hills and their people that these historic communities can remain dynamic and optimistic in a changing world.
A CITY BACK ON ITS FEET

It’s just before sunrise and I’m making my way up a steep, rocky slope. A short jog beyond the city’s main drag, the earth begins to rise. Flat streets become steep grades as we climb up, up, into the Appalachian Mountains.

On the top of the world: Surrounded by beautiful mountains, Williamson residents find purpose in the health benefits of a healthy way of life. On the right, Fulbright Amizade participants engage in running with the Tuesday Track Night group.

Pictures by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin and Daniel Alexander

The weather is cool as the mountains exhale softly in the morning air. I fall in stride next to Tim Caudill, a Williamson native, trained archeologist, and seasoned ultra-marathoner who has since returned home to carry out research into how best to revitalize the local economy.

This morning, we’ve pulled ahead of the group of us who rose early to hike up to “Death Rock,” a peak overlooking Williamson offering a birds-eye view of the Tug Fork River separating Williamson, West Virginia and eastern Kentucky. For Tim, the roughly five-mile route to the top is easy exercise. In the course of training for a 100-mile race, he logs dozens of miles per week in the surrounding mountains. As we run, Tim shows himself to be a trusted guide for all things big and small. He stops to point out the fossilized remains of plants etched into small rocks. And when we reach the peak, he is quick to gesture toward mined mountaintops and discuss the storied history of the area. Here the closer you look, the more treasures you see.

Williamson is a city graced with grand natural beauty. With over 700 miles of trails, the surrounding mountains are a trail runner’s dream. While many locals utilize the Hatfield-McCoy trail network for All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) recreation, runners like Tim are a less common sight. But times are changing.

In the wake of King Coal’s decline, as the city works to find ways to revitalize the economy and address healthcare challenges, locals are also making great strides in fostering a healthier community culture. In the heart of downtown, the Williamson Health and Wellness Center is the focal point for many of the area’s efforts. The Center offers numerous clinical services to residents, sponsors regular events focused on local food, active-living, and healthy lifestyles, and performs outreach in support of community-building efforts that foster a sustainable future for Central Appalachia. The city even has a website dedicated to sharing residents’ motivational success stories at healthyselfies.org.

It also stands as a metaphor for tackling big challenges. Whether that is transforming a city, or completing your first mile, each begins with a single step. In the case of Williamson, there is much that can be said about the progress the city has made towards the goals it set out to accomplish. What stands out most to me is the city’s rugged refusal to quit. Despite tough economic times, depopulation, and other challenges, the people of Williamson continue to come together to put one foot in front of the other and charge onward with big goals in sight.
Twelve Fulbright Students from around the world gathered in Williamson, WV, to participate in a service-learning program led by Amizade. As our group was warmly welcomed by the local community, I felt an authentic sense of belonging, where conversations flowed freely and friendships ran deep. What impressed me the most was the people of Williamson. Their sense of community, hospitality, pride and unyielding perseverance to succeed, was not only inspiring but contagious. Due to a series of floods, the coal mine collapse, and lack of employment, Mingo County’s population dwindled from 50,000 to 3,000 residents. Despite their misfortune, residents are uniting as a family to breathe not only life but hope back into their community.

This collective passion is what drives a community to become the best version of itself, and encourages others to join in the revolution. In a way, this devastating crisis has presented a blank canvas for Williamson to rebuild the future they desire. Sustainable Williamson has spearheaded this revolution by taking a holistic approach to challenges faced by this Appalachian community. By reimagining what sustainable agriculture, healthcare, education, infrastructure, and tourism paradigms could be, they are transforming a place back into a home.

As we know, a home is where the heart is, a place where you enjoy returning to time and time again. Nate Siggers, Sustainable Williamson’s Community Development Coordinator and Amizade’s Site Director, sums it up best, “Teamwork is what makes the dream work.” The re-purposed buildings are just one example of how Williamson is merging the old with the new, in order to reinvent its identity and discover the balance between their heritage and their future. Even though the coal industry was a huge part of their past, their soul is being empowered to create new ways in which they can sustainably diversify their economy.

“I think we can all learn something from the people of Williamson, and I encourage you to make “the heart of the billion dollar coalfield” a future destination.” Upon their last day, Fulbright Amizade participants sat down along at a bonfire with community members to reflect on a week of service in Williamson, WV.

By Cheryl Nachbauer, Fulbright Scholar in Chile in 2014-2015.
Photos by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin and Cheryl Nachbauer
Working hard towards health:
Fulbright Amizade participants and residents woke up before sunrise to work out.
Picture by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin
Special thanks

To the community of Williamson that warmly welcomed this group, embracing the purpose of this program. Every and each resident played a significant role in the life of the participants to understand this ongoing movement happening in Appalachia.

To the Fulbright Amizade participants who really dived into this program, turning into an opportunity to capture with such sharp lenses the essence of Williamson, WV.

About

About The Fulbright Program
The Fulbright Program is the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government and is designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.
> eca.state.gov/fulbright

About Amizade Global Service-Learning
Amizade Global Service-Learning has been empowering individuals and communities through worldwide service and learning since 1994. Over 9,000 individuals have served with local community leaders in 12 countries on 4 continents with 16 partnerships.
> amizade.org

About Sustainable Williamson
Sustainable Williamson, a project of Williamson Health and Wellness Center and the town of Williamson, is a living-lab platform working through vibrant, community-driven processes to breathe life back into central Appalachia.
> sustainablewilliamson.org

On service:
Getting to know the Williamson Health and Wellness Center. At the bottom, Fulbright Amizade participants on service at a community garden in Mingo County. Photos by Daniel Alexander.